

## Medical Condition or Ethereal Anomaly...?

There comes a point when the jurisdiction of doctors ends and the seemingly limitless wisdom of the unknown begins or perhaps continues unabatedly. Many people appropriately enough refer to this as the crossroads. It's the point of transition from what living creatures know of in life to what they can only conceive of in death. But what happens when the natural order is disrupted and a detour occurs? A more interesting question may be: Where did Lieutenant Marileva Dike-Sims acquire the acuity necessary to be able to pull something like this off?

An accomplished martial artist and a keen military strategist, the Lieutenant is one of three known people to have ever achieved the lethal Crimson Red Belt status under the tutelage of the late Master Dyoogie. As impressive as that feat is, it's even more uncanny this woman (who happens to be financially privileged by birth) decided to take her life in a direction she didn't have to ultimately choosing the career-pathing of intergalactic service as a soldier in the Space Force. But no, it could not have been pulled off by sheer conviction. Even the famed Dyoogie couldn't cheat death when his number was called let alone cheat the death of someone else.

No Marileva is playing at a completely different level altogether, and it's also hard to believe this was achieved as a result of her recent conversion from a Human to a Doran physiology. The change hadn't occurred any more than one or two hours prior to delivering the saving throw of all saving throws. Unfortunately the rules of confidentiality prevent these findings from being made available to the broader medical community, but for the purposes of this log, the perfect crystalline makeup of the Doran cellular structure is still not a compelling enough reason to justify the

extent of her actions. If anything, it only underscores the limitless potential of an individual. But clearly she couldn't have become so accustomed to or acclimated with her new body in such a short period of time to pull something like this off.

Edmund Sims was getting ready to check out having sustained a mortal wound from a standard issue hand laser, lacerations from what appeared to be bite marks of sharp teeth across over seventy percent of his body, and a significant loss of blood to top it all off. He flatlined in the Lieutenant's arms. The fix for his condition was well beyond the scope of Human science, yet she brought him back!

Not only did Marileva bring Edmund back, but she brought him back better than before - as in even his nearsightedness was cured. There are no signs of ever having been any injuries, no scarring from healed wounds, and no cellular trace from residual tissue damage - not even a hair out of place. To concede the occurrence is the only way to move the discussion along, so fast-forward to the set of routine tests.

A wise person once stated, "Second chances seldom come along without some sort of worthy catch or interesting twist." The monitor is very nearly mesmerizing - displaying life forces as a flowing aura of every color under the spectrum being represented. At first glance, two sets of life force readings are a good sign. That's until the realization there are three distinct entities: Edmund, the Lieutenant, and their unborn child.

Thankfully the fetus is safe and unharmed from the adventures aboard the Doran mothership where it underwent its own subsequent conversion to a Doran physiology. Miraculously the Doran gestation period is accelerated, so the life force showed up on the monitor.

Edmund's and Marileva's readings are identical.

There's always the possibility maybe something went wrong in the equipment's calibration, so a quick pulling of historicals introduces the controlled variable required to allay any technical suspicions. Both of their life force readings before Marileva's conversion and Edmund's death are what tell the tale. The identical readings they share belong to her. It's unmistakable.

A soul is infinite, but Edmund lost his original. From the historical reference, it's easy to see how the life force hues between those old readings and the Lieutenant's actual readings were different - harmonious almost to the tune of being compatible (obviously), but by coupling this with the differing pulsation, it is again evident his old life force remains distinctly unique to these current readings.

Marileva gave of her own infinite soul and used it to bring Edmund back. So in essence - no pun intended, the two have split and are sharing her soul. Moving forward, it's not too hard to imagine that if one were to die, they'd both perish under this new arrangement.

I now pronounce you husband and wife,

--

Head Doctor Nadala Agënt

Acting Science/Medical Team Lead - SpaceStation Colt



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From the Depths of Death in the Midst of Chaos

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Everybody's busy - that's why they call it work. Because business is a partnership, it's all about respect for time. You respect my time, and I'll respect yours. You don't respect my time, then it's a waste of mine.

-Terry Terrison

They say nothing is certain but death and taxes, and I already screwed up one of those, so I better pay my taxes.

-Edmund Sims

It's always those who talk behind others' backs that aren't shi-themselves.

-Beavy Beave

Space Force

It is not only naive but irresponsible to believe my adversary doesn't carry the same amount of conviction for their cause as I do for mine. In that similarity, we can find the elusive common ground and bring about a process of dialogue to hopefully put conflict aside.

-Lieutenant Marileva Dike-Sims

Space Force



For

The Characters of the Original, Zero, and Epic Universes.



## 19: The Rematch

### SpaceStation Colt

Strategy, as a concept, was often referred to as a game, but many if not all games promoted strategy as a means to achieve victory. Levels of game play could range from the very minute (Tic-Tac-Toe) to the extremely complex (Chess) meaning the level of difficulty was ultimately a subset of the rules. In many respects, those rules tended to be a limiting factor that allowed for some semblance of closure (in a timely fashion), (mutual) playing field boundaries, and a sanity check for species who (historically) only used a small percentage of their true cognitive faculties. Expanding the rules increased the game play difficulty by making strategy an even more integral part to bringing about a successful outcome.

Unquestionably the most powerful piece on a chessboard was the Queen. Yet the game's focus was centered around the much weaker King.

Lieutenant Marileva Dike-Sims was not a fan of Chess.

There was a strong hint of feminist ideology in that statement, but the root of it actually dealt with the mechanics of the game. Chess did not allow the Lieutenant the ability to bring her King up to her level. She could not develop her Pawns in such a manner they could one day perform the special abilities of her Bishops, Knights, and Rooks. Lastly there was strength in numbers, so who could fault her for wanting to bring as many of her opponent's pieces over to her side as possible?

The traditional Chess rule set did not allow for any of that. Fortunately being a ranking Space Force official did. As a Major, Marileva was largely told what to do and expected to make it happen. It was still a command position but only so far as it would allow her to carry out orders. Majors commanded either one contingent of ground troops or a solitary fighter squadron.

In the Space Force hierarchy, Lieutenants were tasked with commanding either multiple contingents of ground troops or multiple fighter squadrons. The Lieutenant was very pleased with the promotion because she felt it was always better to be able to give more orders than she took. This way she could control more of her destiny.

Marileva's thoughts were running wild with all the powerful implications and limitless possibilities. For her to have been up since three hundred hours pouring through almost four hours worth of electronic personnel files, she must have been pretty excited. This was merely surface learning however. This was the easy part. Those now under her command respected her because they had to - because of her rank. The true measure of her leadership abilities would be whether or not she could turn that compulsion into devotion. Getting constituents to go above and beyond the call of duty because they wanted to put in a little extra effort just to help her out was the end scenario she sought.

In theory, it was a great concept. In practice, it was not something easily achievable. The Lieutenant's plate was filling up with mind-boggling amounts of administrative work that would normally have kept a person tied to their desk, but this was a two-way street. If she wanted them to give her one hundred fifteen percent, they had to know she was willing to give them one hundred twenty percent.

A check of Marileva's standard issue wristwatch revealed a secondary ulterior motive for being up and being so active this early in the morning. Deeply engrossed in her work, she had very nearly lost track of the time. Today of all days, that would have been bad. The initial plan was to get to work early enough to knock out some important action items so she could spend the remainder of the day with her husband, Edmund Sims. And it was to be a very special day - for today, he would finally be released from the Science/Medical Section with a clean bill of health.

With the extent of damage the spacestation had sustained, Terry Terrison was officially moved over to engineering duties in order to keep what was left of the mighty ship intact. This meant Nadala Agënt would be promoted to the lead regarding science/medical duties.

As Head Doctor, Nadala immediately made her presence known by insisting Edmund remain in the Science/Medical Section under observation for one additional week. This actually allowed the Lieutenant a chance to get acclimated in her new position while he had an opportunity to rest and regain his strength.

True Marileva had the ability to visit Edmund, and she did so daily, but nothing beat the feeling of having him back healthy and home with her. This man (whom she shared a teddy bear for a son with) loved her so completely, so deeply, so as to give up his very own life in order to prove it.

The Lieutenant never would have expected this of any man. With Edmund, somehow she was not surprised. Attempting to hold back the slight flutter in her heart, she tried not to become overly flattered by the morbid sentiment but did have to admit this was the type of unyielding love women sought.

Marileva would always remember his sacrifice - a subtle

reassurance of fidelity and a reminder she was worthy to receive the penultimate expression of love: "Edmund gave up his life for me."

No work was actually the last thing on the Lieutenant's mind today. When was the last time she could have said that with a straight face? For the longest time, work was her life. There was no work-life balance as they had become one and the same. However multiple instances of what Human resources would consider to be life-changing events hit her all at once forcing her to reevaluate matters.

Edmund could hardly believe it himself. Two weeks ago, he had all but given up on even the thought of finding True Love. One week ago, he had died brutally, so there were other things on his mind at that point. And now - today, he was an expectant father. To be honest, he questioned whether or not he was even ready for this. But he already knew the answer: Nobody ever was.

Upon returning to the scene of where it happened, Edmund realized he would probably never think of the shower in their cabin quite the same way ever again. "Warm," he called out.

Just like the last time, the verbal preset released a perfectly heated stream of pelting water. Saying it felt good to use one's own shower was an understatement. Conservative to the last, Edmund was the classic introvert. Not very trusting of people, easily bored by Human interaction, and totally resigned to the fact being alone kept him from being hurt - his picture was in the dictionary next to the definition of 'brooding loner'.

After wetting himself down as if he were a car, Edmund held his breath and then put his face under the stream of water. He was alive. And the thought was not meant to be misconstrued as

disappointment toward not having crossed over to the other plain. The metaphysical was not in question here. Emotionally though, he was alive.

Edmund finished washing his face and went for the shampoo. He kept his hair short or shaved off entirely, so as he began to lather his scalp, there was a hint of irony in the brainwashing analogy. From the moment he met Marileva, she had taken control. What was more (for all time) he had given up this control completely, unquestionably, and willingly.

At heart, Edmund was one of those coveted fair-minded males, arguably a male feminist, and a masculine guy whose brain sex was undeniably female. He had a certain innocence causing him to never make the first move. To his delight, the Lieutenant was the love catalyst that made him fall hard.

Their relationship lent itself to power exchange sensibilities, but it turned out to be even more symbiotic than they first realized or were willing to admit. At a subconscious level, Edmund and Marileva knew exactly what was happening. On the conscious level, they chose to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Edmund went to work with the soap bar tracing across all parts of his body, and he could not help but fall back into the lulling, peaceful thoughts of the encounter with Marileva. Branded searingly into his mind were the sight of her body, her scent, her touch, her taste, and her approval of the pleasure.

As Edmund went for his face towel in order to scrub himself down and eventually wipe away all the soap, there was the realization his thoughts were making him rather hot. He took a moment to inhale some of the steam in an attempt to collect himself eventually bringing his awareness back.

The Lieutenant had broken through Edmund's defenses by

offering him her heart. He put up a fight for all of point six three seconds before delivering his own in exchange for hers.

If ever there was any doubt as to what her underlying motivation and/or plans for the longevity of this union were, they were answered, no, quashed when she extended to Edmund the ultimate expression of love: "Marileva brought me back from the dead."

He towed himself off inside the shower before stepping out. Edmund was almost more excited about his situation after he had come out than before he had gone in. Apparently the shower was not just for singing but contemplation as well. And his thoughts were overwhelmed with fervent admiration toward and almost exhaustive (if not so empowering) love for his family. Mirroring the prideful feelings one would have for a network or team, he found himself inextricably linked to the Lieutenant via those unforeseen consequences.

For the longest time, Terry had been Marileva's doctor, and she suspected he was Edmund's as well but did have to admit Nadala had a surprisingly adroit bedside manner. With Terry, there was history and trust, however the ease through which the new Head Doctor had diffused a rather difficult medical situation went a long way toward addressing the primary concern of doctor-patient confidentiality.

The second to last thing the Lieutenant needed was for word and rumor to be bouncing around the ship about her pregnancy, her umbilical marriage to Edmund, and her recent conversion to a Doran physiology aboard the alien mothership. From Nadala's dismissive prognosis in not even bringing up the latter Doran piece, she was absolutely positive the Head Doctor knew.

Oddly enough, Nadala seemed completely comfortable -

arguably familiar yet unabashedly indifferent. Perhaps in exercising forbearance, the Head Doctor was projecting for a time when roles might well be reversed as to who was under the microscope and in need of discreetness.

Marileva could respect that.

Almost involuntarily the Lieutenant caught herself grasping slowly at her abdomen in a clichéd manner with both hands. This infusion of emotions brought a certain chaos to her natural order. On one hand, the semblance of normalcy was comforting. On the other, that same sanity check was disconcerting. She had been protective of her new immediate family before, but these heightened, maternal instincts made her more focused, more methodical, more meticulous - likely even more dangerous, and that was scary.

It was all those feelings and thoughts swirling about her very essence that caused Marileva to put aside the Space Force paperwork so she could attend to the more immediate matters at hand. Pushing up from her chair, she realized how calming and draining the dimly lit atmosphere of the Conference Section happened to be. Well it was either this or morning sickness that had caused a moment of dizziness. She was actually unclear as to the length of the Doran gestation period and honestly did not know which of the culprits were to blame.

Under normal occupancy, the Conference Section was a veritable lecture hall in the heart of SpaceStation Colt that could accommodate hundreds. Much to the dismay of the soldiers who had lost their original living quarters during the battle with the Dorans, they would have much preferred this place be one of the unsalvageable sections left behind. At this hour however, the Lieutenant made welcome use of an unfettered peace and quiet in

order to churn out somewhat tedious tasks before the rigors of the normal working day set in and created mounting distractions.

After bookmarking a selection of various files and saving those onto the slate computer she had been studying from, Marileva secured the entirety of the paperwork in her left arm by holding the device close to her chest and walked up the center aisle of stairs that led to the back of the lecture hall. From there, a corridor would allow her to exit the Conference Section via a transport module.

Resembling elevators in their aesthetics, transport modules were actually more advanced in that they could travel horizontally about the spacestation as well as vertically. With currently four football fields worth of length to traverse and each section having a potential of three different levels, the transport system was essential.

The expedited travel time was much appreciated and only underscored the efficiency of the complex system. No sooner than the transport doors had closed were they again opened right back up with the transport now inside the Ranking Officials' Living Section. The Lieutenant planned to drop off the files and meet up with Edmund in their cabin.

But he was not there. Edmund was currently in the Docking Bay Section where he stood perched atop a step ladder helping their son, Jago Dike-Sims, aboard the Class III Fighter that held the artificial intelligence of Compound.

The fighter sat docked on the lower level of the section which allowed Edmund a chance to catch Marileva's entrance from out the corner of his eye. He stepped down carefully from the ladder - cautious of the new black boots to the Space Force uniform he wore.

The clothing he had originally arrived in was now bloodstained, tattered, and well beyond repair.

The normal uniforms were of a dark sterling gray metallic color which the black boots really accentuated. They clung eerily albeit comfortably to the body as the material's 'one size fits all' special polymer customized itself by molding to the wearer's individual physique for that perfect fit. The jacket and pants held a certain weight to them, so a person could equate the feeling to bundling up, but mobility was strangely not affected as they also felt incredibly lite. A weighty white undershirt shone through the opened jacket providing an additional contrast to the gray and black. As always, the curled insignia of SpaceStation Colt sat embossed on the left breast of the jacket - in black.

Never one to subscribe to militarism, Edmund had always said he was not cut out for the Space Force but did have to admit he looked good in its uniform. His thin black gold necklace and attached pewter ax pendant plus his steel watch with blue dial really set this ensemble off. Did the clothes make the man or the man make the clothes? Indeed.

The Lieutenant's uniform was similar except for the display of her rank embossed in black on the left breast side of the weighty white undershirt. After the material's special polymer conformed to the curves of her contour, one could say she was not exactly a slouch either. Quite the contrary.

The two stood facing each other unaided for the first time since returning to the spacestation from the Doran mothership. Except for Jago, Compound, and a few workers sparsely dispersed around the various levels of the Docking Bay, they largely had the massive, open-ended area to themselves. Refreshed, reinvigorated, and renewed - a firm, heartfelt hug took the place of any words.

And in this physicality lay the security that came from a reassurance of wellness. So many questions remained, but from this conversation of the heart, it was clear the trueness of their love was not one of them.

The moment happened to be so comfortable, so familiar, so inviting, and the Lieutenant had to put a stop to this. With a shove from both arms, she pushed her husband backward stating, "You have something that belongs to me."

Edmund backpedaled flailing a few uneasy yards before losing balance entirely and collapsing to one knee in order to stabilize himself. His wife's aggression was an unexpected jolt that caused the lulling, peaceful mindset to be replaced with a healthy dose of confusion.

"Defend yourself," Marileva ordered as she lunged forward readying an ax kick.

DOPE ENTERPRISES INFINITY presents

"Okay, this is some fu--ing bullshi-," Beavy Beave announced from the cockpit of his fighter. "This is monotonous!"

Ciba Due Dimry piloted hers below and then up and over the massive tow cable connecting the front of SpaceStation Colt to the back of Beavy's fighter. She then pulled alongside her fellow squadmate. "Ah what's wrong?"

"Stop it, Ciba Due! Why do I always get stuck with these bullshi- assignments?" Beavy hit some hot keys on his fighter's

keyboard to bring up her visual on his monitor. She was flying close enough they could probably look into each other's respective canopies while conversing, but space tow was a very serious responsibility. For the spacestation, his fighter was to be the propulsion all the way to Second Earth. Weightlessness caused by space made this endeavor possible - simple almost, however it did not excuse the fact any number of things could go horribly awry. In this scenario, points of failure were maximized from the tow cable to the rigging to the fighter. The entire crew depended upon his actions, so this realization was weight enough against already weary shoulders that psychologically did not succumb to the properties of space. It was best to focus and continue flying with eyes forward. "Seriously who the fu-- did I piss off at the academy? Did I date some ranking official's daughter or something? This shi- is getting old."

"Being Vex Squadron is all about being a team player," Ciba Due smiled. She delighted in teasing the visibly rattled, newest member of her squadron. Part of it had to do with keeping him company as it was not like they could just swap out positions even if she wanted to. This was a nonstandard situation with one fighter manually jury-rigged to SpaceStation Colt during an extravehicular activity. They did not have time for another.

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The eyeballs almost rolled out of Beavy's skull on that one.

"Why is it my being a team player is questioned only when I'm tasked with doing something the rest of the team wants no part of?"

"Gain some seniority, and you'll have the answer," Ciba Due replied. All jokes aside, she was proud of him as this was no easy task and suspected the higher-ups handpicked Beavy specifically because of his track record of pulling off the impossible.

First Squadron provided the necessary accompaniment for Beavy and the spacestation - ready to defend both at a moment's notice. Under Ciba Due's command, the sub-squadron hugged every inch of the linear path the derelict was being hauled.

With the rest of SpaceStation Colt's crew (the bulk of the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent) having collectively pulled off a bit of the impossible themselves against the Doran forces, it was decided (in order to not become complacent) Phantom Squadron would fly off on ahead to proactively monitor the path forward. Houser Reynolds headed up that effort on the outskirts of an area still teaming with Dorans. And for this amount of alien fighters to be patrolling incessantly, staging had to be nearby. Another mothership was out there somewhere.

Phantom Squadron was performing a clinic in misdirection utilizing fighters to meet and lead astray the Doran forces. As the underlying exercise was in conflict avoidance, they were fortunate to have made it this long without altercation because the spacestation barely survived one mothership and was in no position to take on another. Unfortunately the Dorans also understood the need for staging by calling Houser's bluff with a detachment.

Edmund thought for all of one second about potentially throwing up a crossed arm block. This was until he saw the Lieutenant had gotten full extension with her leg holding the sole of her boot for increased leverage in an incredible display of flexibility before snapping off the devastating ax kick.

Desperately Edmund rolled out its path and came to his feet as Marileva herself spun around to greet him with a forearm smack. He managed to defend against that, but his transition into mounting some sort of offense was slow, and his opponent knew all too well how to expertly keep a person on the defensive. She threw a combination of jabs at his chest before opening him up with a right uppercut and then sent him flying off his feet with a straight, standing left kick - the force of which was used to cut through his defenses and strike him square in the chest before the velocity carried him a few feet worth of airtime until he came crashing down onto his back.

"I can't watch this," Jago said, "but strangely enough, I cannot turn away."

If Compound had a head, he would be shaking it right now in awe. "This is amusing."

Edmund grimaced away the initial pain, but in that little bit of time, the Lieutenant was already bearing down upon him and well past his guard. Elbows and knees rained down as he retained his status of being a punching bag prior to taking a chance and catching her left elbow by hooking it with his left arm.

From there, Edmund mounted Marileva's back and stood them

both up, but she wormed away from his grasp placing them in a neutral position where she agitatedly asked, "Why are you holding back?"

He truthfully answered, "I don't want to hurt you."

The Lieutenant reassured, "Edmund, you never could hurt me."

LADY LUV

Houser had found a pocket - a haven of Doran fighters much more dense than any other concentration he had previously encountered. If only he could have lingered at his current position for a few moments more, he could have broken through their line by using the asteroid belt as cover and drifted silently to a visual confirmation of the mothership's coordinates.

Nobody could fault Houser's flying effort for him to have been able to make it this deep within the Doran epicenter - that was, nobody except the aliens who had detected his fighter and were now attempting to put an end to his life.

Pumping a disappointed fist in the air, "Da--it," he felt hollow knowing just how close he had come to pinpointing a vital piece of information. As with any reconnaissance, gathered intelligence was only useful if it could be disseminated upon return. There were three issues with this: First the return was easier said than done. Next the Dorans seemed determined to trace Phantom Squadron back to its origination of SpaceStation Colt. Finally the mothership might assume it was spotted and could always

move thus starting this cat and mouse game all over again.

The only things Houser could control were his own actions, so as he dug his hands in on the twin yokes, the issue of returning retained his focus. He peeled away from an asteroid as Doran fighter fire exploded the rock into fragments just outside his cockpit.

"You never get used to that," Houser said while flying out into the open drawing any potential number of dangerous weapons systems locks from the multitude of Doran fighters now swarming the area. Luckily his Phantom Squadron wingmates had managed to hang back some distance inconspicuously so their rush headlong into this skirmish allowed him a chance to break away.

E LUV

"S.S.C.," Houser announced over the Ear-To-Mouth Coms, "Phantom Squadron is coming in hot!"

"You're shi--ing me!" Beavy turned nervously to look at Ciba Due's fighter which was already veering off.

"First Squadron," Ciba Due ordered, "we need to intercept the enemy in stride." The key was to meet and stave off the Doran attack well ahead of SpaceStation Colt so as to prevent the ship's position from being discovered.

In mobilizing this quickly, Ciba Due had set about a lightning-fast clash pitting the Humans against the Dorans once

more. It was safe to say neither faction fully understood the motivations of the other as seen by the deterioration of this fight into the 'them or us' mentality on all sides. One side fought with the ferocity of a sole survivor while the other side attacked with the viciousness of an animal protecting its turf. This was certainly a 'shoot first and not even worry about asking questions later'-type situation because nobody would place fault or care to know the answers. War's irony would always be that, in waging said campaign, it defeated the purpose of the outcome (peace) via the means through which it was fought.

Phantom Squadron flew safely behind the new front of First Squadron which held up a bit of a generic buffer between itself and the spacestation.

All these events seemed to be occurring in slow motion for everybody except Beavy. To him, the action all managed to gel together into the unease of powerlessness. He could not help out. He could not fight back. He could not even move. Leashed and collared like a dog and unable to get the monkey off his back, he thought, "Yeah right. Lions, tigers, and bears - my as-."

FROM THE DEPTHS OF DEATH IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

"Uh you-all realize the space tow is now left completely unguarded?" Beavy pointed out.

"Can't be helped," Ciba Due replied as explosions set off to

the right side of her fighter. After flying to a bit of breathing space, she let off two costly missiles netting only one kill.

Only.

Previously the Doran fighters had been so poorly spaced together in battle where attacks with missiles were almost always a guarantee of the coveted, careening multiple kills. Their formation during the first encounter was meant to overwhelm and destroy. This new formation was wide and spacious - meant to overrun and sift through First Squadron's perimeter defense.

The Dorans wanted the position of SpaceStation Colt. Even at the behest of turning their backs to an adversary who would surely turn in and collapse upon them, they only needed one fighter to get through and report coordinates. That was their end game.

"Houser, can you get Phantom Squadron to lead the aliens away from the spacestation?" Ciba Due asked.

"Toward the ditch point?" Houser acknowledged but warned, "Yeah, we can do that. They're gonna be on us tough though."

"First Squadron has got your back," Ciba Due said. "Let's hope this works."

Unfortunately the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent did not have a counterplay of their own. With an unimaginative strategy of reactive moves dictated completely by the actions of the Dorans, the Humans were merely biding the time of whatever was to become the inevitable. And if Houser's predictions were correct, the inevitable was to be an encounter with a second mothership, its full array of Doran fighters, subjugation, and/or death.

Marileva annihilated Edmund with a right cross to his face which blew the legs out from under him. His knees buckled, and his ankles might have broken had he not succumbed totally to the attack and simply collapsed to the ground. He rolled over onto his back and used his elbows to hold his torso up.

"Get," the Lieutenant put her foot in Edmund's chest to kick him (down) while he was down, "up!"

"I'm not following this," Jago told Compound.

"Watch," the Class III Fighter suggested.

Edmund winced with tears clouding his vision. Somehow he managed to turn around on all fours and then reach both arms around Marileva's lower body in an attempt to stall the proceedings like a boxer clearly being outclassed.

Edmund had tried for a double leg takedown in an attempt to get off the floor but caught multiple stinging elbows that came crashing down upon his spine. The ensuing beatdown complemented the stomping he also sustained.

Unfortunately for Edmund there was no referee available for the purposes of breaking this apart, and Jago had neglected to bring a towel. The Lieutenant balled her right hand into a fist and brought a crushing forearm smash down directly onto his back. At her feet, he now lay in a pathetic crumple.

But despite Edmund's anguish, fear, and sorrow, Marileva had commanded him to stand up. She was not to be denied or

disobeyed as seen by her grabbing ahold of his collar with her left hand and muscling him - pulling him to his feet. Actually his feet were not touching the ground as he dangled in the air via her grasp.

CIBA DUE DIMRY

Out of instinct, Edmund cupped his hands around the Lieutenant's wrist in order to steady himself as she turned to her left bringing him down slowly to his feet and draping his arms around her.

It was at this point, with Marileva's back turned to Edmund, she reached over with her right hand to take hold of his arms and tensed up her grip before...

Commander, on the other hand, tensed up her grip of Edmund's left arm with her right hand, delivered a stinging left elbow to his kidneys, and flipped him savagely across the Docking Bay Section.

Edmund caught massive airtime before bouncing off a wall where he came down face-first onto the floor more than some fourteen meters from his previous position. His hand laser landed somewhere in between. He had to get to his feet. There was no turning back now if there was ever any.

...delivering a treacherous hip toss. And no sooner was

Edmund pushing up against the wall in an attempt to get to his feet was the Lieutenant back on top of him with the unseen speed of a ninja. He tried to reach out with both hands in order to keep her at bay, but she knocked his left arm away with an open right palm and then pinned his right arm back down to his side with the unyielding grip of her left hand.

"Look at me," Marileva ordered while pressing her right forearm against Edmund's throat. She pressed him even harder up against the wall and reiterated, "Look at me!"

The moment Edmund met the Lieutenant's intense gaze, his free left arm fell limply from the air, his breathing slowed, and his pupils dilated.

MOUSEY

"Innocence Postponed," Compound told Jago. "Amazing. For your parents to be moving forward with something this dangerous, the payoff must really outweigh these risks."

"Compound, what risks?" Jago asked explicitly, "What are my parents doing?"

"Your dad's most endearing quality is his innocence, but it's also his greatest crutch," Compound explained. "It wouldn't be such a big deal except for the fact that now if he falters, your mom will invariably suffer as well. She is ensuring his innocence never gets in the way by pushing it briefly to the side on a temporal level, bringing his subsided killer instinct to the

forefront, and then restoring his innocence back in place. I'd only read about this and never thought I would actually see the technique performed live."

Jago was starting to comprehend the gravity of this exercise. "So if any piece of this goes wrong, my dad will no longer be the man I know."

"Fortunately your mom is skilled enough to succeed," Compound comforted.

"With all we share," Marileva suggested, "trust in me one more time, and channel your hate."

Without the vacant look on his face even changing, Edmund said coldly, "I'd rather hold it all in."

The proclamation was followed by a laugh so devoid of humor or compassion it would have cut through the resolve of a person on their best day should they have been unfortunate enough to overhear the hollow echo. Things became increasingly clear as to why the Lieutenant still had Edmund forcefully pinned up against the wall when his body began to rebel against her with a strength that took everything she had to hold him back.

and

"So that's who you've been hiding from the rest of the universe all this long time," Marileva acknowledged as her opposition of Edmund's violently jerking body remained fierce, yet her demeanor remained calm and focused. "Now what do you love?"

The extent of the internal struggle Edmund was fighting within the walls he had constructed and fortified over decades was now made visible as a more familiar expression returned to an obviously paining face. "My head wants to explode!"

"Wrap your hate within the shell of love," the Lieutenant guided, "and focus it like a laser. Don't repress it. Don't be consumed by it. Unleash it. Use your hate as a tool to protect all you love."

It was Edmund's innocence that had drawn Marileva to him originally. It was this same innocence she refused to take when they first made love - the coveted rarity of purity or consummation without lust vaulting their union into the graces of a love so true. Being empathically linked by way of the soul Edmund and Marileva shared, she also knew this innocence was the cause of so much anger, disappointment, frustration, and pain. Although his innocence was his Humanity, clinging to it above all else would carry a steep price they both knew the universe would and, to an extent, already did prey upon.

And for what? Edmund owed nothing to anybody, and the Lieutenant was simply pulling rank. Out of all the times he had sacrificed his happiness, sanity, and well-being for others - whether in personal, social, or work settings, all he was ever met with was disdain, disillusionment, and disrespect. The hollow, pathetic, and typical likes of selfish energy vampires did not deserve a chance to feed from his innocence. At the conclusion of this reformation, there would be ultimate clarity.

Most people had a lifetime or, at minimum, a few years to decide who they wanted to be. Marileva was forcing Edmund to reevaluate and readjust this in a mere moment's time. In that moment of heavy breathing and clenched teeth, all fell coldly limp.

In the next moment, Edmund exploded out from under the Lieutenant's grip thrusting her skidding backward. She performed two somersaults in order to blunt the momentum, regain traction, and come to a stop while keeping her opponent in front of her.

Edmund pushed off the wall in an attempt to go at Marileva with a renewed vigor that came from having the complex shackles of his conscience lifted.

The Lieutenant did not back away and met the aggression with an impenetrable defense of blocks, dodges, and sprawls. Edmund went for a simple right leg sweep, so she countered with a low right kick catching his attack and freezing him back on his heels. He had expected her to jump but wound up being parried instead, shattering his equilibrium, and finding himself dropped to his butt.

"You favor your right side far too heavily," Marileva critiqued before extending her left hand to Edmund, "and we can work on that..."

"...now," Edmund smiled while accepting his wife's hand.

But rather than pull Edmund up, the Lieutenant crouched down beside her husband and threw a telling right arm around him - extremely proud of his progress. He did the same with his right arm to complete the embrace.

Jago stood up, clapped, and cheered within Compound, "What a

show!" Then with what felt to be a massive explosion somewhere, SpaceStation Colt was rocked in her entirety, and he was thrown back into the fighter's cockpit.

music by DJ VOICECRACK

"Beavy!" Ciba Due screamed as she turned her fighter away from the immediate battle to hover in place and ascertain whatever it was she could of the damage. "Are you alright?"

"Holy fu--," Beavy retorted, "that was close!" His eyes were starting to adjust to the bright flashes of light emanating directly behind his fighter and, from his vantage point, seemed to be following him.

Although strapped down into his fighter, Houser was mentally kicking himself for leading the Dorans back to the spacestation, but he could not figure out where that last attack had come from. He refused to accept the blame yet took a hollowing responsibility which chilled him to his very core, "I'm so sorry."

Ciba Due cut the nonsense off immediately because they were all in this together, "Don't even start that, Houser. This is nobody's fault but the Dorans'."

"Fine," Houser replied tersely as he knew Ciba Due was correct, and needless self-doubt was pointless, "but where was that Doran fighter hiding? We had the entire alien detachment isolated outside the vicinity!"

"Shi-," Beavy said, "I've been here the whole time, and I

didn't notice anything. Somebody better get back to SpaceStation Colt and see what's up."

"You got this battle out here, Ciba Due?" Houser asked.  
"I'm taking Phantom Squadron in."

"Gladly," she stated out of sheer animosity.

With hands shielding his eyes from the singe of flames that had engulfed Captain Ricardo Cairce's office, Terry spoke calmly into his Ear-To-Mouth Com and said, "Lieutenant, I need you to come to the Cockpit Section immediately."

story by EDMUND ALEXANDER SIMS



## 20: Victim Mentality

Phantom Squadron's fighters flooded inside the Docking Bay Section at all three levels. A few ships actually flew overhead of Edmund and Marileva who were pushing to their feet on the lowest level.

Edmund called out, "Jago, are you alright?"

Part of Jago wanted to simply offer a lighthearted thumbs-up out the canopy for his parents to see as it would have allowed him a chance to gather himself turning his body around right side up, but he could sense the urgency in the situation, the flurry of returning fighters, and the query. Children in the Space Force often had to grow up more quickly than their civilian counterparts, so the question demanded an immediate, serious answer, "I'm fine."

It was this answer which freed Marileva's priority list up to be able to branch out and deal with other, more pressing responsibilities. She spoke into her Ear-To-Mouth Com to respond back, "I'm on my way."

And with that, the Lieutenant began to sprint for the nearest transport module. Edmund hung close but fell slightly behind as he lingered briefly to point toward her fighter and bark out, "Compound, watch Jago!"

"Always, Edmund," Compound agreed.

Marileva held the transport module's doors open for Edmund and let them close immediately after he flung himself inside. "Cockpit Section," she said before fingering her Ear-To-Mouth Com to contact the leaders of the fighter sub-squadrons. "Ciba Due, what's going on out there?"

"Hey, Lieutenant," Ciba Due acknowledged while multitasking as always - still in the thick of battle. "We were successful in leading the Doran fighters away, but I couldn't tell you what that explosion was. Phantom Squadron is headed back to be of any assistance."

"We're here," Houser corrected as he threw down his helmet inside his fighter's canopy and leaped to the floor where he hit the ground running for the nearest transport module. The other members of Phantom Squadron did the same on their respective levels of the Docking Bay.

The door to the two's transport module opened up to a scene of chaos right outside the Cockpit Section. Both the Engineering and Science/Medical Teams were already on-site scrambling about to help however they could with the devastation by clearing rubble and bodies. All the handheld fire extinguishers were having quite a time in battling the flames because this problem was part electrical.

"Beavy," Marileva asked, "how are you doing with the space tow?"

"It was very close, Lieutenant," Beavy stated honestly. "I don't know what hit us or where it even came from."

"Hang in there," Marileva said as she and Edmund made their way through the swarming masses of people working frantically to salvage the Cockpit Section.

Inside the Cockpit, the giant view-screen up front was

offline sparking with a crack tracing diagonally through the center. All three main panel stations (Left Com, Right Com, and Weapons Com) were eerily vacated. Terry stood with his right hand clutching the back of the captain's chair. Off by himself in some sort of reflective thought, the focus of the engineers and sci/meds was clearly on Captain Cairce's office to the left side of the section.

The Lieutenant stood facing the office with a broken heart, and this tore Edmund up since it was inappropriate for him to comfort her here in front of the masses. Just being aware those feelings existed - being on the same page because of their umbilical link was initially comfort enough to both, and truly the thought counted for the sentiment kept them from coming apart at the painful revelation of a scene that happened to be respectively familiar.

The Captain was a father figure to Marileva from her teenage years at the Space Force Academy on and interestingly enough, the only father she had ever known. It was an unofficial arrangement but mutual as he had seen her as the daughter he never had or would have had.

Terry knew the Lieutenant's biological father had died when she was very little and even Edmund's father had passed away just recently, so he chose his words carefully, "Even if Captain Cairce survived the kamikaze."

Marileva tore her gaze from the scene to face Terry.

"Even if somehow he survived those searing flames. He couldn't have withstood the suction of space," Terry admitted. "I believe he perished instantly and was not made to suffer."

"How long until you'll be able to get a portable shield generator set up for that room?" The Lieutenant asked.

Terry shook his head. "Even if we had the ability to vent atmosphere in there, we don't have the available resources to be able to do anything about the room."

"I didn't ask you that," Marileva stated. If resources meant the bandwidth allocation of physical labor, she found it hard to believe there was not a person on all of SpaceStation Colt who would not do a little extra to lend a hand to this task. If resources meant the actual physical materials - well, that too was irrelevant as far as she was concerned because Terry was expected to figure it out.

"I'm so sorry," Terry apologized, "within the hour."

"Thank you." The Lieutenant knew this was a hard time for everybody and that for as close as her relationship was with the Captain, she did not have a monopoly on the mourning. But without order, things would just break down. Besides, this was far from a selfish request. He was a great man, and the crew deserved an opportunity for catharsis (sooner rather than later) because this was beyond a tough blow, and she needed to begin the process of salvaging the spacestation's morale. They were, after all, still in the middle of a war.

Terry did not take this personally and put a soft right hand on Marileva's shoulder to again express his condolences. Sometimes he was too smart for his own good. The sentiment was met with a couple pats from her left hand in acknowledgment of the tense situation they were all facing before he exited the Cockpit to get to work on completing the task she had assigned to him.

"SpaceStation Colt crew, this is Lieutenant Marileva Dike-Sims," she said into her Ear-To-Mouth Com. "As of seven hundred forty-one hours, I am assuming command of this spacestation and the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent. I'll be in touch

shortly to address everybody at length."

Edmund was not officially Space Force, so he literally had no idea about protocol or what he could possibly do in this situation but felt the need to help out. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do."

Pregnant, Doran, umbilically linked, limping to Second Earth, under attack, and promoted by the default of death - the Lieutenant stared a moment at the captain's chair, dropped her head, and laughed, "Your being here with me speaks volumes as always."

"For better or for worse, Marileva," Edmund smiled while playing off of her previous statement he knew was meant to be a quick barb at the storage compartments worth of baggage she had brought to the relationship. Theirs was not a love of convenience but unconditional in every sense of the descriptor.

"Captain Kincaid, Lieutenant Sadonjia, Captain Cairce," Ciba Due sighed.

Houser leaned against the wall of the transport module and slid down to the floor in disbelief. "Fu-- me."

Beavy was perhaps the only person not immediately paralyzed by the emotion of the situation. In fact, he did not have any time to sit and internalize this latest bit of bad news as seen by him engaging in evasive action that subsequently took SpaceStation Colt along for the ride!

With the stabilizers remaining offline to conserve power, any jarring by the spacestation was felt internally ship-wide by the crew. Beavy had dipped hard right of his current position and

previously linear path throwing everybody inside hard to the right as well.

The transport module doors opened up just as Beavy had veered away from Doran fighter fire, so Houser found himself dumped out the transport when SpaceStation Colt tilted. Clawing futilely for some sort of grip, his body fell an uneasy amount of meters before ultimately slamming into the very floor that had been taken up from under him after the spacestation leveled out.

"Wake up, people," Ciba Due ordered. "The Dorans have discovered SpaceStation Colt's position. None of them must escape or we can expect to see a mothership in our short-term future."

The Doran fighters but only required a mere glimpse, and once the position of the spacestation was ascertained, they fled the area in multiple directions leaving behind a pair of buffer contingents. Already greater in number than First Squadron, this became a highly calculated strategy that turned the deadly game of Tag detrimentally back on the Class III Fighters.

Their speediest pilots were tasked with escaping the area at all costs so they could return those precious coordinates to the second mothership. The first buffer split up First Squadron and caused problems in the immediate vicinity by attacking SpaceStation Colt head-on. Accompanying the speediest fighter pilots back at a distance was the second buffer meant to meet and stave off any Class III Fighter that decided to follow. Their strong defense was truly the best offense, so unfortunately as it appeared, the Dorans continued to hold all the relevant cards.

They controlled all the actions of the Space Force's

remaining Terran System contingent by constantly keeping the survival effort pinned back on its heels, and the Lieutenant was tired of this. Everybody in the Cockpit Section had been flung violently across the area because it never had stabilizers to begin with. So now there was an additional crisis of increased amounts of wounded with any number of broken bones, concussions, and other injuries that came about from the trauma of a roller coaster-like ride without any restraints or lap belts.

Marileva managed to grab the captain's chair with her right hand. She was able to catch and hold a flailing Edmund by his left wrist until Beavy could level out the spacestation at which point various engineers and sci/meds could be seen kissing the floor.

"Thanks," Edmund said as he stood up and caught his bearings.

"No problem." Again, the Lieutenant fingered her Ear-To-Mouth Com, "Terry, how's our shield holding up against the Doran fighters?"

Terry was putting his displaced equipment back on a makeshift table of beat-up boxes he had jury-rigged together as an interim working space. Luckily his monitor was connected to the wall and unaffected by the more negative effects of inertia, so he was able to pull up readings at a quick glance. "It's much more of a nuisance than anything else. They aren't doing much damage to us at all, and the shield is holding steadily. What did you have in mind?"

"Can you increase the power to the shield on the port side?" Marileva asked.

"Certainly." Terry walked over to the console. A few keystrokes later, he announced, "Consider it done."

"Thanks, Terry." This took care of the first part of the Lieutenant's plan, so she moved onto the second part. "Ciba Due, can you have First Squadron lead all Doran fighters to the port side of SpaceStation Colt?"

Ciba Due's fighter hugged the spacestation tightly and then turned to explode over the top of the ship as if it was using SpaceStation Colt as a much more nimble drafting partner in an auto race. A Doran fighter hounded her all the way up and around the hulking derelict with lasers also in close pursuit. "Gladly. How much distance do you need between us and the spacestation?"

"Outrun them," Marileva ordered.

"Okay," Ciba Due acknowledged while letting loose a rearward missile that freed her up from the pursuer long enough to be able to type the following orders to First Squadron:

First Leader orders -

Head to the port side of SpaceStation Colt and keep going!

The second part of the Lieutenant's plan was set in motion. She was now onto the third and final piece. "Beavy, do you know anything about a jackknife?"

"Weapon, martial arts, or truck?" Beavy asked for clarification.

"A jackknifed truck," Marileva answered.

Edmund just stood and marveled at how easily the Lieutenant took to this recently increased responsibility like she was born for it. Her natural prowess in these matters shined through because he was witnessing three-dimensional planning that made use of trusted resources and incredible vision even despite the fact the spacestation was so badly damaged there was no timely computerized data available.

"You've got to be shi--ing me." Beavy could not believe his ears and was astonished a superior officer would actually authorize something this vicious.

"Have fun," Marileva said, "but please make sure to perform this maneuver to your right."

Beavy nodded his understanding but had to verbalize his acknowledgment, "You got it, Lieutenant. Brace yourselves back there."

By now Houser and his Phantom Squadron members had made their way to the Cockpit Section. The rest of his sub-squadron immediately moved to assist the additional wounded whereas he met up with Marileva. "Did I overhear that correctly?"

"Care to do the honors?" The Lieutenant answered in the affirmative with a question and her index finger pointed upward in the direction of an overhead speaker.

Houser used his Ear-To-Mouth Com to open up a ship-wide page, "SpaceStation Colt crew, this is Houser Reynolds of Phantom

Squadron. Brace for impact. This is going to be a rough one, so I'd advise everybody to either strap yourself down or huddle up in the direction of the previous evasive action."

The control column of a Class III Fighter featured a twin yoke structure requiring each arm to manipulate a separate yoke for the most natural piloting experience available. The yokes were nothing more than three-foot poles protruding out either side of the canopy with a grip pointed inward and toward each other completing the shape of an 'L' (from the left side) or a 'J' (from the right side). On these grips, the firing buttons could be switched intuitively from normal lasers to missiles to rearward missiles.

From a piloting perspective, there was a centrist position where the grips were parallel to one another and the piloting computer deemed the fighter was going straight adjusting and maintaining pitch, roll, and yaw accordingly. The twin yokes were sensitive, so any motion outside this centrist position affected the flight dynamics. For instance, moving both yokes upward, equally, would decrease altitude causing the fighter to dip. Moving both yokes downward, equally, would increase altitude causing the fighter to rise. Keeping the left yoke in the centrist position and raising the right yoke would cause the fighter to dip to the right, so conversely, keeping the left yoke in the centrist position and lowering the right yoke would cause the fighter to rise to the right.

Much of normal flight theory needed to be thrown out the window when it came to outer space propulsion, so a greater reliance on the piloting computer for positional tracking and flight correction was necessary in order to offer a pilot any

semblance of perspective in a three hundred sixty degree axis with no ground to compensate for and only directional coordinates of objects to account for. There was no secret as to why Beavy was selected for space tow in Marileva's mind. According to his personnel file, he was possibly the least conservative fighter pilot the spacestation (and perhaps the Space Force altogether) had, but he coupled that with the same amount of skill Ciba Due and Houser had - at such a startlingly young age. Conceptually he was not the only pilot who could understand how to jackknife the space tow and SpaceStation Colt, but functionally (aside from Compound) Beavy was the only pilot who could pull it off.

Beavy wiggled his fingers like a baseball player leading off in anticipation of a stolen base attempt or a football player anxious for the snap to take place. He wrapped his fingers around the twin yokes slowly and then said to himself, "Game time."

With a stark reaction of Beavy's right arm, he pulled the right yoke all the way downward to set the direction and gunned the thrusters to push his fighter abruptly in that direction. Next he yanked the yoke all the way upward and released the thrusters to level the fighter out like a braking maneuver of a person intent upon producing a car's controlled skid around a sharp corner in snow.

By now, the tow cable rigging assembly was caught up in between the forty-five to ninety degree angle keeping Beavy from smashing himself into the right side of the Cockpit Section and would allow the simple machine of a lever (based upon the rigging as the fulcrum and the torque and velocity as the force) to swing the entire spacestation. Visually it was like a horizontal hip toss, and when he sensed he was getting the necessary movement, the thrusters were gunned once more in order to guide the remainder of

the process on around as if gaining traction in the aforementioned snow-driving example.

The Lieutenant had strapped herself down in the captain's chair while Houser took Left Com and Edmund took Right Com for the purposes of riding this maneuver out. Everybody else, not fortunate enough to find something to strap themselves down with, found they were pressed up against the right side walls like when the floor dropped out the Rotor ride at an amusement park.

The Dorans had expected every contingency, but this was insanity. SpaceStation Colt's hull was being used as a weapon, and the much smaller Doran fighters within her deadly circumference were crushed like a pitch mistakenly hung over the strike zone to a batter looking for a fastball to hit.

Beavy allowed the spacestation to get full extension before bringing the right yoke back to the centrist position and giving his fighter some additional thrust to cause everything to straighten out on path of the original trajectory - at which point the Doran fighters that either survived or were far enough away to have witnessed the event were noticeably making their way out the vicinity. There was no telling what the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent had up the proverbial sleeve next.

At the conclusion of the maneuver, Marileva spoke into her Ear-To-Mouth Com, "Ciba Due, you're my eyes out there. How do things look?"

"Lieutenant," Ciba Due answered, "whatever it was you

planned has not only the Dorans running scared but my sub-squadron pumped up because of the perfect execution."

"Then all thanks goes to Beavy on that one for the physics lesson," Marileva acknowledged.

"That shi- was crazy!" Beavy replied. "You're most welcome. Anytime, Lieutenant,"

"The shield held steadily," Terry alerted, "but right now, I'm more concerned about the space tow rigging. I recommend we take a pause while there's a lull in the action to make sure everything is still secure."

Marileva unstrapped herself from the captain's chair. "Good idea, Terry. Keep me posted. Ciba Due, you can bring First Squadron in."

"But shouldn't we go after the Dorans," Ciba Due questioned, "to keep them from reporting our position?"

Houser joined the conversation on his Ear-To-Mouth Com for the sake of the others plugged into the conference but also turned around to address the Lieutenant directly, "I think there's another mothership out there."

Everybody seemed to want to second-guess Marileva by making suggestions at the most inopportune times. She did not have to justify her decisions, and to do so each time would slow down the proceedings. True they were only trying to be helpful, and she hated to have to say this, but they needed to be made aware of the

larger picture as she saw things from her vantage point first, "This is not a debate." Nimble clicks on her Ear-To-Mouth Com added Nadala to the conference. "Ciba Due, Houser, Beavy, Nadala, Terry, and Edmund - I need all of you back here in the Cockpit Section by eight hundred hours. Do what you need to do in the next ten minutes to prepare for debriefing. Dismissed."

Houser nodded his agreement with the Lieutenant's decision and mentioned, "My fault."

"Get out of here," Marileva offered a smile. "You have nine minutes left."

Ciba Due made sure to cut off her Ear-To-Mouth Com before taking her discontent offline, "I see how it is."

Ten minutes seemed to make all the difference as the frantic scene of search and rescue inside the Cockpit Section became a more tepid patch and repair. Throwing resources at the initial problem had helped to get things under control in a much shorter time frame, so the lower numbers of engineers and sci/meds made the Lieutenant's impromptu meeting that much more quaint.

Marileva leaned up against the front row of Com panels with Edmund on her right side. Everybody else stood around in a half circle facing them.

"It feels good to stretch my legs," Beavy started things off, "and it feels even better to see all your faces."

"That feeling is definitely mutual," Terry shared in the sentiment.

"Well you called this meeting, Lieutenant," Ciba Due said.

"It's your show."

Marileva spoke, "I wanted to take this time to formally address the six of you, first, before branching out to the rest of the crew. Ciba Due, Houser, Beavy, Nadala, Terry, and Edmund - in these circumstances, I consider the six of you to be my senior staff. Now Edmund is not Space Force, and his military file is thin, but there isn't another person alive or in this room I'd rather put the trust of my life in, so he carries a dotted line directly to me. Is it a conflict of interest? Absolutely it is, but our numbers are low and our predicament is great, so I challenge you to offer up a military solution to that problem which would replace his two additional hands should you disagree with my decision."

Ciba Due wanted to argue this, but the Lieutenant shut down her point with the counterpoint of asking for a better solution and not just a complaint.

It also did not help that Houser came out in support of Marileva's decision, "His contribution in helping to destroy the first Doran mothership was as valid as anybody's standing here. I have no problem with Edmund, and if anyone else does, then I move we get this out in the open right now."

"I agree we need to be on the same page with this." Nadala explained, "With all the additional wounded filling up the Science/Medical Section, my team has had to branch out into the remaining two Living Sections in order to be able to adequately triage the injured. We have a Humanitarian crisis on our hands, and saying our numbers are low is an understatement. If Edmund can lend a hand, I'll certainly accept it."

Terry interjected, "If it helps, I can vouch for both the Lieutenant and Edmund."

All eyes were now on Ciba Due whose dismissive body language Marileva picked up on. She was already outvoted, so a simple wave of the hand cast her vote in the affirmative.

This left Beavy - as brash as ever. "Seriously, who are we trying to kid here? The Lieutenant single-handedly destroyed Death Corps, then wiped the floor with the first Doran mothership, and just got done allowing SpaceStation Colt to be used as a fly swatter. Shi-, she's about the last person I want to cross, and Edmund is the second to last because she likes him!"

Everybody had to share a laugh over Beavy's observation because, in so many words, it was true. Even Ciba Due, who hated to admit it, had to chuckle over that one as at least, from her perspective, a spade was finally being called a spade.

"Thanks, everybody - for the kind words," Edmund replied, "but in all seriousness, I realize you have to give trust in order to get trust. I was talking things over with Marileva before this meeting, and we've both agreed to let you in on a little bit of an edge we possess. Terry could probably put this more eloquently, and I'll defer to him if this goes too technical, but her fighter harbors an artificial intelligence by the name of Compound. He was what made it possible for me to be able to fly aboard that first Doran mothership despite the war zone I needed to traverse, untouched, and with significantly less experience or skill than any other fighter pilot."

This admission gave Ciba Due the opportunity she needed to pounce on something the Lieutenant had perceivably done wrong, "Out of all the good pilots we lost during the alien incursion, how could you not have made this technology available to the masses?"

It was now clear to Marileva that Ciba Due was extremely resistant to her lead. Having been on the other side of this coin

in the past, the sooner things got addressed, the better matters would be for everybody. The leadership team could disagree somewhat (to an extent) but could not be at odds. When the roles were reversed and she was actually at odds with her superior officer, she always managed to keep her cool. This meant Ciba Due's attitude and behavior were honest because some people wore their hearts on their sleeve whereas others were much more difficult to read. It also meant the differences were reconcilable.

Terry fielded the question, "Unfortunately the artificial intelligence doesn't work like that. It was literally a once in a lifetime occurrence. Believe me, if I could've rolled this out to everybody, I would have - and would be retired on Second Earth by now. Compound is about as experimental as it gets and not easily replicable."

Ciba Due was satisfied with that answer for now, but the Lieutenant was not off the hook in her eyes. She would surely be looking for another angle with which to go at her superior officer.

"I'm assuming you bring this up because the location of the second Doran mothership escapes us?" Houser inquired.

"Exactly," Marileva responded. "With Compound, we will find out the location, but it doesn't underscore the reconnaissance Phantom Squadron provided to cause us to even be in a position to be able to ask the right question."

"I appreciate that," Houser said in response to the Lieutenant. This entire fiasco of leading the Dorans back to the spacestation had been eating away at him as to how his hard work would be received.

"I appreciate all your efforts," Marileva praised. "It's not something I'll be able to say enough when we're in the midst of

encountering whatever it is that's out there waiting for us and you are performing your duties admirably - I'm sure, so I want to tell everyone now."

"So we find the second Doran mothership or it finds us and then what?" Beavy asked. "We came out the first skirmish looking the way we do now. I really hope there's a plan."

"Remember the Lieutenant's track record you so readily recited, Beavy?" Nadala reassured. "I don't think she's ever not planning. The least we can do and I'd imagine the other part of this meeting is to put our faith in our new leader as she has put her trust in us."

"Very good point," Terry seconded.

"Well first thing's first," Edmund volunteered, "we need to find the second Doran mothership, and I'll take Compound and do that."

"How can I help?" Houser asked the group. "I was so close that maybe I can provide some additional perspective. They couldn't have moved too far from their staging area in this short amount of time, so I could be of some value to your search."

"Actually yes," Terry agreed, "I'd like to extrapolate your flight plan. Both that and any impressions you can offer would be extremely helpful. I'll get the data uploaded to Compound, and then Edmund can be on his way."

"Okay perfect," Houser said - anxious to see how his intel would be used to finally locate this elusive second Doran mothership. Out of everybody in the room, he was perhaps the one person who wanted it found most in order to put an uneasy mind to rest. The nagging feeling of business left unfinished ate away at his professionalism, and to him, that was the worst feeling in the universe to have.

"Then is that everything?" Ciba Due asked.

It was not as if Ciba Due had some place pressing to be at the moment, but Marileva would not be baited into choosing that as her response. "There's one last thing of importance I wanted to bring up. I know we haven't worked together (in this capacity) for any meaningful amount of time, and I also realize we've undergone a dramatic shift in leadership over the past couple weeks. This is no more strikingly apparent than with the men and women who aren't privy to the high level information we're discussing right now. For them, the uncertainty of such drastic changes in leadership affects the very core of the crew's morale. And for our next movements to have any hope of succeeding, we need to get a handle on workplace sentiment.

I am hereby promoting Ciba Due, Houser, and Beavy to the Space Force Rank of Major Prime because you're familiar to the crew and above all else, you deserve it. In doing so - in increasing your responsibility, I'm charging the three of you, first and foremost, with the absolute necessity of improving the crew's spirits - ship-wide. This is your first official command position, so please know my door is always open. By the same token, I won't hide behind that door either, so please come to expect I'll take an active role in ensuring your development and success. Both of which are integral to the survival of SpaceStation Colt and invariably the Space Force as a whole. Congratulations and everybody is dismissed." She, instead, chose to meet curtness with kindness.

Edmund, Nadala, and Terry started clapping for the newly promoted Majors.

Beavy began pointing off at imaginary people in both directions as if there was a larger crowd present and he was

accepting some award. Shaking his head in clear approval of the promotion he said, "Right, right!"

The levelheaded Houser could hardly find the words to express what he was feeling and simply offered, "Wow, Lieutenant. Thank you."

Ciba Due had not expected this but did have to admit Marileva was good. She wanted greatly to dislike her superior officer and was now starting to even question why. All she could do was shake her head in disbelief.

Everybody exited the Cockpit Section leaving the Lieutenant to her thoughts. She sat in the captain's chair at the helm of a disaster, and it was her responsibility to bring the spacestation back from the brink.

Command of SpaceStation Colt, SpaceStation Soliloquy, or really any of them throughout the universe was something Marileva craved for the longest time, although she never really had the rank to show for it. The Space Force Rank of Captain was currently three notches above the rank of Lieutenant, so thoughts began to cross her mind that when the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent survived this latest predicament, she would be stripped of these command duties. The only thing though, this spacestation got in her blood. It had become home. It sheltered her family. And as motherly as it sounded, she was now responsible for nurturing a greatly extended family.

How could the Lieutenant give this up? She now understood why Captain Cairce spent so much of his own time - decades' worth in command positions and continually pushed her to excel inside and outside the academy. It was the reason he recently fast-tracked her with a promotion to the Space Force Rank of Lieutenant.

The Captain knew Marileva was built for this, and she but only hoped her way of doing things - her mannerisms in leadership made him proud. She did have to admit he was a little lackadaisical in cracking down on all the free-spirited actions of the crew tending to want to go off and do any old thing, but she would tighten them up.

The thought of it brought a smile to the Lieutenant's lips and ultimately held back tears. She was the queen of freewheeling and dealing and probably wore Captain Cairce down to a point where he just gave up on trying to mold those under his command and was content to simply guide their development. These free spirits would most certainly run over her if she let them, so she would do well to heed his prowess in this area of guiding development. But there also needed to be a balance struck which included molding those under her command, if for nothing else - for their own good and eventual survival in the militaristic jungle that was the Space Force or even the universe in general.

Certainly the circumstances could have been better. Marileva would miss the Captain more than she was capable of expressing to him in the context of their professional relationship which had already begun to garner cautionary stares and scrutiny from certain people and groups within the Space Force. But this was similar to the impropriety tightrope she was required to walk with Edmund. Only her marriage situation was much more blatant. Besides, it was a bridge she would have to cross when she came to it. All of it was, and she would not mind burning it down if she could continue to do things her way. In that, the path she chose was no different than any path she had traveled previously to this point - least taken.

And talk about paths least taken - Nadala had seemingly come out of nowhere. Superbly qualified for the position, her assistance in teaming with Terry to load-balance two of the most critical functions of SpaceStation Colt (engineering and science/medical) had been lifesavingly timely.

On the surface, Nadala generally enjoyed her duties, and for as morbid as the Head Doctor position was in a time of war such as this, she never lost her smile. What was more, she never let her patients lose their smile either.

Houser seemed purely avid in his support of the cause - a true team player. This was the type of soldier who would give everything he had and then turn around to be the hardest on himself when it was not enough. People like that were always keepers.

With Houser's flight plan digitized into data points Compound could easily digest, he had an opportunity for vindication. That second Doran mothership had become a personal mission of his to solve, but this was not a project of obsession. It was an understandable sense of urgency.

There was an uncertainty as to what made Terry tick or why he did things in his own specific way. There was, however, no denying his genius, and in that realization, it became a little bit clearer than mud as to why he continued to stay aboard the spacestation when he did not have to.

Terry was not officially Space Force, but SpaceStation Colt was his baby to which a deep-rooted connection existed. This freelancer knew things though, but not to the tune of Nadala who was not going to tell so one should not even ask. He was much more calculative in his omissions (namely the separate attachment he had

to the two going back decades) and his admissions (playing matchmaker with Edmund and Marileva all those decades later). This was a much less subtle example, but it went a long way to support the argument Terry was more on par with the level at which the Lieutenant played than anybody else aboard because with people like them, there were no such things as coincidences.

"There's something about Marileva I can't put my finger on," Ciba Due told Beavy as they headed down a corridor on the way - the long way back to the Docking Bay Section.

Beavy was still in the afterglow of his promotion. "You know I'm feeling no pain right now. Why do you have to go and ruin my natural high?"

"I mean, how can the Lieutenant just bring her husband on the spacestation and give him 'a dotted line' to her worth of responsibility?" Ciba Due asked animatedly.

"You're doing that thing again," Beavy announced. "Remember what I said about you ruining my high? Do you realize in all of Space Force history, I'm the youngest person to ever make Major?"

"Where does Marileva come off? There are probably a bunch of other things she's keeping from us as well. I don't trust her."

Beavy stopped walking and turned to address Ciba Due, "I'm headed to the bathroom before I have to be cooped back up in that space tow madness again, but at least the Lieutenant acts like she gives a shi- about what I do. That's all I can ask of her. I don't know her backstory, and personally I can give a fu-- less. But if the only thing she's guilty of is falling in love, it pales in comparison to what I've done by my short time in this universe, and I'd probably warrant execution if that was the bar. If you have beef with her, you go talk it out with her directly, but don't

bother me with your hating. I'm on some next tax bracket-type shi-." He continued on down the rest of the corridor without Ciba Due.

They were both a trip - Beavy mostly. Nothing more could be said about him. Ciba Due stood rationalizing yet another defection from her cause.

This animosity was seen as a positive though because nothing was worse than having a senior staff of yes-men and women. The checks and balances came from the differing perspectives of diverse thought, and in that, Marileva welcomed Ciba Due's contribution.

Rounding out the Lieutenant's senior staff was the sixth member - her husband, Edmund. So rather than sit pensively within the devastated Cockpit Section, she decided to stand in the entranceway of their cabin while watching this man she had once referred to as 'perhaps the most civilian of all' get suited. Women were just as visual a creature as their male counterparts who tended to get all the credit for that, and she liked what she saw.

Edmund reached out with his right hand for the Beretta 93-R residing on top of the night table. It was at this moment Marileva stealthily advanced. She made her presence known by wrapping her left arm around him upon approach and placing her right hand lightly over his.

The grace of the Lieutenant's touch alerted Edmund to her arrival putting him at ease mere milliseconds before a person would have normally become startled. He turned his head slowly to look over his shoulder taking his eyes off the handgun for one succinct moment that allowed his wife an opportunity to confiscate the weapon.

Marileva stared at Edmund's piece initially before turning

her soft yet penetrating gaze upon him and asking, "Explain this to me - why do you even have a gun?"

"At the time," Edmund admitted, "I thought I needed protection."

"Is that situation resolved?"

Edmund nodded. "And not because of the Beretta. Despite the initial reason for owning the handgun, I still kept it because my weapon offered me a sense of power from whence my life held none."

"Do you want to know where your true power comes from?" The Lieutenant offered. She placed the Beretta 93-R back on the night table. "It is so obvious to everybody except you. It's the one thing your adversaries and rivals fear most. It's why they do wrong by you and work to bring you down rather than up. It's the one thing that draws your closest friends to you. It's why they can't even explain why they like you, yet they just do. But Edmund, it has nothing to do with your handgun or anything of the sort. There isn't a weapon created that possesses as much true power as what you hold. It's your innocence - the one thing in this universe even I couldn't resist."

Marileva held out both hands for Edmund's, and he obliged by offering his palms for her to grasp.

The Lieutenant continued, "I say all this because I don't want you to experience a repeat performance of being attacked with your own weapon. You put undue and undeserved confidence in the Beretta 93-R. And I know you felt the brunt of it, but it was hard seeing you like that especially since I never had the opportunity to impart this type of knowledge upon you as the mistress of your martial arts training. But as your wife and best friend, I'm asking you to not use any type of firearm on the next few missions

before us. It's the only way I can show you and you can prove to yourself how powerful you truly are."

Edmund did not need their umbilical link to be able to sense the concern in what Marileva was expressing, so he also did not hesitate to promise, "I won't use any type of firearm until you so deem it appropriate."

"Thank you, Edmund," the Lieutenant replied.

Most newlywed couples exchanged vows of fidelity and longevity, but the two were in the middle of a war, so the traditional was proven by past history and automatically assumed.

Marileva let go of Edmund's hands in order to raise hers to the sight of him decked out in the elite all-black Space Force Battle Uniform II. "So, what do you think?"

"I think you're enjoying this too much," Edmund replied.

"I think you look good," the Lieutenant countered.

The battle uniforms were similar to their normal Space Force uniform counterparts in nearly every aspect. Again rather than sterling gray metallic, the battle uniforms were all-black from jacket to pants to boots. The only thing not black and the only contrast to the outfit was the weighty white undershirt shown through Edmund's opened jacket. Even SpaceStation Colt's curled insignia still sat embossed on the left breast of the jacket in black, so it was slightly difficult to see.

Simply put, these battle uniforms were meant for business. Although they were still made of the same special polymer as the normal uniforms, each came with additional circuitry on the left and right forearms. Edmund was attempting to stretch and test the mobility of his left arm as the oval puffiness like a muscular bulge being on the wrong part of the arm was incredibly awkward especially since it was missing - not featured altogether on the

right arm. Instead a minicomputer lined the front half of the right forearm. He spoke about the lack of symmetry, "This is going to take some getting used to."

Marileva explained, "It's called a gauntlet. These uniforms are powered off a person's life force energy. Focusing that energy through the gauntlet creates a personal shield which can be used to defend against things of the hostile projectile nature: Bullets, laser fire, etcetera."

Edmund turned his left arm over - back and forth with newfound approval in every motion. "I take it back. I can certainly get used to this."

"Yeah the implications of your defensive capabilities are limitless," the Lieutenant opined. "Now let me tell you about the offensive capabilities." She pointed to the hip holster belted to his right thigh and waist.

Edmund removed a surprisingly lightweight handgun from the holster. It was no more than five inches long, three inches deep, and a little less than an inch wide.

"You just initialized a Triple Action LUNC," Marileva announced. "The weapon will now only recognize your DNA from here on out, and as you can tell, its initialization process is painless compared to what I had to go through with your Beretta 93-R."

Triple Action refers to what LUNC used to stand for. The Generation One version of the LUNC featured firing modes for a Laser, an Uzi, and a Nine millimeter making up that Combo. In fact, fully loaded, the weapon could take a laser fluid cartridge, a banana clip in the forefront, and a magazine in the butt of the handgun."

"Whoa," Edmund said.

"As you can imagine," the Lieutenant continued, "the weight

got out of control. Solid-state is the big thing right now, and everybody is trying to design devices with as few amount of moving parts as possible, so what you're holding in your hand is poetry in armament.

LUNC currently stands for Lightweight UNtraceable Combo weapon. Although the engineers may have gotten rid of the various types of loadable parabellum, they simply made the firing modes better for the laser. There's single shot and automatic shot based upon how you squeeze the pressure sensitive trigger pad. Now aim at the wall and tap the trigger pad lightly."

Edmund did so. "Built-in Spartan Green laser targeting beam? Nice."

Marileva added, "If you squeeze the trigger pad more completely, the LUNC lets off one singular laser pulse. If you squeeze and hold down the trigger pad, the LUNC lets off a continuous stream of laser pulses. It's very intuitive."

"How many shots?" Edmund asked.

"One laser fluid cartridge holds one million shots," the Lieutenant answered, "and ironically the battle uniform comes with extra cartridges."

"This thing is nuts!" Edmund was astonished.

"Oh," Marileva almost forgot, "and there's no kickback."

Edmund replaced the LUNC in his hip holster. "Amazing. And you're telling me all this because?"

The Lieutenant smiled, "I want you to know what you have on your hip and compare it to what you have in your heart. That's the most powerful and accurate handgun ever created, but believe me, it pales in comparison to your innocence."

"Well this I've got to see," Edmund sighed.

"You will," Marileva said confidently as she sat down next

to Edmund on the right edge of the bed.

"How are you holding up?" Edmund inquired before joining the Lieutenant on the bed and wrapping his arms around her.

Marileva stared distantly forward in a solemn manner putting the focus of her vision some ways out the window. She brought her right hand up to take hold of Edmund's embrace and pull him in closer. "It hasn't hit me yet, but I can't hold you here for if and when it does. We should get going."

"Yeah," Edmund understood, "that little thing called the war probably won't wait."

"No," the Lieutenant concurred, "it won't."

A short walk down their corridor in the Ranking Officials' Living Section put Edmund and Marileva at the closest transport module. The doors opened up to a familiar face.

Nadala inquired, "Getting ready to take off?"

"I'm ready," Edmund answered while allowing Marileva to enter the transport module ahead of him.

"Hi, Nadala," the Lieutenant greeted. "We're actually headed to the Docking Bay right now so I can pick up Jago and Edmund can be on his way."

"Oh, I love that little guy!" Nadala announced as Edmund entered the transport module and the doors began to close. "He's so polite. I can tell he has a good head on his shoulders thanks to Mom and Dad."

Edmund smiled, "As a parent, you never get tired of hearing praise like that from people about your child."

"It almost sounds like she wants to steal Jago away." Marileva crossed her arms and stared pointedly in Nadala's direction.

Nadala was quick to accept the levied charges, "Well actually yes. Why not? As the spacestation's captain, you obviously have to handle who knows how many different things in command, so Jago can't be with you there. Rather than have him sit up in your cabin alone this whole time, do you mind if he hangs out with me in Science/Medical? Things have calmed down considerably, so he wouldn't see anything inappropriate, but there's certainly a lot he can pick up, learn about, and stay occupied with until you two get a little downtime."

The transport module doors opened up to the Docking Bay Section where Marileva and Nadala exited first followed by Edmund. Continuing the conversation, he explained, "Well Terry's already given him a crash course in the Engineering Section."

"This is much appreciated, Nadala," the Lieutenant accepted the Head Doctor's offer. "I can't imagine how this is the ideal situation for anybody right now let alone a child."

"It's my pleasure," Nadala stated. "I'll keep Jago company so you can focus on getting us out this predicament. That, I'm sure, is no easy task, and you shouldn't have to be worrying about your son as well."

Marileva sighed, "As if you ever stop worrying, but I do appreciate the sentiment and your help."

"You two kiss up. I'll go get Jago." Nadala made a hugging motion with her arms before walking off ahead of Edmund and Marileva.

"She just cracks me up," Edmund stated.

"Yeah," the Lieutenant agreed.

The two hugged for a brief moment.

"Take care of yourself out there," Marileva ordered. "I need you to come back to me."

"Like a boomerang," Edmund replied.

Continuing on through the Docking Bay, Edmund and Marileva came to a stop at the step ladder latched to the right side of Compound. Nadala was cautiously crawling down with Jago held comfortably in her right arm.

Edmund proceeded to rub Jago's head before taking to the step ladder himself for the purposes of boarding the fighter. "Be good, Little Man."

"You out, Dad?" Jago asked.

"Yep," Edmund answered, "Compound and I have to run a quick errand."

As soon as Edmund was situated inside the cockpit of the fighter, a docking bay worker detached and wheeled away the step ladder. "Everything's clear for takeoff. Have a good flight!"

"Is everything alright, Mom?" Jago inquired.

The past events did take some addressing, so the Lieutenant reached for Jago and decided, "Nadala, give us a moment."

"No problem," Nadala said while softly relinquishing Jago to Marileva. "I'll be in the Science/Medical Section when you're ready to drop him off." The Head Doctor made her exit and left the family alone to say their goodbyes.

By now Edmund had the canopy closed and was strapped in ready for departure. Compound took the initiative of maneuvering the fighter out its docked position and onto a path for the fifty meter high Docking Bay Section doors. All the while the two's eyes remained locked together until Compound's back was completely turned to the Lieutenant and Jago's position - at which point Edmund hit some buttons to effectuate a vertical takeoff and took hold of the twin yokes shortly thereafter.

When people were present in the Docking Bay, the

shield/shield dome tandem was used to allow fighters the ability to enter and leave without the precious atmosphere of SpaceStation Colt being sucked out. In times of an all out squadron dump, a pressurization shift might be called for because of the sheer amount of fighters needing to be moved through the shield barrier, but for one fighter, the dynamically allocated shield system was sufficient. And Terry was actually getting the system configured to the point of where it could account for multitudes of ships coming and going, however that was a luxury and not a necessity at this point in time.

Marileva and Jago watched Edmund and Compound depart from the spacestation, turn on path of their eventual destination, and kick on the fighter's thrusters in full making their way out normal visual range rather quickly.

"Jago," the Lieutenant broke the news, "something bad happened while your father and I were training. In whatever it was, that man I told you about before - my superior officer, Captain Cairce, perished."

"Oh no," Jago replied. "You seem to be holding together pretty well."

Marileva explained, "That's only because I don't have any other choice. I'm missing some key pieces of information as to what exactly happened, and I don't like being in this position. Could you please do your mom a favor?"

"Of course," Jago accepted. "How can I help?"

"Just keep your eyes and ears open," the Lieutenant suggested.

"That's all?" Jago wrapped his soft arms around his mother's neck to amply show his support of the request with a heartfelt hug.

"I'm hoping it'll be enough." Marileva turned to walk toward the entrance on the lower level of the Docking Bay Section cradling the seventh member of her senior staff.

Even in SpaceStation Colt's deteriorated state, she was still quite the sight to behold up close. Unfortunately Edmund could not sit and linger about marveling at the majesty of the derelict for any worthwhile length of time, so he relegated the thought to the back of his mind and brought up the tracking computer screen on Compound's monitor.

"Based off Terry's calculations," Compound announced, "we're actually able to estimate the enemy's positions. Houser did an excellent job of getting this far into enemy space to give us such a significant amount of information with which to pull from."

Edmund pointed to the screen and said, "I take it we're red."

"That's correct," Compound said, "and the blue marks represent the Dorans. I've got my autocorrection set up to adjust for their movements in real time. The yellow is the path Houser took. While the paths converge, the color-coding is orange."

"So if there's any purple," Edmund deduced, "we were found out."

"Exactly, Edmund," Compound replied. "In keeping up with the primary color structure, this green section over here," he added a dashed circle to highlight the area on the monitor while speaking, "is where Houser's yellow ran into the Dorans' blue. There's a lot of information I can take away from his flight plan that'll help us stay either orange or red."

All the colors showed up vibrantly on the bright tracking computer screen. Edmund chose to look at things from the

overarching top-down view rather than the three-dimensional vantage since it would be slow to instance what was to come up ahead. His preferred view was a statistical mock-up that took some liberties with the assumptions.

First it assumed there were ten fighters to a Doran patrol - each independent of one another with regard to sub-squadron formation. The snapshot in time Houser was able to provide detailed at least ten separate enemy flight plans.

Second it assumed these enemy flight plans were static. There was about a fifty-fifty chance of the Dorans not having an opportunity to change this up in the last half hour or so, plus Compound could adjust to account for any variances that did occur meaning there stood an even better chance of the patterns to those enemy flight plans not having been able to change up drastically enough to make a bit of difference to what they were attempting to accomplish.

Third it linearly assumed six north and south routes plus four east and west routes. Space travel was a three hundred sixty degree endeavor, so this flattening out of the star map in order to add perspective was based off the fighter's positional bias.

All this really meant was Compound would have to fly perfectly through a spider web's worth of hostile bogeys without being detected, use their patterns to interpolate the best chance guess at a return path to the second Doran mothership, hopefully gather enough of a glimpse to be able to radio the vital coordinates back to the spacestation, and remain hidden the entire time plus long enough to escape - not causing the positions to further shift because of detection. Simple. He was as clutch as it got in these types of situations.

"It's almost as if you were made for the purposes of these

military-type applications," Edmund realized. "Jeez even look at me! This is a far cry from us playing Car Tag back in high school, old friend."

"I try not to go into the whole 'What is my purpose?' thing," Compound admitted, "because there are even too many variables in that equation for me to solve. Being around my family is sufficient for now. Making sure of your safety brings me a measure of comfort. I have to say, for the most part, I'm at peace."

It was a peculiar conversation for Edmund and Compound to be having but not a taboo subject. They had encroached upon this many times in the past as their friendship grew eerily more closely. Yes Compound was an artificial intelligence, but he was not just some inanimate object. There was a high level of sentience that was much more than preprogrammed answers to numerous queries. Edmund could call on Compound for advice, Compound was free to make his own decisions, and Compound was a self-contained entity within the 3-Chip holding his cybernetic soul!

Neither Edmund nor Compound were able to explain this. Perhaps if they could, each might lose a little bit of the Humanity resulting from the uncertainty over life's mystery. In that, they were very similar, so it was hard to argue against the point of this Class III Fighter actually being alive in a spiritual sense.

"You do look good in that uniform though," Compound stated.

"Oh don't you start too." Edmund took his hands off of the twin yokes handing control of the fighter to Compound, crossed his arms, and shook his head in disbelief.

"At first," Compound mentioned, "I thought this was the Lieutenant's influence over you, but they always say nothing can ever happen to you unless you allow it."

"Or so I think they hope there's always a choice," Edmund countered.

"Regardless," Compound continued, "your whole demeanor is different. Like you said, maybe we were both built for this."

At this point, Edmund could see the occasional Doran patrol in the asteroid field. Compound was doing a masterful job of conforming to Houser's previous flight plan. As expected, the Dorans had not yet deviated from their patrol pattern to make any bit of a variable difference in what they were about to pull off.

"Here's where Houser ran into trouble," Edmund pointed out.

"Brace yourself," Compound alerted as he dipped to his right and performed a barrel roll up under and then over an asteroid before emerging on the left side of it undetected. In that instant, a Doran fighter flew above them on a heading along one of the east and west routes from the tracking computer map - again, all in accordance of their position.

Back aboard SpaceStation Colt, Engineering was tense with anticipation. Terry monitored the unfolding flight plan closely while Houser paced impatiently.

Edmund's voice came over their Ear-To-Mouth Coms, "Houser, you'll never know how close you came."

Houser balled his fingers into a fist and shook his hand triumphantly. "Yes."

Terry smiled in acknowledgment of Houser having received a much needed boost from the personal vindication. As a team, their successes and failures were linked. He was also happy his efforts, however small, had made some semblance of this possible.

Houser and Terry were not the only ones listening in on this

announcement as Compound did the honors, "We've located the second Doran mothership along with another armada of their fighters. I'm transmitting the coordinates now."

Sitting in the captain's chair, Marileva ordered, "Hang tight. We'll be in touch shortly."



## 21: Composition Aggression

Not even the Conference Section could accommodate the entire crew of SpaceStation Colt in one session, so Marileva chose the Docking Bay Section to produce her desired effect. For perhaps the first time since the war with the Dorans began, everybody with responsibility from the Cockpit Section all the way back to the Engineering Section - the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent was brought together in one place.

All three levels of the section were filled with personnel from the cooks to the fighter pilots and everybody in between. Those on the first level, packed in closest to the (open) fifty meter high Docking Bay doors, were a little bit nervous because they were being offered an up close and personal view of outer space with nothing but the shield separating them from being sucked out into oblivion.

The Docking Bay Section had been designed for operational efficiency because the spacestation was an enclosed aerospace craft carrier, so each level needed to be visible by the others to prevent traffic flow accidents. A step level design was created with the lowest first level being the most prominent area followed by the 'U'-shaped second and third levels protruding outward less and less (respectively) the higher up a person happened to be. For the Lieutenant, this meant she could be seen and heard by everybody from a position on the third level at the safety railing located directly in front of the entrance to that upper level.

Marileva made a quick check of her appearance and battle uniform in order to make sure each was immaculate before choosing

to enter the Docking Bay. At the conclusion of her procession, she stood facing the masses with Houser on her left and Ciba Due on her right - both also in battle uniforms.

Once settled into position, she gave the signal to Houser who fingered his Ear-To-Mouth Com and announced, "Lieutenant on the premises!" over the public-address system.

In a sign of momentous respect, all three levels of the Docking Bay Section snapped to a thunderous attention. They, like everybody else, had heard rumors of Marileva's exploits. Whether or not they believed the résumé was a completely different story, but for right now, they needed something to believe in and were willing to hear this woman out.

Applause was to be accepted, but respect was to be expected. As soon as the echo from the magnificent roar created by everybody under the Lieutenant's command coming to attention (all at once) dissipated, she began, "If not for war, we'd have no purpose. But war was not our intended purpose.

The Space Force Doctrine speaks to a defensive preemption of which war is but only one small instrument. To its ends, peace is what actually defines our purpose, and contrary to what many factions may believe, peace is not a by-product of war.

We don't wage war to bring about peace nor are we warriors in the sense this occupation is our legacy for the sake of itself. No that cheapens the sacrifices all of us have made, and our honor happens to be defined by something much greater than the Space Force who we so serve in its sole defense and advancement.

But rather, the Space Force Doctrine is very clear on this point: The honor I speak of is most deeply rooted in our capacity to expand our horizons in the interest of achieving our purpose of peace.

Only fools underestimate their constituents' propensity for peace when spiraling down into the hopelessness of a never-ending war disguised as the sugarcoated pill of hegemony. For as targeted of attacks as we've suffered and for as much care in precision as our enemy has taken with all we've faced, I'm banking on the fact they aren't fools."

Hugging an asteroid by hovering closely next to the slow-moving mass with systems and thrust in a minimal state kept Edmund and Compound's position from being detected. About the only thing outside of life support and an occasional boost correction to adjust direction they had running was the monitor with Marileva's speech displayed. Dimly lighting the cockpit by the brightness and glare, the contrast of the blackness of space elicited a strange yet subtle calm amid a dangerous zone of Doran territory.

"The boarding party I led to the original mothership gathered some important tactical information. The Dorans are apparently our sister species - Humanoid in appearance, but there's one thing above all we share in common. It's uncanny, but we speak the same language. This affords us an immutable opportunity declaring our intention must now be to force open the two-way channels of communication.

This is what the Space Force Doctrine dictates. This is the theme of peace I continue to elude to. And this responsibility to the purpose happens to be at the heart of what our honor code consists in.

I'm not saying Humans and Dorans must be one hundred percent in agreement because that's highly unlikely, but the other end of the spectrum - war is horribly clichéd. We do however reserve the

right to ask what's at the root of this aggression, and I intend to negotiate from a point of strength.

How? We've lost countless loved ones and comrades. We've lost Captain Linda Kincaid, Captain Ricardo Cairce, and Lieutenant Sereena Sadonjia. We've lost SpaceStation Vagabond - our flagship, Anatoga - our capital city, and SpaceStation Colt is barely able to sustain life support let alone go toe-to-toe with a second mothership. Should war be the only bar by which we perceive victory and loss, then yes, we're done. Fortunately I subscribe to a different school of thought: If there's time, then there's hope. And we have time, so there's hope. How apropos."

To say the crowd was listening intently would not do this scenario justice as they were actually hanging on every word. The Lieutenant was clearly polished in her delivery of a bold speech which was both earnest and thought-provoking. It was also understandably short on rah-rah sensibilities but made up for any false sense of security out its sheer order of magnitude and vision. At the end of the day, the Space Force was really nothing more than a private military contractor who had become so established, so large, so powerful - so as to usurp the very government itself and become the establishment. With that said, addresses of this type (in a bureaucracy reminiscent of the Space Force's corporate roots) were few and far between.

"It'll take one last battle to end this, and when I say that, I must defer to the tactical information we obtained aboard the original mothership in order to state something so initially improbable with such straight-faced confidence. Additionally I do believe the resolution will be to the favorable regard of both

Humans and Dorans alike as the intelligence was - the intelligence is extremely valuable.

When the channels of communication are either clogged up partially or closed off altogether, a wedge is often necessary to help push through the unconciliatory vestiges of pride and stubbornness. Helping to lead in this effort are the newly promoted Major Houser Reynolds to my left, Major Ciba Due Dimry to my right, and Major Beavy Beave who sits patiently aboard space tow. They along with Science/Medical Team Lead - Head Doctor Nadala Agënt and Engineering Team Lead Terry Terrison will be taking a more active role in personnel decisions. At the behest of hard times, our own internal communications should never stagnate because if we're not our own best example of this, how can we expect the Dorans to follow suit accordingly?

Because we were fortunate enough to have survived, it is our duty to make the hard choices. Part of being alive has to do with the ability to be able to choose freely. The other part has to do with the foresight to choose wisely. At this stage, I see a decision with no personal risk as not being a decision at all. It's a cop-out.

This is more than just blind patriotism to a faction. This is more than just following orders. This is more than just getting petty revenge. This is more than just finishing what was started. And I choose a calculated leap of faith toward the ideals espoused in the Space Force Doctrine which detail the pathway to peace. If that's also your choice, then be ready to move out in fifteen minutes. Thank you."

Beavy added his hand-clapping and nods of approval to the chorus emitting out his fighter's cockpit speakers. Sitting decked

out in a battle uniform as with the other senior staff, he was slightly disappointed he could not have attended the speech in person. The youngest Major echoed Marileva's sentiments regarding the only choice he felt they had in laying it all on the line to open up negotiations, so he would not have had enough time to be hooked back up into space tow within the fifteen minutes allocated.

The second mothership stood as a dominant fixture among the asteroid field. Its supporting cast of Doran fighters, persistently patrolling the area, almost seemed innocuous in their efforts when compared to the massive, spherical mobile spacestation. A highly advanced piece of military machinery, the mothership was not one to be trifled with.

Or so the Dorans believed.

Motherships featured a staggering array of armaments that surrounded the outer hull making them capable of a full three hundred sixty degree defense - or offense depending upon which side of the laser cannons somebody happened to be on. The fact not one of those cannons was fired nor did any of the surrounding fighters move to intercept meant the Dorans were completely stunned by the spacestation's advance.

Traveling right out in the wide open, SpaceStation Colt (in space tow) boldly entered Doran sensors range. After passing Edmund and Compound's position, the hidden fighter powered up fully, pushed away from the asteroid it had clung to all this time, and began to fly alongside the spacestation before thrusting out into the lead.

Beavy held up the first two fingers of his right hand in a peace sign as Edmund and Compound passed him on his fighter's right side. A sensors check revealed, "The Dorans are holding steady. They have no idea what's going on."

"First Squadron," the Lieutenant stated from the captain's chair, "you're up."

In a leapfrog movement, Ciba Due lead her entire sub-squadron out the Docking Bay Section and into a front line position ahead of both Edmund and Compound's fighter and SpaceStation Colt. From there, they proceeded to clear a path for the derelict right through the middle of the Doran fighter innards.

The Dorans truly did not know what to make of this. Perhaps they had always expected the need to hunt the spacestation down in order to bring about her destruction. Maybe this confrontation was occurring much sooner than what was anticipated since they had just recently ascertained the derelict's coordinates.

Confusion created hesitation which allowed First Squadron the chance to seize the momentum of a blitzkrieg cutting deeply through the Doran forces. And like a syringe piercing a vein, it allowed for the injection of its contents. Edmund and Compound's fighter pushed past the initial Doran front on path to a one-on-one confrontation with the mothership.

"I'm reading a lot of laser cannons on that thing," Compound announced as his monitor lit up with pulsating circular blip after blip after blip.

Edmund was barred from taking part in the attack via any sort of weaponry but was always good at utilizing his resources. "My hands are tied, so I'm gonna sit this one out. It's all you,

Compound."

"I'll take out as many as I can before our armada pushes through the enemy line," the mighty Class III Fighter acknowledged.

Marileva had fired the first shot of this battle, and she intended to fire the second as well. "Houser, take Phantom Squadron and flank First Squadron's attack. Cover their rear."

First Squadron's attack had left them open for retaliation which would wipe them out in very short order because it was literally a one-way motion meant for no return trip. Phantom Squadron was to provide the diversion necessary to preoccupy the stunned Doran fighters long enough to allow Ciba Due's sub-squadron a chance to make it back behind the moving line of the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent.

"We'll handle it," Houser promised as he led Phantom Squadron out the Docking Bay, but instead of running straight through the Doran fighters, they fanned out and went directly after the enemy.

It was at this point when somebody within Doran leadership had finally given the order to defend themselves by counterattacking. How ironic was it that for as embattled as the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent happened to be, they actually had the (supposedly) tactically superior Doran forces back on their heels for a change?

Houser finally caught a glimpse of the second mothership he had been tracking all this long time, and it really was a sight for sore eyes. The hard work was starting to pay off, but the work was far from finished, so he kept his battle focus tight and allowed his flight survival instincts to take up their rightful place in

prolonging this skirmish for as long as the Lieutenant needed to enact her plan.

In Terry's absence from Marileva's speech, he had managed to restore the vital functions of Left Com, Right Com, and Weapons Com enough they could each be staffed. As far as the controls of SpaceStation Colt (or any spacestation for that matter) were concerned, the Space Force had a big belief in specialization over multitasking. These functions held a responsibility for the entire vessel and were too much for one person to keep up with let alone perform with any bit of effective effort.

Left Com was responsible for all facets of navigation including the spacestation's transformation capabilities from vertical skyscraper mode to horizontal in-flight mode.

Right Com dealt with communications, data mining (and interpretation), plus environmentals. Long-range or intraship communications, internal and external scanners, damage control, and the shield/shield dome tandem all fell under its responsibilities.

Lastly Weapons Com had a handle on SpaceStation Colt's six swivel guns as well as the storied Mulgulous Weapon.

The panel worker at Right Com turned around to address the Lieutenant, "The Dorans are taking their focus off Phantom Squadron," which was fine, "and engaging the spacestation," which was not.

"Vex Squadron," Marileva ordered, "protect the space tow at all costs." She always saved for a rainy day whether monetarily or militarily, and her order sent Beavy's sub-squadron spewing out the Docking Bay Section to defend their Major.

The final sub-squadron met the Doran fighters like a

collision - the force of which would be felt at the Doran leadership's very core because of the sheer ferocity of these not so meager forces.

The Lieutenant had executed an immensely coordinated attack on the mothership accounting for everything from offense to transition to defense, and all the while, SpaceStation Colt continued to move forward. Things had gone smoothly to this point, but she knew the closer they got the more creative the Dorans would become.

This resourcefulness came in the form of eight apparently elite Doran fighters who exited the mothership and took to the fray with a seemingly unmatched level of flight experience.

Edmund turned to look over his right shoulder as those fighters roared past Compound's location - clearly uninterested in their antics. It was not an underestimation of the Class III Fighter's aggression because the mothership's forward firing array being lopped off one cannon at a time was starting to add up in detriment to the Dorans. This only meant there was another more important target warranting this elite sub-squadron's attention.

Any Class III Fighter that got in their way was grazed and immobilized short of being destroyed as now the Dorans demonstrated they too had studied the field manual on guerrilla-based fighting tactics. Wounding an enemy would almost always net two opponents removed from play - the first opponent who was wounded and the second opponent who happened to be helping the wounded opponent out.

Ciba Due was all too familiar with these maneuvers because the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent had been

reduced to using them for the longest time before this current incursion. She also did not need long to ponder the implications of the elite Doran fighters' entry into the battle. "Looks like the enemy's decided to throw their varsity team at us. First Squadron, fall in with Vex Squadron and defend the space tow."

It was the only way the Dorans could defeat Marileva's plan, and although Ciba Due would like to see her superior officer fail at something - anything, failing at this point would also mean her own demise as well as Beavy's death. Self-preservation and the preservation of a friend made it so she would not sit idly by and allow the elite sub-squadron's attempted transgressions to come to pass.

The Lieutenant would call that leveraged loyalty, and it had its place too. "Don't think, Ciba Due," she said to herself with a smile while bringing her laptop (which sat atop a mount on the right arm of the captain's chair) online.

Edmund and Compound's flight had a tertiary purpose outside locating the second mothership and taking out its forward firing array of laser cannons which was reporting back previously unattainable uranographical information about the mothership. Marileva's laptop received the upload of data, and she immediately began to highlight and magnify various vantage points throughout the screen with the help of a wireless mouse that sat beside the computer on the sizable mount.

"There it is." The Lieutenant fingered her Ear-To-Mouth Com and conferenced in both Beavy and Terry. "I'm sending you both a set of coordinates, and I need you two to work together to get us there by way of the fastest possible speed available."

"With or without stopping?" Beavy inquired. Right about now, he could tell the space tow was the focus of much attention from all sides of this skirmish. They were deep behind enemy lines, and the vicious dogfight to determine his fate was playing out everywhere around him with Class III Fighters and Doran fighters duking it out in a slugfest that strangely made him feel honored to be so wanted from the Doran perspective or needed from the Human point of view.

"Preferably with although ramming speed is what I'm looking for," Marileva explained.

Terry sat with his own laptop within the Engineering Section at the makeshift table and said, "I just received your coordinates. I'm going to use our current position plus Edmund and Compound's fighter for triangulation. That'll help me in determining the proper trajectory."

"What?" Beavy asked.

"I'll upload a program to your fighter's computer," Terry restated. "Just follow the macro's instructions, and make sure you give your ship enough juice when the program calls for it."

"Much better," Beavy approved.

Mistakes in battle often occurred in the blink of an eye, but mistakes in space battle actually occurred well before the battle even began. Above all, the elite Doran fighters were a wise and patient group. Yes the space tow sure seemed to be the

ultimate target, but the Dorans had time as they still held the statistical advantage of sheer physical numbers, battle-readiness of forces, and probability of victory. They waited for the Space Force's remaining Terran System contingent to become overconfident. They allowed the fledgling and scrappy armada to come this far. They broke off their assault on the space tow - postponed it really, and they baited First Squadron out.

A Class III Fighter was an amazing piece of machinery whether in air or space, but it could not touch the maneuverability of a Doran fighter with an operator who knew how to work its controls in piloting the ship to a virtually limitless potential.

In having never seen this particular attack, Ciba Due unknowingly walked into it. Shaped like an '@' symbol, the Doran fighters took the spacestation's stabilizers (tiny thruster pockets surrounding the surface of the vessel for precision direction correction and handling) to a whole different level. Simply put, their fighters could literally turn on a dime.

Ciba Due had homed in on the elite Doran fighters' apparent leader to bring about a blindside chase. The pilot stopped the ship in midspace and spun instantly around to face her with lasers letting loose.

"Oh shi-," Houser had his eyes glued to his monitor. "Ciba Due!"

It was such an amazing attack that if Ciba Due had been following the target any closer, she would have flown right into and actually seen her death coming. The Dorans could not get rid of her this easily however, and she managed to veer off to the left at the last possible moment suffering graze wounds to the right

wing of her fighter which spun her wildly out of control.

Since it worked so well, all the Doran fighters began to battle in this manner, and the momentum of this campaign was now theirs.

"Terry," the Lieutenant alerted, "we're out of time. I need the slingshot right now."

Fingers flew frantically across the laptop's keyboard as Terry added the final pieces of code to the program he happened to be creating from scratch. He slammed his fist on the enter key of the numeric keypad at the conclusion of his work and then said, "Beavy, go!"

Beavy gave his thrusters everything they had and the subsequent booster kick-in jerked everybody on the inside of SpaceStation Colt. He piloted on target of the coordinates that seemed to be a centralized point of the mothership.

Ciba Due regained some semblance of piloting control back in her fighter and watched as the spacestation thundered by. "What's Marileva planning now?"

"You alright?" Houser inquired. "We're in the thick of it over here, but I just saw that. These guys are no joke, and it seems like all the rest of the Dorans mysteriously stepped their game up as well."

"They were sizing us up all along," Ciba Due acknowledged while running a systems check. "I'm a little dinged up, so

maneuverability will be a bit off, but I can compensate. I want another crack at their varsity team."

"Yeah well they're playing at a major league level right now," Houser announced.

Objects being sped toward were much closer than they appeared. Beavy was getting an all-inclusive, emerging close-up view of the mothership.

The Dorans were doing all they could to take it to SpaceStation Colt and divert her from the locked on course. By now, the sub-squadrons of Vex, First, and Phantom converged under one as a unified Vex Squadron with the smothering defense of the space tow as the only objective. Edmund continued to pilot evasively while Compound focused on destroying as many forward firing array laser cannons as mechanically possible.

Wait, that needed to be repeated: Beavy was getting an all-inclusive, emerging close-up view of the mothership. "Ah he-- no! What the fu--? Are you fu--in' shi--ing me?"

"Stay on course, Beavy," the Lieutenant ordered.

"T-minus twenty-two seconds until impact, Ma'am," the panel worker at Right Com announced.

Marileva returned her focus to her laptop and requested, "Route me access to Right Com through my station here."

"Done. T-minus fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten...."

The Lieutenant ran her fingers over the keyboard for a detached moment of pensiveness before typing away.

Prior to impact, Beavy's monitor prompted him to disconnect

from space tow. He did so and dipped his fighter hard to the left via corkscrew very nearly scraping the canopy of his fighter on the mothership with how close he had come to it while flying evasively up underneath it thanks in part to the famed Stiletto Maneuver.

But no impact was to occur. The spacestation was hurled inside the mothership via the slingshot! The panel workers were paralyzed by astonishment, and the feeling spread mutually to all the Class III Fighters and Doran fighters out in the space field.

"Holy shi-!" Houser exclaimed.

Ciba Due shook her head and could merely say, "Unbelievable."

There was no time for this. "Landing gears!" Marileva shouted.

Snapping the panel worker at Left Com out her trance, she brought the landing gears down and in place as SpaceStation Colt slowed to a soft landing with about the last bit of power the derelict could muster. The emergency lighting engaged because everything else was officially tapped out.

Terry had programmed into the macro a reignition of the stabilizers and momentum devices to gently stop the spacestation and bring her down inside the mothership's most massive docking bay. It only further underscored the sheer size of a mothership for it to be able to house the derelict with levels above and below her plus what appeared, from initial estimates, to be ten kilometers in diameter worth of room to spare around the ship.

This feat - this violation was broadcast in all its glory on

the giant view-screen within the mothership's bridge. The captain of this vessel was an extremely interested onlooker who uttered the word, "No."

The mothership's gigantic docking bay section featured internal defenses - turrets that began to open up on the intruder (SpaceStation Colt) from the upper levels, walls, and ceiling of the area. They fired thick tripulses which would mow down any individual deciding to disembark and attempt to go against them straight up.

With the spacestation's six swivel guns offline due to dire power constraints, the task of taking those internal defenses out would normally have befallen upon external resources for resolution, but the Lieutenant was not finished. A few more keystrokes from her unapparent hacking of the mothership's computer systems put the turrets in a hibernation mode as they obediently pivoted downward and powered down - out of commission.

Beavy had managed to regroup and executed a reverse loop once reaching the base of the mothership which brought him back up and around - right side up for a more suitable entrance into the gigantic docking bay. Edmund had little trouble piloting through the masses of bewildered Doran fighters in the space field as he too turned and thundered inside the surprisingly spacious area.

Seeing this, Marileva closed her laptop and stood with the minicomputer of her battle uniform as the new focus. That screen she was working from on the larger computer was now a mobile version of itself on the much tinier computer. Her Ear-To-Mouth Com happened to be paired with the minicomputer as well, so she was

also able to deliver verbal commands to it, "Authorization: Queen. Preset: Systems and Security Lockout. Directive: Initiate."

Tiny but powerful. The top and bottom doors to the gigantic docking bay section came together as one closing off access to the area.

Edmund and Beavy disembarked from their respective fighters as SpaceStation Colt's own Docking Bay Section revealed a floorboard ramp on its lowest level that descended utilizing dual hydraulic boom cylinders which emerged and extended downward from underneath where the fifty meter high doors stood at the base of the section - all the way down to the ground of the mothership's gigantic docking bay below. The Lieutenant exited and was accompanied by a heavily armed detail of battle uniform-clad soldiers.

"I'm not even going to ask how any of this is possible," Beavy stated. "Can I just have your autograph?"

Marileva smiled, "Let's move out."

Beavy clutched his standard issue pulse laser rifle for emphasis and asked, "Are you two missing anything? I have some grenades up in my fighter's cockpit if the spacestation is out of ammo or something."

Edmund shook his head, "No. It's not necessary."

And it was not. The Lieutenant, by some heightened sense of Doran protocol, had granted her boarding party unmolested passage to the mothership's bridge by locking the entire place down completely. Wherever there was a group of Dorans, those soldiers were trapped in their location and the boarding party's pathway was diverted accordingly around the section to avoid conflict. The

trek through all the various pathways leading up to the bridge also served as a brief tour of the newly commandeered vessel.

"Nothing...", a feminine robotic voice began.

"...is responding," another feminine robotic voice finished.

"How is this possible?" The mothership's captain questioned with thin pinlike fingers gripping angrily at the respective arms of his chair. "The Humans."

The boarding party stopped just outside the doors to the bridge, and Beavy unslung his laser rifle in order to power it up to rapid, maximum blast. "The crazy shi- always happens when you take the bridge."

Marileva made use of the intuitive, one-handed typing on the adequately-sized keyboard to her minicomputer and opened the doors. A disappointingly small room of darkened design, there were no windows to give a sense of any bit of exterior as was the case with Space Force ships. The bridge was actually hidden within the heart of the mothership with large monitors and a wraparound view-screen surrounding a metalized interior as the command center's only eyes and ears.

Edmund and Marileva entered first with no hint of fear or hesitation. It was almost as if they were both home or completely at home within these seemingly foreign surroundings.

Beavy performed a forward roll to the right side of the two and scanned the area with his laser rifle. He was followed by the remainder of the armed detail who rushed in and took up positions at various vantage points within the bridge. All eyes and weapons were on the captain's chair which had a high back concealing its occupant.

The first of the Doran faction to stir were two feminine androids who left their post at the control panels in the front of the room to approach Edmund and Marileva.

"Don't come any closer!" Beavy said with his laser rifle trained on both androids.

"Nobody fire one single shot," the Lieutenant commanded, "or you'll have to deal with me personally."

The androids continued to approach.

"Lieutenant?" Beavy urged. He truly did not know what to make of the hostiles.

"It's okay," the Lieutenant replied.

With noticeably flowing hair of tendrils, both androids knelt down before Marileva.

"My...", the first one began.

"...Queen," the second one finished.

"No!" The mothership's captain exclaimed. "It's not possible!" He swiveled around to reveal a male android but apparently one of more sentience - not so automatically swayed by the Lieutenant's influence as seen by him firing off eight fingers and two thumbs worth of electrified and possibly poisonous pin barbs in her direction.

Marileva stepped in front of Edmund with her gauntlet powered up exposing a personal shield of an oval shape which was large enough to intercept the projectiles. Almost as if taking a brief moment to drain the attack of its electric and kinetic energy to further add that to the power of the battle uniform, she held her arm in place for a moment of supremacy before viciously flinging her arm to the floor - sending the now powerless pin barbs to the ground where they clinked superfluously like the spent shells of a handgun's clip.

At this point, the Lieutenant held out her arms and reiterated, "Weapons down! I mean it."

"Just say the word, Lieutenant," Beavy acknowledged before pointing the barrel of his laser rifle toward the floor.

"I will," the Lieutenant asserted, and the remainder of the tensed boarding party followed from Beavy's lead example. She knew they could not help it. They were bred to protect her at all costs, and under normal circumstances, the mothership's captain would have been annihilated for even the thought of attacking their superior officer. These were not normal circumstances however, and she needed to be clear in light of the delicacy of the situation.

In direct contrast to the cool of the armed detail, the mothership's captain was now frantic crawling over the high back chair and crashing to the ground. He could not escape fast enough with no discernible place to run but chose to stand against the panels in the front of the room with a trembling hand pointed at what would appear to be two ghosts. "Edmund and Marileva, i-it's n-not p-possib-ble!"

"What the fu--?" Beavy asked, "How does he know your names?"

"I don't know," Edmund admitted.

Marileva did not know either but could see their presence was clearly familiar albeit disconcerting to the mothership's captain. She reassured while speaking with gentle, open hands, "Nobody here is going to hurt you. Please calm down. How do you know of Edmund and myself?"

"This doesn't make any sense. You were both - ugh!" A silver-slicked oily version of dark-colored blood spurted out the mouth of the mothership's captain as dual projectiles entered in through his back and exited through his chest. He stood straight

up with wide petrified eyes fixated on the two, quivered slightly, backed away, jerked violently, and then collapsed to the floor - killed.

## 22: Month-to-Month

Beavy dove to the ground and came up in a firing crouch gritting teeth as whatever type of projectiles those were swooped around overhead of his position. He thought better of firing blindly into what he perceived was the direction of the attack's origination.

"Mother - fu--er!" Marileva exclaimed.

It was a good thing (too) Beavy held his trigger finger. He would much rather the Lieutenant deal with things than him have to deal with her.

Marileva walked past the kneeling androids out even further into the open - certainly within the radius of that deadly attack and demanded, "Show yourself."

A man, formerly hidden by shadows, stepped into the dim light wearing a black trench coat and hat to match his gloves. Dark shades along with the combination of a pulled-up collar and sloping brim served to shield the important features of his face. He removed the shades to reveal two empty eye sockets.

"Impossible," one of the members from the boarding party stated, "we had the entire room secured."

Suddenly the returning attack became more clear as two crimson red circles homed in on the shady figure's position. He stood and braced for impact as they made a gouging halt in his eye sockets causing the man's head to jerk back painfully, it seemed, from a Human's perspective. There the crimson red circles turned into a position eerily focused on the downed mothership captain.

"Fineyes," Edmund asked, "why?"

All weapons were now poised and aimed at Fineyes following every motion of his as he sauntered over to the mothership captain's position.

From his knees, the mothership captain slumped into a crumple with eyes frozen open and a right hand that looked to be uncomfortably draped over the panels.

"I just saved your life," Fineyes said while removing a Doran U-Gun from the mothership captain's unresponsive fingers, "again."

The Lieutenant knew exactly who Fineyes was and what he had done from Edmund's report of their time aboard the original mothership but wasted no time in ordering, "Arrest him before I kill him."

Fineyes held up both arms with one hand flailing the U-Gun and had a smirk plastered all over his face. Two members of the boarding party approached with their weapons lowered. The first soldier relieved the shady figure of the U-Gun while the second soldier bound his wrists together behind his back with fusion cuffs - a device the size and shape of a AA battery.

Once activated by pressing the solitary button in the center, the fusion cuffs used a nanite beam to literally fuse with the bones of a prisoner's wrists holding them effectively cuffed in place. One of the most ironic of technologies, that nanite beam only expended energy if the prisoner were to resist the bonds. If there was no resistance, the beam remained dormant enough to simply hold the device in place. In theory, it was a predicament bondage of the prisoner's own making.

Those two members of the boarding party, turned guards, forcefully carted the sneering Fineyes away - past Marileva and off the bridge.

The Lieutenant paid Fineyes' disrespectful looks and eye contact no mind as she ignored the shady figure being dragged away and fingered her Ear-To-Mouth Com before accessing her minicomputer. "Vex Squadron, stand down. Scherzo, Mezzo, Komodo, Durdeaghnott, and Sforzo Squadrons; stand down. The battle between our two groups is over. All Space Force and Doran Military fighters, return to the mothership immediately. Once docked, report to your superior officer and await my further instructions."

Marileva could not have played this any closer. Still a bit of disappointment managed to settle in at the loss of precious information that might have been - had not Fineyes reacted in such a manner. Deceased captains were starting to become a disturbing trend of deadly cliché, and each occurrence was seemingly forcing her hand into a narrowed down selection of choices and next steps. She was being herded but where, by whom, and why? Not knowing the enemy or the end game was certainly an unenviable position to be in, so these continued attempts at trying to play her were going to result in the game play reverting back to a more personal rule set meant to achieve results even though a hesitance to take things there lingered out the interest of curiosity toward the hidden players. She went along with this only to weed out the factions, but of course, whoever they were knew that as well.

"What's next?" Edmund asked the Lieutenant.

Marileva answered, "We begin the process of healing on both sides."

Beavy walked over to the mothership captain's corpse. "Hopefully it'll net us some answers because this whole thing seriously has me spooked. I can't imagine what the two of you are experiencing right now. Can somebody get over here and clean this up?"

## SpaceStation Colt

Most of the charred furniture and rubble had been cleared out Captain Cairce's former office thanks to Terry's efforts. Although very little of the physicality belonging to him remained, just the chance to be at one with the location where the unfortunate accident occurred was enough for the Lieutenant to suffice right now. She stood overlooking the mothership's gigantic docking bay by way of a makeshift window in the missing hull provided courtesy of a force shield generator when Ciba Due and Houser entered.

"Hey," Houser greeted. "Is it just the three of us?"

Marileva turned around to face Ciba Due and Houser. "We're waiting on one other person to arrive." She had asked Edmund and Beavy to take the remainder of the day off in order to rest from the fatigue of their extended sessions out in the space field. Terry had an entire spacestation to fix and a whole mothership worth of technology to learn, so he was otherwise preoccupied. Nadala was tending to the autopsy of the mothership's fallen captain and would not be available to join this meeting. Neither of those four were to be the focus however.

An armed escort led a Doran male in full crimson red battle garb to the entrance. This man was taller than six feet, and the way he walked over to the Lieutenant, Ciba Due, and Houser carried an air of importance in every step.

"What is this about?" Ciba Due questioned.

"Intendant Xach," Marileva extended a hand of introduction

and motioned in her team's direction respectively, "I'd like for you to meet Major Ciba Due Dimry and Major Houser Reynolds."

The Intendant could not remove the focus of his stare from the Lieutenant before he dropped to one knee, bowed his head, and acknowledged, "My Queen. It is an honor to finally meet you. In speaking with the crew, they harbor no ill will toward you in the passing of our captain, Pinlock. We know you did everything possible to prevent any casualties to your subjects."

"Wait," Ciba Due could not believe her ears, "what?"

"Please," Marileva told Intendant Xach, "stand."

"Wow, Lieutenant," Houser smiled. "We can add bending an entire alien race to your will to the list of accomplishments Beavy was touting earlier."

"My Queen," the Intendant began to say before being cut off.

Marileva shook her head before starting to walk back toward the makeshift window. "No call me Lieutenant or Lieutenant Dike-Sims. All the constant bowing by everybody is unnecessary."

Intendant Xach stood and agreed, "As you command, Lieutenant. It is rare for a person of such high genetic rank as you possess to trouble yourself with the daily workings of a mothership. We are not worthy of this prize of the captured Space Force vessel and its crew you have delivered to us. This victory is undeserved."

Ciba Due threw up her left arm in disgust. "I've heard everything."

Marileva spoke from a Doran perspective, "There's no more us versus them, Intendant. Dorans and Humans on this mothership are going to work together moving forward."

"And how do you plan on accomplishing this?" Ciba Due questioned. "These Dorans have been out there hunting us day in

and day out for weeks! Whose side are you even on?"

The Lieutenant turned back around to face everybody and simply said, "Mine."

"How disrespectful!" Intendant Xach shouted in Ciba Due's direction. "Had I not just been commanded to work with you by our Queen, I would have you shot, Human."

Ciba Due argued, "Your Queen is Human!"

"Insult!" The Intendant accused.

Houser got in between Ciba Due and Intendant Xach with arms bent at the elbows against the force of their approaching aggression and palms open in urge of restraint while edging them apart. "Hey, cool it. We have our orders, and this wouldn't be the first time we were told to do something we didn't initially understand."

"Therein lies the point of this meeting," Marileva announced. "We're among the highest ranking officials on either side respectively, and we're about ready to tear each other apart. Imagine what both our crews would do."

"My apologies, Lieutenant," the Intendant said while backing away from Ciba Due and Houser.

"We have to get a handle on this right now," Marileva explained, "and the four of us are the only ones who can do this effectively."

"I'm open." Houser asked, "What are you proposing?"

"Racial integration," the Lieutenant said. "If we work together, play together, live together, learn together, and are dependent upon one another for survival; tensions stand a much better chance of working themselves out."

"Very wise," Intendant Xach complimented.

Marileva continued, "The problem we'll face is the Dorans

who outnumber the Humans, significantly I might add, will feel subordinated and subjected to a Space Force rule. This is a recipe for mutual destruction."

"How do you envision this looking?" Ciba Due prodded.

"It needs to be a partnership at every level to show all sides are both represented and vested," the Lieutenant replied. "Intendant, I'm promoting you to the Space Force Rank of Lieutenant Secondary which will place you as second in command behind only myself in controlling both the Doran and Human groups."

"I am honored," Lieutenant Intendant Xach accepted.

"You can't do this!" Ciba Due pleaded animatedly.

"I can," Marileva corrected, "and this is effective immediately."

"This is crazy," Ciba Due pushed, "we don't know anything about the Intendant."

"I know Xach was talented enough to cripple your fighter in battle," the Lieutenant admitted.

"That was you?" Ciba Due's mouth dropped to the floor upon the realization of meeting her adversary in person.

Xach simply nodded.

"As you can see," Marileva stated, "there are a lot of wounds needing to be mended, and this is the only way to do it."

"Whatever you're teaching your pilots is incredible," Houser extended his right hand to Xach, "and it's worthy of my respect."

Xach accepted the hand and shook it heartily as he also offered praise, "I know the Lieutenant was making the majority of the Space Force's plans, but it took keen execution on the part of her Majors. I look forward to meeting with all you Humans to help bridge our cultural gap. We certainly speak a compatible language of battle."

The significance of that handshake held a universal implication by marking a momentary cessation in the hostilities between Humans and Dorans. Unbeknownst to Ciba Due and Houser, Marileva was Doran, so this held a special meaning for her since Edmund was Human: Their two peoples needed to sort things out and get along for everybody's sake. If this room of strong personalities could get on the same page, then there was hope for everybody else. In that, she was curious to see if these strong personalities would be charismatic enough to create one succinct faction under her.

The Lieutenant decided to go even further with her personnel decisions, "Xach, feel free to promote your most trusted staff to the Space Force Rank of Major Secondary to support in our cause of desegregation. There are two additional audiences we need to win over: Earth and the Doran Homeworld.

Since venturing forth in this endeavor, we actually left Earth in anarchy. By the same token with Pinlock killed, those answers to the questions regarding the wheres and whys of the Doran aggression seem to exist only on the Doran Homeworld now. Having two ships affords us a little leeway to be able to tackle bridging that cultural gap as Xach put it - systems apart.

Houser, you were instrumental and tireless in your efforts of locating the second Doran mothership, so I'm hereby placing you in command as its new captain. My plan is for you to take the mothership back to Earth and restore some semblance of order there. I have some ideas on how to do that based upon Second Earth's Enforcers strategy I've recently learned about, so we'll definitely talk. There are certain things you can do in the interim until a valid Space Force presence can be built back up and maintained."

"I don't even know what to say," Houser was dumbfounded.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Marileva complimented, "It was an easy decision."

"Congratulations," Xach mentioned, "the Juggernaut is a fine ship."

"The Juggernaut, eh?" Houser liked the sound of the mothership's actual name.

Last but certainly not least, the Lieutenant mentioned, "After some much needed repairs, SpaceStation Colt will make the trek to the Doran Homeworld in hopes of striking up diplomatic relations with the ends of bringing about a formalized treaty close to the hostilities. Ciba Due, I'm giving you perhaps the most important responsibility as my first officer. Although Xach outranks you, he stands more prominent as our liaison in the capacity of emissary to the Dorans. Should the both of us be off this ship, it falls to you."

"Table scraps?" Ciba Due replied.

"No," Marileva disagreed, "my family happens to be aboard this vessel. And to me, there's nothing in the universe more important than that."

"Then congratulations are in order for you as well," Xach extended his right hand to Ciba Due.

"Save it," Ciba Due crossed her arms, rolled her eyes, and shook her head disagreeably - all in one fluid, standoffish motion.

Xach retracted his hand and was visibly taken aback by Ciba Due's disrespectful mannerisms. It was actually more of a sadness than an anger that got him down because he was really only trying to be nice and do his part in a tough situation. As it stood, this one person (who he harbored no malice toward) apparently hated him. Genetic reengineering aside, the Dorans were Human after all.

The Lieutenant would put a stop to this after the meeting but worked through the rest of her agenda, "Xach and Houser, I'd also like to see you two sit down and divide up the Human and Doran forces between both the spacestation and the Juggernaut. Split them right down the middle. We'll entertain any grievances or reservations as a committee, but I don't expect to see too much of that nor will I accept too many changes to the allocations you select.

In fact, I won't tolerate insubordination from either side, so until I'm satisfied all these changes are having their intended effect, we're going to impose a ship-wide curfew. Those assigned to SpaceStation Colt are confined to the spacestation. Those assigned to the mothership are confined to the Juggernaut. Roaming privileges belong only to myself (obviously) and my senior staff: Xach, Ciba Due, Houser, Beavy, Terry, Nadala, Edmund, and those people Xach selects as his.

I expect us to be underway within one month. Everybody except for Ciba Due is dismissed."

Houser patted Xach, who had entered Marileva's office by way of a fully armed escort, on the back and led his new superior officer out as a team member.

"I take it this conversation is going to be off the record," Ciba Due added.

The Lieutenant went right into it, "Yes, but not because you continually choose to embarrass yourself in hopes of possibly getting at me somehow. I need you to interrogate Fineyes."

Ciba Due was mystified. "Not something you wanted to say in front of the boys?"

"Keep your actions and findings between us," Marileva requested. "I'll let everybody else in on your work as necessary.

Fineyes is the most dangerous and manipulative person we've met to date. I want contact with him and any details funneled through him kept to an absolute minimum."

"This coming from you, Lieutenant?" It was time for Ciba Due to have it out with her superior officer. "Those words seem to better fit you as the most dangerous and manipulative person I've ever met."

"There's a fine line between manipulation and helping," Marileva replied.

"Which is?" Ciba Due questioned.

"Sacrifice," the Lieutenant answered.

Ciba Due laughed, "And what in the universe have you ever sacrificed?"

Marileva's Humanity was a start. In being converted to a Doran physiology aboard the original mothership, there was not a single crystalline cell within her body that did not scream out for her to turn on and betray the Space Force. This battle at the genetic level within her own body was what she had come to realize was called the Struggle.

Conversion was more than brainwashing, although the massive infusion of Doran history and ideology were all quite overwhelming. Conversion was more than transformation, even though the increased physical abilities, prowess, and strength were all very appealing. Above all else, conversion was outright torture - brutal, pervasive, and unrelenting.

The Lieutenant's knowledge of Doran protocol and technology was staggering having no prior contact with or training from the species, but this spoke to both the extensiveness and the invasiveness of the conversion process. It was a procedure started within a device called the Crystal Cage, but a subject was really

only kept in there to further the feeling of helplessness from their surroundings and hasten a surrender to the process. Once conversion began, it did not end until the subject submitted completely to the procedure - at which point, the former person no longer existed and a loyal Doran would then emerge. Resistance created an error in the process, and at a genetic level, those types of errors were accompanied by excruciating amounts of pain. If she were to simply just give in to the conversion, the pain would cease, but so too would her autonomy.

Aside from Edmund and Nadala - and even then, only her husband knew the true extent of what Marileva was experiencing because of the soul they shared, nobody else knew she was going through the Struggle. This was not something that could have been articulated let alone documented in some report. Every waking and resting moment of her life since conversion was fraught with a compulsion to hurt the ones closest to her heart, the Space Force she served, and anybody else who decided to get in the Doran Military's way.

Hopelessness was again the key to either losing to the conversion or combating it and continuing the Struggle. Sharing the Lieutenant's soul with Edmund created an anchor to Humanity of great irony. Now she could not hurt the one she loved without hurting herself, so self-preservation kicked in not only preventing malfeasance but stifling the conversion's unyielding grip.

"Are you even listening to me?" Ciba Due interrupted.

Marileva only allowed this pointed line of questioning to continue because she wanted to hear it. Ciba Due's constant belligerence was a quaint little reminder of an ongoing feud with a former superior officer by the name of Commander.

A bit dissimilar in the manner by which these battles were

waged through varying degrees of tact, the Lieutenant needed to make one thing very clear, "You don't like me. I get that, but if you ever bring it to the mission again -"

Ciba Due cut Marileva off, "Are you threatening me?"

"Oh yes," the Lieutenant admitted, "absolutely I am. If you ever bring it to the mission again, I'll have you either jailed, thrown off SpaceStation Colt, or killed dependent upon my mood at the time. Also a friendly piece of advice: If you ever decide to go up against a superior officer, you might want to make sure your actions and network are both strong enough to support it."

"Where do you come off?" Ciba Due raised her voice, "You're cavorting around the spacestation with a civilian, hoarding valuable technology like Compound to yourself, and seem to be uncomfortably buddy-buddy with the Dorans!"

"And yet we're all still alive," Marileva countered. "My record speaks for itself as exemplary. I don't have to justify anything to you, and you don't have to like it. What you need to do is separate your hatred of me from the Dorans immediately."

"How am I supposed to do that, Lieutenant?" Ciba Due asked honestly. "They were just trying to kill us."

"As were we trying to kill the Dorans. Nobody said anything about this being easy, but we need their physical resources to repair SpaceStation Colt, their mothership for the protection of Earth, and their troops to help foster some sort of peace accord with the Doran Homeworld. We're not about to do or take any of that by force, and you're too smart not to see this. Besides and I'm not referring to you when I say this: Soldiers follow orders; very rarely do they make decisions. You have to be very careful in holding the troops accountable for carrying out the orders of their leadership. Why waste them figuratively and literally in such a

manner when they can be our way 'in' to talk to the enemy's leadership and so much more when you factor in the Juggernaut?" Marileva's position was well thought-out as always. "Extend the olive branch to Xach. Show him around the spacestation. I cannot impart upon you strongly enough the importance of Humans and Dorans working together. There's too much at stake for me to stand idly by while one of the members from my own senior staff disobeys the most important edict of this war out of some petty gripe or disagreement with me. I will not allow it, Ciba Due, and if you feel you're at the level where you can challenge me - well then, by all means."

One day, Ciba Due might be strong enough to challenge the Lieutenant, but within the matters of experience stood a good chance her superior officer would have almost assuredly become exponentially stronger as well by then. What really struck her as odd was in how open-ended the challenge remained - almost as if it was encouraged.

Ciba Due had not expected this contingency because she had no preferred end result to speak of. Problems with certain people in authority existed surely, but she was a victim of not knowing what she wanted the outcome to be otherwise. Marileva could have come up with any number of responses, and she would have been no more prepared for those than the one currently before her.

Never before had Ciba Due been so riled up, but there was something about the Lieutenant she just could not place her finger on. Her superior officer was heralded throughout the Space Force as some sort of prodigy. Yes she had heard all the stories as well, but working under somebody created a completely different impression than the untested lore was said to initially provide. Jealousy was there certainly but so was a certain disbelief in the

mysticism surrounding this woman.

Ultimately two choices existed for Ciba Due. The first and most appealing choice was to continue to fight with Marileva out of a discontent for the annoying perception of her superior officer's perfection. How was this even possible? The second choice was to take a step back and learn from her superior officer. After all, she was actually - recently fast-tracked. Receiving a command position of SpaceStation Colt was a big deal and certainly something only the foolish would take lightly.

Even the Dorans seemed to be greatly enthralled by the Lieutenant's spell. Perhaps her superior officer was just a great person, but there was still something Ciba Due could not figure out. Defensive mechanisms - these defenses that had seen her through so many tough times were not to be ignored however. No matter how untouchable this woman seemed to be on the surface, a gut instinct was worthy of being heeded.

Of that gut instinct which was rarely ever wrong across the trials of Ciba Due's entire life, a sinking feeling was left in the pit of her stomach at the realization of what would actually cause her to have to finally go up against Marileva. The implications were nothing short of horrifying, for waging that battle was almost assuredly not something she could walk away from with breath left within her lungs. Maybe that was what she hated most about her superior officer - the foreshadowy thought of her own demise at this woman's hands. A means of prevention escaped her for even the cause was unthinkable. The context was also borderline inconceivable. No nobody she had ever come in contact with had rubbed her this wrong way.

There was nothing Ciba Due could say, so she conveniently changed the subject, "What is it you want me to get out of

Fineyes?"

"I take it this conversation is back on the record," the Lieutenant added with a smile. "Look, Ciba Due, I like you a lot and respect your record of service. There's no way I'd have given you command of the spacestation otherwise. Even though we don't always agree, I trust you to do what's best for Ciba Due. It's this specific quality I believe will aid you in the interrogation."

"He's the one in the detention cell though," Ciba Due stated.

"Yet Fineyes will be in control," Marileva warned, "and I don't expect him to hit back against your attempts with anything less than straight daggers. We'll consider this a victory if you can pull anything useful out of him at all that doesn't wind up destroying us."

Week One

Houser trotted down SpaceStation Colt's Docking Bay Section ramp to meet up with Xach promptly before their meeting. He was not only early but anxious to take command of the mothership.

"Did you have a good rest, Major Reynolds?" Xach inquired.

"For once," Houser admitted, "yes. You know, this war thing kinda gets in your blood, and it's hard to let it go."

Xach nodded his agreement. "Hopefully our two peoples will experience a much more prolonged moment of being able to let their guard down because of our collective actions. I, on the other hand, could not contain my enthusiasm to restful slumber and waddled in the restlessness of planning."

"You already completed your promotions list?" Houser pointed to a slate computer Xach was clutching - almost aching to share.

"I have," Xach said proudly. He handed the slate computer to Houser for a brief review. "I am promoting Brody of Scherzo Squadron and Hubbard of Sforzo Squadron to the Space Force Rank of Major. The numbers of your Vex Squadron are greatly diminished, so I am also proposing the spacestation accept both Scherzo and Mezzo Squadrons as addends to its forces - this above the fifty-fifty split."

Houser did some quick math in his head. "That would leave Durdeaghtnot, Komodo, and Sforzo Squadrons for the Juggernaut."

"Correct," Xach replied, "and under this arrangement, Major Hubbard would be at your side as a ranking Doran official to help guide you. The mothership is a massive installation with a lot of moving parts, so I believe his help can be of some value to your learning curve."

"I'd say his help is more invaluable than," Houser admitted. "This list looks great."

Xach sighed, "I will miss this place." He had actually spent more time aboard the Juggernaut, by years, than on the Doran Homeworld. It was a bittersweet irony sprinkled with the slight nervousness of a long overdue homecoming.

"Well," Houser made light of the situation, "get me up to speed so I can return her to you in one piece. What types of things should I know?" He had no intention of commanding the mothership forever and was fully aware success meant a temporary posting as the Juggernaut's captain.

Right now, Xach was ultimately needed on SpaceStation Colt to help deliver the message Humans and Dorans could actually get

along as peaceful allies plus further enunciate the benefits from his unbiased point of view. When he returned, Houser would rightfully and welcomely turn the reigns of the Juggernaut back over to him. By which time - more than enough time actually, Earth would be back to some semblance of normalcy under the protection of the Space Force again.

One needed only imagine how things fared on a planet all but forsaken by its lead, governing authority and law enforcement agency. Sure national, state, and local governments could and would take up the slack, but that also would not preclude them from vying for certain advantages - the arbitrage opportunities afforded to the most powerful. The Space Force had a mere skeleton crew of a few bases and SpaceStation Vagabond after the bulk of its officials and fleet relocated to the Quadron System for colonization which was more than enough to hold Earth in check. A mothership happened to be over fifteen times the size of a spacestation, so that was more than enough to take Earth back. In matters of planetary domination, the thought truly counted.

Xach and Houser began to walk through the mothership's gigantic docking bay section placing them at almost four kilometers from the nearest wall. Seeing the spacestation up this close was an amazing site separately, but she now paled in comparison to the massive installation that happened to be her garage.

"Even I do not know of everything on the Juggernaut," Xach explained, "but there are three main areas every captain should be aware of. The other sections are either typical of most other space vessels - just to Doran specification or you will simply happen upon something new in your daily travels. When a crew is trained for duty aboard a ship such as the mothership, they are segmented operationally and only given a specific knowledge to be

able to perform the duties of their assigned sections. As I understand Space Force protocol from the documents I have read, this is no different than the specialization encouraged by Humans. With the sheer size of the Juggernaut, it is an imperative."

"I can imagine whole sections of the mothership may never even see the others at any point in time because of this," Houser said.

"Precisely," Xach added, "so we are all dependent upon each other for the proper function of the Juggernaut. This area here, for instance, is a rotating docking bay."

"Nice!" Houser had wondered how SpaceStation Colt would ever be able to exit the mothership because she sure was not about to back her way out.

Xach acknowledged, "Ships like the Juggernaut were often referred to as hunters because of their ability to seize large vessels, dismantle or retool them, and then spit the retrofit back out again. A Doran would train their entire career for just the mastery of these tasks."

"Our work ethic isn't all that different then," Houser stated.

"No," Xach agreed, "it is not. This was the first place I wanted to show you and the first piece from our culture I wanted to make you aware of."

The tour continued, and Xach and Houser found themselves within a luminescent crystal chamber. A high towering ceiling made it impossible to calculate the room's true height because of the seemingly endless darkness that appeared the higher up the reverse chasm a person looked. The clear focus of the room, however, was the crystal cage sitting prominently in its center.

"The Dorans did not only specialize in retooling equipment," Xach announced, "but bodies and minds as well."

"Bodies and minds?" Houser sought clarification.

"Yes." Xach pointed to the control box attached to the crystal cage. "The Doran people are a society born and bred of science. Our history is such that a man - a Human by the name of ProjecX perfected a method of genetic reengineering which created a crystalline cell structure immune to both cancers and cellular degradation. Could he have been capable of describing his own origin of existence, I would submit this man was a god. At minimum, he was our God."

Houser had no idea what to make of the crystal chamber but circled the crystal cage as Xach spoke hoping to grasp some semblance of the bigger picture. "Your original numbers - the original numbers of your species probably consisted of Human terminal cases, I'm guessing?"

"You catch on quickly," Xach complimented. "It was a very noble endeavor, but somewhere in the history and dependent upon who you speak to, opinion on the path of the race split. The scientists watched their influence wane as our numbers increased, so order and rule took up the place of idealistic sentiment. It was the harmless evolution of a society taken a dangerous turn toward civil war. Science was perverted into military applications."

"As is often the case," Houser said while feeling the crystal bars of the seemingly hexagonal cage.

Xach appeared to speak in an earnest, regretful tone, "Where once this technology was used on the willing, it became a weapon to use against the unwilling. A concept of Doran Military Rank was introduced into the deepest genetic marker causing a forced

compliance in non-Doran species who were converted. Perhaps it always existed as a byproduct of the original encoding - the intent of which I am unable to venture a guess about, but these crystal cages have been used for everything from interrogation to creating loyal double agents to ethnically cleansing entire species."

Houser put two and two together, "You spoke of a high genetic rank when addressing the Lieutenant as your Queen."

"Yes I did," Xach recalled. "Lieutenant Dike-Sims was not a pure Doran by birth, but the timetable of events surrounding Edmund killing ProjecX puts her conversion around the same time as your battle with the original mothership."

"This is almost too much." Houser was clearly caught off guard by this part of their conversation. "Soldier-to-soldier, we were both instructed to kill each other. Either this is the most elaborate ruse I've ever seen -"

Xach continued, "Or the Lieutenant is resisting the conversion. Please note not all Dorans believe the same way as I am sure not all Humans believe the same way. This only underscores why I and the rest of this mothership believe she is the deliverance. From the killing of ProjecX to resisting conversion, it is a clear-cut representation of the fight for our species' sovereignty."

Houser was quick to grasp this concept, "I can imagine seeing every old species brought into the fold would commoditize the overall batch."

"Are we merely conquerors and imperialists, or are our own people capable of achieving a great many things through innate wisdom, intelligence, and resolve? That is the question from one perspective - the one to which I subscribe and also share my true allegiance. To the Dorans serving aboard the Juggernaut, it is no

secret of in how high a regard they hold Lieutenant Dike-Sims. We are excellent fighters - the best, but too much of something is not necessarily a good thing. She is the living representation of the paradigm shift away from science and the military."

"So how big a blow was dealt when we destroyed the original mothership?" Houser asked.

"The biggest," Xach stated. "Negotiations will not be easy. They never are, but I wanted to introduce you to the crystal chamber to show you the extent of what is at stake. Because of this, the Space Force will have a leg up on credibility. The Dorans will be hesitant to throw out one undesirable faction in favor of the sweet promises from another, so therein lies the ultimate challenge to the overall peace process."

"Then the Lieutenant is the bridge," Houser reasoned, "on all accounts and from various perspectives as a Doran clinging to her Humanity."

"Right," Xach replied. "The universe is old and fraught with many great ironies."

The tour concluded within the darkened bridge. Greeting the visitors were the feminine androids standing side by side at attention in anticipation of the arrival.

Xach proceeded with the introductions, "You are perhaps going to spend more time on the bridge than any place else on the mothership. Please meet your copilots, Arbie and Cebe."

Each bowed their head gracefully upon the mentioning of their respective names. The motion was slow and precise but fluid and deeply respectful.

"Are they much for conversation?" Houser inquired. "I'm gonna be honest, Xach, this whole place is rather constricting."

Houser was referring to the foreboding room unfortunately splashed with entirely too much black paint. It was reminiscent of an office too dimly lit to keep a person energized enough to focus on anything other than mind-wandering.

"They will make as much conversation as you need, I suppose." Xach described their true function, "Arbie and Cebe represent the nerve center of the Juggernaut. There are essentially too many functions, occurrences, and variances for a normal Doran or even a team of Dorans to take into account and track during an ongoing basis. Either Arbie or Cebe could perform this task alone, however their combined effort allows processing time to be seamless to an end user such as yourself."

Houser was impressed. "Load-balancing is always a good thing, but I have a question for you."

"Of course," Xach welcomed.

"Why is it so da-n dark in here?" Houser asked.

Xach smiled, "I knew that was coming. This is one stark difference in particular to how Dorans and Humans view navigation. Again from what I have read, and even still from what I have seen firsthand, it appears Humans prefer line of sight and depth perception as the preferred methodology. Dorans much prefer the increased reaction time and freshness of simply being responsible for the act itself."

"Interesting," Houser said. "I'll admit there's a certain fatigue that comes about from prolonged flight time because you're always responsible for every facet of the travel. Your mind is constantly working. You've basically broken a pilot down to their base, piloting instincts so they can hopefully perform their duties longer and with greater impact."

"Yes," Xach replied.

Houser too had to smile. "Well I'm not buying it. I'd love to put the best pilot I've ever seen, Beavy, up against your best pilot to test that theory out. There's so much more to being a pilot which has to do with overcoming the limitations of not having wings. You guys are almost too efficient to take away - how many senses would that be? Probably two or three at least?"

Xach relished a challenge. "I have heard of this Major Beave. A once worthy adversary - I would not mind some friendly competition."

"If for nothing else," Houser suggested, "when we start to integrate the Class III and At-Ship Fighters, it'd give the teams something to draw upon - perhaps find a little flight synergy in the differing views. But anyway, although I don't initially like this type of setup, I'm willing to give it a try."

"As I will have to do on the spacestation," Xach offered a criticism of his own, "because I cannot fathom how such a ship is even flown in the manner by which you Humans choose."

Houser shrugged, "She has been destroyed a few times so apparently not all that well."

Xach almost forgot a critical component to this entire tour, "Speaking of destroyed, you noticed how this room is out of the way - basically hidden, correct?"

"Yeah I did," Houser answered, "and I was meaning to bring this up, but I thought you'd answered it with that bit about the piloting differences between our cultures."

"Not so simply," Xach said while raising his arms to showcase the room. "Security beget the flight differences. For a ship like this to fall into the wrong hands, an enemy would have an unbelievably destructive vessel at their disposal. This bridge is hidden deep within the innards of the ship to prevent all but

ranking officials from finding it - thus their assigned specialization. Even with a captain neutralized, Arbie and Cebe can continue to perform their duties. Enemies cannot find the bridge or knock it out of commission, so the mothership remains figuratively in hand until returned physically to Doran hands."

"Now that makes sense," Houser admitted, "and I can see it as an exploitable weakness of SpaceStation Colt. I don't know enough about her to know how that's combated, but it sure sounds like the Dorans have thought things through thoroughly."

Both Xach and Houser kept open minds in their reassignments, and the longer they talked, the more they found things in common including a burgeoning friendship. The start to the relationship was going better than anybody could have ever hoped for.

The Juggernaut's detention cells were much more deep than wide - small but surprisingly efficient. In dramatic contrast to the rest of the darkened decor, these rooms were all-white and lit by a soft, calming brightness. Featuring a dual security layout, the complete room (from the vantage point of initial entry) looked like an upside down letter 'T'.

Prisoners were afforded a chair for momentary comfort and the floor for overnight accommodation. A force shield was the only thing separating Fineyes from Ciba Due. Making use of the space in the wider section of the cell, she sat at a table with a slate computer in hand displaying various, different paperwork from files to notes. Armed Space Force guards, who were tasked with being the last line of defense in preventing an escaped prisoner from getting too terribly far away, posted up outside her section.

Ciba Due's dismissive demeanor in studying the slate computer in the presence of Fineyes was meant to establish some

semblance of authority, but those eyes - his gaze, that stare was ever-penetrating if not simply just eerie. As if by involuntary response, she kept to the attention of the files and notes realizing how Marileva's words of forewarning never rang so clear.

A guard entered the room with a plastic bag containing some sort of device. As it was placed on the table beside her, the guard announced, "This was the only thing he had on him, Ma'am."

"Thank you," Ciba Due said as she took hold of the bag and studied the device for a brief moment. After the guard exited the room, she held it up for Fineyes' view. "What is this?"

"Terry should know what to do with that Converter-X Adapter," Fineyes announced.

Whereas his mentioning of the spacestation's Engineering Team Lead out of the blue might normally be construed as a startling piece of information, Ciba Due was prepared for this since having read about Fineyes' mention of Terry's name to Edmund during their time aboard the original mothership. "How do you know Terry?"

"Well," Fineyes explained, "when we worked together, I was called Carlton Lenorox."

That was the name of the person who had helped Terry reconstruct SpaceStation Colt. Ironically Carlton was also the son of Colt Lenorox the original creator. DNA scans would have alerted everybody to this coincidence. There were certain figures of legend in the universe, and the Lenorox family was certainly among that class - textbook certified.

Not certifiable like the hardened killer and roaming enigma the slate computer was describing. Fineyes sat there without his trench coat, hat, gloves, or dark shades. The fusion cuffs remained in place, but it almost appeared as if a little bit of

complexion was returning to the formerly shrouded prisoner. He had flowing hair and, aside from those eyes, seemed somewhat normal albeit reserved.

Could there be some truth to what Fineyes was saying? Ciba Due asked, "Why would Carlton Lenorox be on board of not one but two Doran motherships?"

Fineyes answered in the third person, "Carlton Lenorox was an aerospace engineer for the Space Force - one of the four most skilled and well-known in its short history, so what better way for the New Alliance to get ahead than to have brought him over to their side?"

"These files say you helped to destroy the original mothership we faced," Ciba Due said while paging through the electronic documents. "Your story doesn't add up. Why betray the Dorans if you were really on their side?"

"That's an incorrect assumption," Fineyes replied calmly. "There is a clear distinction between the New Alliance who I serve and the Dorans whose mothership I helped to destroy."

"Which is?" Ciba Due was curious and willing to follow this conversation for as far as it could lead. Everything was being recorded to the minicomputer on her battle uniform, but if she were to have been taking notes with a pencil, she would be twirling that writing utensil anxiously in anticipation of the next response.

Fineyes explained, "In Doran society, there exists two leading groups: The Doran Aristocracy and the Doran Military. This is very similar to many of the governing bodies in Human history."

"True," Ciba Due concurred.

Fineyes continued, "Both held a strong hand in the rule of the Dorans, however the Doran Military had continued to branch out and grow its power through acquisition and forcing others into its

culture rather than organically as the Doran Aristocracy wished by bringing its culture out to others."

Ciba Due located a specific page in the files. "Yes I read this, here, about the original mothership's captain, ProjecX. But he was the leader of the New Alliance and I'm assuming by default the leader of the Doran Military. Yet again, you helped to destroy that original mothership. The leader of the New Alliance and the leader of the Doran Military would in fact be your leader. You're talking in circles, Fineyes."

"Only because you believe you've caught me in a lie that isn't a lie," Fineyes offered. "Things seem to be so black and white when you only hold a fraction of the total truth. This isn't even a situation where you want to believe a certain truth. You're just grasping at straws."

"I'll concede you that point," Ciba Due admitted, "so help me out. What am I missing?"

"ProjecX was a leader of the New Alliance," Fineyes answered. "The part you're missing is who the actual leaders are."

Ciba Due had no idea what Fineyes was talking about but decided to play along and go for it, "Okay then who would these people be so that I might request an audience with them?"

"I've known many a pilot in my day, Ciba Due Dimry," Fineyes knew her name! "Each ace pilot is blessed with a sixth sense - a survival instinct if you will. You already know your Lieutenant is one of the leaders."

It was at this point Ciba Due lost complete control of this interrogation. She placed the slate computer on the table and sheepishly followed along.

"How is it the spacestation just magically fits within the belly of a mothership like these hands would inside my tailor-made

gloves? It's how I designed the motherships. How is it I knew about the Mulgulous Weapon when Edmund boarded the original mothership? Terry and I created it. How is it Marileva knows the highest levels of Doran protocol and everybody on the mothership respects her authority as law?" It was at this point Fineyes broke out laughing with his head back almost falling out the chair.

"What's so funny?" Ciba Due inquired.

Fineyes faced forward without any such hint of humor and very seriously said, "That I can tell you the truth and still net the desired effect."

Ciba Due thought of going for it again, "Which is?"

"Which is for me to know," Fineyes assured, "and you'll surely find out."

"Well I'm starting to come to terms with it," Ciba Due hit right back.

"With what?" Fineyes was curious.

Interrogation was all about give and take, and Ciba Due intended to take back control of this session, "The fact my Lieutenant will most likely be the death of me. I don't have all the answers or even the reasons, but you'd have to be dense not to see where this is all leading. My only question is when? Two questions really: When did it happen, and when will it happen?"

Fineyes had to recalculate his response for a brief moment. "You should be asking the question of how. How did it happen, and how in the universe could you possibly stop it?"

"Is this going to explain how one of the four most skilled and well-known people in the Space Force's short history could've turned his talents to the competition so willfully?" Ciba Due was starting to see why Marileva picked her for this assignment. The pilot's inquiring mind wanted to know. Even more than that, her

distrust of her superior officer was a genuine quality which would seemingly insulate her from Fineyes' psychological wiles. This was far from putting aside the uneasy feeling everything she had believed or feared was probably true and incidentally worse than originally expected.

But Ciba Due finally understood what the Lieutenant had been trying to say but could not come right out to say. Their prior conversation was an admission to these wild accusations Fineyes was now levying. Perhaps the only person on two spacestations unaffected by her superior officer's charms, it was her duty to continue to see that glass as half empty even if it meant her impending demise.

Fineyes spoke, "The Dorans possess a technology called conversion which can not only change a Human or really any other species into the Doran species but force them to become a Doran loyalist."

It became even more clear as an admission of guilt without the finding of fault.

"So they changed your molecular structure and brainwashed you?" Ciba Due preferred to keep the conversation basic rather than technical.

"Myself and Marileva," Fineyes added with a smile.

Ciba Due also had to smile, "I'm clearly unimpressed. You've managed to explain how your DNA structure is different and link your behavior to the Lieutenant, but you haven't mentioned anything about your eyes. When you plan to get serious, we'll speak further." She gathered her belongings and abruptly exited the room.

Fineyes was visibly taken aback by the nature of the vicious snipe and was left to contemplate how he had perhaps underestimated

Ciba Due. Yes they would speak further.

Outside the detention cell, Ciba Due fingered her Ear-To-Mouth Com and asked, "How was that?"

"You realize he's going to try and kill you the first chance he gets?" Marileva announced from her office aboard SpaceStation Colt.

"Oh I'm saving the honors for you apparently," Ciba Due blurted out. Changing the subject, she again asked, "Did you hear what you needed to hear or will this require multiple sessions?"

"I'm being serious, Ciba Due," the Lieutenant reiterated. "Fineyes knows I'm listening and watching, so everything in there was very calculated and deliberate. Your last words to him touched a nerve such that for the first time I noticed he fell out of character. Be very careful."

Ciba Due dismissively said, "He's a man. I let him have a little bit of control, and then I just hit him in his pride. What gets me is how you don't even deny or refute any of his charges against you."

"What's either to deny or refute?" Marileva replied.

All at once, the first dagger became amazingly clear. Not more than two hours into this, Ciba Due needed to take a break.

## Week Two

A stark contrast existed between originally restoring the spacestation underwater and currently repairing her within the Juggernaut's gigantic docking bay. It took Terry every bit of one entire year to salvage, reassemble, and fix what the Lieutenant was asking him to make fully operational within one month. Amazingly with the tools available to him on a mothership, he could pull this off with possibly a week and a half to two weeks to spare.

Each of the surviving sections of SpaceStation Colt were receiving an infusion of energy to their solar cells provided courtesy of the mothership. She was down two sections, so Terry was off to the side assisting Humans and Dorans alike as a pseudo foreman keeping the construction on task and under the budget of time.

There was no underscoring the sheer size of the workplace, the incredible selection of tools, or the unmatched abundance of materials. The gigantic docking bay even had more than enough room to accommodate the construction of those two entire fifty meter high sections. Robotic tentacles from the floor, walls, and ceiling made it so the spacestation could be safely separated for the reintroduction of the re-created sections to be brought smoothly back into place in no time. Power sources of all kinds ported directly into compatible feeds and every possible material needed to refurbish her blemished - more like pummeled outer exterior and abused, collapsing innards made this endeavor a snap to pull off.

Xach had been previously indisposed, so he needed to delegate the tour Marileva requested for him to Brody. In showing

the newly promoted Major around SpaceStation Colt, Ciba Due brought the tour to the cafeteria of the Non-Ranking Officials' Living Section. This also meant half the tour was completed since they started in the Cockpit Section and were working their way back toward the giant Thruster Section.

"I've been on a lot of ships," Ciba Due admitted, "and the food here isn't really half bad."

"Anything tastes good when you are hungry," Brody stated.

Ciba Due nodded. "Yeah that's true. Speaking of which, do you want to take a break here and maybe discuss some of the spacestation's protocols over a meal?"

Brody seemed to be a little preoccupied with a startling bit of ruckus that chastened the normally calm atmosphere. "Yes. I would also like to know your thoughts on the best way to integrate the Doran and Human fighter squadrons. Perhaps we can gain some additional insight from Space Force precedent in merging the formerly adversarial governments of Earth."

A shrill sound like a cupboard of glasses crashing to and shattering on the floor rang out. Ciba Due retained enough of her train of thought to be able to say, "You've been doing your homework. Well that didn't sound good," before making a move to investigate.

And what was normally a peaceful scene of subdued soldiers either taking a fifteen minute break or a load off altogether was now the setting of a brawl as contentious as any Ciba Due and Brody had witnessed from the cockpits of their fighters.

"Stupid Human!"

"Fu-- you, Dorans!"

Fists, food, dinnerware, and furniture were all flying around in a whirlwind of swirling divisiveness. Luckily since

nobody had reached for a hand laser or U-Gun, a few soldiers sprawled out on the ground here and there - knocked out were the only ones who appeared to be seriously hurt. The longer this skirmish continued to escalate further and further out of control, the greater the chance the numbers of seriously wounded would increase exponentially.

"Unbelievable." Ciba Due disgustedly rushed headlong into the fray. "I'll take the Humans!"

"And I will deal with the Dorans," Brody assured out of the disdain he held for the out of control members of his brethren dishonoring themselves with this - the most petty of squabbles. He walked calmly yet purposefully into the ordeal.

Ciba Due ducked an errant blow and replied with words, "You idiot, I'm your superior officer," and actions. A quick left jab to the jaw put that Space Force soldier on his back. She wrenched the wrist of another in the area and twisted the soldier forcefully to the ground. Never one to leave her back exposed, she delivered a rough reverse kick where what it lacked in extension it made up for in power by flooring her now winded assailant from a middle attack caught squarely in the breadbasket.

Brody located a pile of Doran soldiers who were gang-tackling a bloody Space Force soldier and began the process of picking the rowdy Dorans out and off one by one. He first cupped both hands forcefully on the sides of a Doran soldier's head in order to pull the soldier up and toss the person aside into the buffet table a couple yards back. Female soldiers got it for insubordination too as seen by Brody thrusting his boot into the Doran's back which caused her to collapse on top of the downed Space Force soldier. Looking up to see what the deal was, another Doran soldier stared right into a turgid uppercut that lifted him

from his feet and onto a crumple on his back.

Human soldier by Doran soldier, Ciba Due and Brody blindsided their respective groups and put down the riot leaving them as the only two sole survivors standing in the wrecked cafeteria. Both were completely out of breath but stood with clothes surprisingly untattered overlooking their handiwork. Bodies were everywhere - some moving, some not; and those that could still move did so feebly.

As if out some twisted idea of groupthink, Houser and Hubbard found themselves dealing with a similar situation of chaos at about the same exact time in a public recreation area of the Juggernaut. Unfortunately their attempts to cull the uprising fell painfully short of success. Commentary would be left for the armchair critics and live witnesses to decide on whether there was possibly any other way to have resolved this problem, but as things stood, whatever it was they tried did not work in the slightest.

In fact, it failed miserably and to their detriment. All at once, Houser lost sight of Hubbard, and then he lost sight of the situation altogether. Cracked in the back of the head from behind his back by some unknown object, the mothership's new captain awoke to the subtle thumps of some Doran soldier's boot with an all-encompassing view of the floor.

"Nah fu-- that! Get off the Major!"

"Get off our ship!"

Week Three

The Lieutenant called a meeting of her senior staff on the first day of the third week to check progress. If there were any sort of roadblocks, she needed to know about them immediately so the obstacles could be cleared away and no longer pose a further impediment to the impending due date. Two weeks also felt like a good time to bring everybody back together because although they were technically assigned to different ships, they were still one unit under her and should never forget the camaraderie.

In an effort to test out the intraship communications, Terry requested this meeting be held on both SpaceStation Colt in Marileva's office and aboard the Juggernaut on its bridge. Time was also still tight, so his request would save everybody the unneeded, extra effort of having to traverse both vessels. The temporary separation was also a reminder of the day when this method of communication would become more permanent as a norm while the forces officially split, so it was a subtle chance to start getting used to how things were supposed to eventually wind up.

The Lieutenant's office was newly furnished with a black business plush furniture set, but the office was small, so outside ladies first, it was first-come, first-served. She sat at her desk which had two chairs facing it. To her left, there was a couch on the outset of the wall closest to the Cockpit Section - opposite the outward-looking window and obviously meant for late nights. Ciba Due and Nadala sat in the chairs while Edmund and Beavy took the couch. Everybody else: Xach, Brody, and Terry crowded around the desk in a manner that did not block off the view of those participating from the couch.

For this meeting, the lights would be dimmed and the window would be used in its secondary purpose as a sizable view-screen. A crisp image of the mothership's bridge appeared so clear the people

in Marileva's office probably felt like they could literally walk through the view-screen and onto that bridge.

There were two members of the senior staff assigned to the Juggernaut, but only Houser was on the screen. Arbie and Cebe were in the view as well, but Hubbard was noticeably absent. Perhaps one of the biggest drawbacks to the conferencing technology Terry was testing out was the incredible clarity of detail. It was this amazing resolution that allowed everybody to see Houser's visibly wincing left eye along with his right arm in a sling.

"Is everything okay over there, Houser?" The Lieutenant asked.

"Yeah," Houser grimaced away some obvious (to the viewers in Marileva's office) pain. "I have no complaints."

Most of the viewers on the spacestation's side were astonished, but Xach took this as a personal affront. He would be sure to make an additional appearance on the mothership before the next two weeks were up to express his displeasure with the crew. Their antics were an embarrassment to him and not something to be tolerated nor taken lightly. One need only imagine what would have happened had the Lieutenant been privy to such ill behavior in her presence, and the fact this was done in the cowardice of the covert meant only one thing: Disrespect.

Fighting off the migraine piercing his skull, Houser noticed everybody on SpaceStation Colt's side was gravely concerned for his well-being. "Oh this?" He lied with a pained smile, "It's nothing. I just slipped. That's all. No need to worry about me. I'll be healed up in a couple weeks - good as new."

"And where is Major Hubbard?" Xach inquired.

"He's uh," Houser looked over his shoulder as if to pull the next utterance out of thin air, "running a little late. Said we

should start without him."

Marileva peered over at Xach as if to visually transmit what she was thinking. Xach understood, without words, what needed to be done and nodded his agreement.

With that settled, the Lieutenant formally began the meeting, "Thanks, everybody, for coming together on such short notice. I wanted to check in to see how things are coming along, see how much longer things would take, and offer up my personal assistance to all of you in order to keep things on task. We have two weeks left remaining, so if you need any sort of assistance, please don't be shy - just let me know. Xach, why not start with you?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Xach said. "Over these past two weeks, the Lieutenant and I have worked to finalize personnel decisions as you should now see falling in place. These assignments are fairly set, so it would be worthwhile to make yourselves available to any new people who appear in your area and make them feel at home.

Most time-consuming, Lieutenant Dike-Sims and I have each been going over an extensive series of courses in Human and Doran cultural differences. She has been instrumental in helping me to grasp some of the finer details about Humans that will stand out prominently during our presentation to the Aristocracy upon our arrival at the Doran Homeworld. I have been coaching her in preparation for some of the pushback we should expect to receive during our unity pitch.

Although our respective learning curves have taken up most of our time, I do want to reiterate what the Lieutenant was saying earlier about availability. This is a team effort, so if you need some time, we are both more than willing to take that time for

you."

"Thanks for the report, Xach," Marileva seconded, "and he's absolutely right. These next two weeks are going to be critical as far as keeping us on schedule is concerned. Because of this, we'll both be out and about during the daytime and shelve our studying to the evenings. Ciba Due, how about you go next?"

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Ciba Due replied. "Brody and I have been doing just what Xach suggested, making sure everybody new is acclimated with the resources available to them aboard the spacestation. Sure there were some disagreements here and there, but for the most part, both Humans and Dorans have complied with the integration orders."

Brody smiled his agreement.

Ciba Due continued, "One thing I needed to bring up was the exception process. I know the curfew continues to remain in effect, but every once in a while, somebody may've forgotten an item aboard the Juggernaut and needs to return briefly in order to retrieve it. Vice versa, I'd imagine it's the same for those who need to return to SpaceStation Colt. Can this be reviewed? I'd prefer not to have morale suffer over red tape, but I do recognize the need for the protocol."

Xach raised his left hand and accepted, "I will take this as an action item, Major Dimry. Please let me know when you are available to speak about matters, and it may be pertinent to bring Major Reynolds in on the discussion as well."

"Thank you, Xach." Ciba Due concluded, "Those were all the things I had."

So far, the Lieutenant was pleased with the progress. "Excellent. Perhaps this is a good segue for Houser to report?"

"Lieutenant," Houser acknowledged. "First of all, I knew

the mothership was ginormous, but I didn't expect a different culture to exist in each sector. Hubbard and I ran into some trouble on this and needed to institute a sectional curfew to keep containment in place. If you aren't from a certain section, you don't belong in the section. The security teams consist of a Human and a Doran. It's almost embarrassing we had to take things to this point, but I didn't see any other alternative."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about," the Lieutenant reassured, "because it was a good move. What number did we come to regarding the Juggernaut, Terry?"

Terry projected, "The mothership is over fifteen times the size of the spacestation."

Marileva put things in perspective, "Ciba Due and Brody are able to handle things more effectively because of the community-based atmosphere of SpaceStation Colt. I'd venture to say this same atmosphere exists aboard the Juggernaut but in various pockets."

Houser agreed, "Yeah you're absolutely right. Xach brought this up to me a little bit ago when we were talking about how people can be on the same ship for years and never see the other shipmates who (more likely than not) are performing some pretty hefty functions just like they are, so these separated nodes pop up."

"It was a type of corporate feel the Space Force strove to get away from in designing the spacestation originally. During the course of your daily work, you're going to be on the move throughout the vessel and be forced to, if for nothing else, come into contact with people from other sections. The Living Sections are separated among Ranking, Non-Ranking, and Soldiers, but that's about it," Terry spoke about SpaceStation Colt with a certain,

hands-on pride in every sentence which lent additional enthusiasm and credibility to his explanation.

"That has always been a problem among motherships," Xach chimed in. "I welcome any fresh new insight on how this might be rectified. But yes, it was a very good move on your part, Major Reynolds."

"Thanks, everybody." Houser was starting to feel a little bit better about his report now - a direct result of the support structure. "The only other thing left for me to report is we're on schedule to repair all the laser cannons from the forward firing array Compound had taken out."

"Thank you, Houser," the Lieutenant said.

Terry sensed his part in the conversation coming up and said, "One thing I'd like to add to this concerns the shielding for those weapons. Their vulnerability is a big potential weakness I believe can be turned into a strength by utilizing the shield/shield dome tandem SpaceStation Colt possesses. With the sheer amount of weaponry dotting the hull, it must've been virtually impossible to keep a shield in place during a battle, so the mothership takes a lot of undue damage. Now don't get me wrong, you have to get close enough in order to be able to deal any harm, but let's not even take the chance. Once I'm done retrofitting the Juggernaut with our defense technology, it'll literally be unstoppable. There's no reason its defenses need to be off for such an extended period of time or anytime really."

"How are things looking for the spacestation?" Marileva asked.

"She'll be back to well over ninety percent within a week. We're lacking some functionality because of missing, proprietary components I haven't had any luck in reverse engineering," Terry

explained. "I do have to say I'd love to be assigned to the mothership for its tool kit alone. Xach, this place is amazing - the lifts, the tentacle arms, the space."

Xach replied, "I am glad you have found it to your liking. I will miss the Juggernaut as well."

Everybody present shared in a solemn moment to reflect on the ever-approaching realization of their separation. Rather than say something to make them all feel better, the Lieutenant allowed the silence to stew as a reminder of what they were all fighting to get back to: Each other. Sure some external factors like her genetic rank contributed to the success they had seen thus far in holding the Humans and Dorans together, but the true credit belonged to her senior staff because she could not be in all places at once. They were on the ground dealing with a political capital that was the people. For two weeks, it was impressive. For them to be so choked up after such a short amount of time together, it was real.

"Well there was everything I had," Terry said reservedly - still locked in the thought of missing shipmates.

Marileva wanted to pick up the morale a bit and decided to throw matters over to her ace, "Beavy, let's hear how things have been progressing on your end."

The only thing they heard was a snore, and the only thing they saw was a myoclonic jerk. Beavy yawned and stated, "Vex is good."

"Absolutely shameful," Ciba Due replied.

"Thank you, Beavy," the Lieutenant did not want to wear out his welcome on a score that had both her office and the mothership's bridge in tears from laughter. "Nadala?"

"Surprisingly," Nadala went right into it, "the numbers of

wounded aboard SpaceStation Colt and the Juggernaut have gone up significantly I might add. I'm not quite sure what all is happening in light of the fact we're no longer locked in battle, but I'm advising everybody to cool whatever it is down. I need my resources in peak working order for the future - not filled up with nonsense. Don't get me wrong, it's been wonderful for training purposes, but if I get one more Human or Doran in there who slipped, I'm going to scream."

"Duly noted." Marileva ordered, "Let's tighten that up. We've been stuck on these ships for two straight weeks without any air, so Beavy, can you start up the training exercises for both forces? A little activity to burn off some of this pent-up energy should do both Humans and Dorans well."

"Wonderful!" Xach was elated. "I would love to see Major Beave partake in some healthy competition with the Doran pilots."

Beavy rolled his eyes. "Competition? Please. They don't really want it with Beave."

"They may not," Brody corrected, "but I sure do."

"Oh it's on then." Beavy sat up and took notice of his challenger.

Ciba Due suggested, "Terry, we should make sure the weapons systems are all disabled and put in a training mode. We're liable to destroy the remainder of this meager armada with these two running the training exercises."

Terry smiled, "Yeah no kidding. I've got that as my first action item."

The Lieutenant shook her head playfully while extending her hand in Edmund's direction and throwing the floor to him, "Please."

"Thanks. With all our forces grounded because of the curfew, Compound and I have been keeping up with the daily recon

duties. Suffice to say, it's been extremely quiet on the space front. We'd hoped Human and Doran factions were the only ones out in this part of the Terran System, and for the moment, that's a correct assumption," Edmund announced.

This had been Houser's former job, so he asked, "Are we expecting any company outside the Dorans?" It was something close to his heart.

Edmund answered, "Yes but not really. It's more of a precautionary measure."

Xach added, "As many of you know, there are two distinct factions within the Doran society. We believe Lieutenant Dike-Sims and Edmund had done away with the highest remnants of the Doran Military, much to everybody's liking, but it says nothing of the New Alliance which is the larger, more formidable fleet."

"Wouldn't they be closer to the Doran Homeworld, if anything, than out this far?" Ciba Due inquired.

Brody elaborated, "See that is the thing. They had to branch out to the stars because they were no longer welcome on the Doran Homeworld. With the head chopped off because of the Lieutenant's and Edmund's actions, the grip of the New Alliance over the mothership was fractured.

The hierarchy shift threw control of this vessel and others like it back under the jurisdiction of the Doran Aristocracy and ultimately the command of Lieutenant Dike-Sims. This does not mean the New Alliance is not still out there en masse."

"And that's what we've been searching around for," Edmund admitted. "Nothing would be worse than getting blindsided by the New Alliance while we're stuck in repair mode."

The Lieutenant spoke of the bigger picture, "I believe the New Alliance was behind the pulling of strings when it came to the

conquest of Earth. For some reason, they believed and very nearly succeeded in getting the job done with only two motherships. If they truly rival the Doran Aristocracy, we're going to need not only our entire Space Force fleet from the Quadron System but the help of the Aristocracy as well. The fact we haven't received any sort of communique to check status could either be a glitch in their protocol, doubtful - or a security measure meant to buy time and regroup in force, more likely."

"We even went deep into the data banks of the Juggernaut. Outside of Pinlock here and ProjecX from the original mothership, there was no additional controlling influence or record of such behavior by the New Alliance existing," Terry alerted.

Beavy demanded, "Dumb this down some."

Terry obliged, "There's an old quote that says something to the effect of, 'Those who can rule with but merely an ideal have a hand larger than any iron glove can fit.'"

"Our civil war was one of grave difficulty because the genetic rank laws are woven into our very essence," Xach spoke passionately about his experience. "Broken down to our base, soldierly instincts, all we could do was simply follow the orders of those in charge. When a soldier is instructed to follow an order he or she harbors reservations toward - in the Space Force, the Human carries out the order reluctantly. In the Doran Military, that reluctance happens to be bleached away, so the Doran carries out the order indisputably. It was another of the core differences between the Doran Aristocracy and Military."

"So," Beavy asked for clarification, "this right to choose depended upon what faction you were ultimately assigned to - I guess born into originally?"

Xach nodded, "You are correct, Major Beave. And it was not

until Lieutenant Dike-Sims took control of this installation that our individuality returned. It is this much sought after clarity causing our people affiliated with the Doran Military to face what we have termed the Tearless Weeping. In many respects, it is better to be dead and free than alive and enslaved (against your will)."

Beavy understood, "Yeah that's fu--ed up when you think about it."

"As more and more of our people were liberated to the side of the Doran Aristocracy," Brody mentioned, "the Military needed to branch out further and further in order to replenish and build upon its forces. But who knows? It has been a while since we have had any contact with other vessels, so perhaps this new generation may actually believe in what the New Alliance has to offer."

"Well you've got my stepped up commitment to get things rolling ahead of schedule on the mothership," Houser promised. "I guess it was slightly naive of me to believe this was close to being over."

"Everyone is just now learning about these potential pitfalls during our daily preparation." Marileva wanted to close this meeting out because they could be discussing these issues all day - none of which could be resolved with battered crews and barely functional ships, "This is why it's imperative we give our workload the effort it requires. A month is almost too long to be idle, but unfortunately that couldn't be helped. Any longer than this month, and we'll seriously be pushing our luck. Again Xach and I are available to any and all of you, so we expect to be called upon for something by each of you whether it's a pep talk for the troops, a need for individual commendation you so deem appropriate, or whatever the case may be. We will be there to help

expedite your cause toward completion.

This was a very good meeting, and I sincerely hope we'll all strive to do our part so we can bring everybody back together again for another, more lengthy session. Although I'm not yet willing to lift the curfew at this juncture, I want to congratulate all of you on your efforts to bring everybody together as one single unit. It does feel more and more like a 'we' scenario rather than a situation where it's either 'them or us'. Simply put, that's no easy task in light of the circumstances and the time crunch we're all under. Keep up the good work. Everybody except for Terry is dismissed."

Houser said, "Thanks, everybody," as the lights went up in the Lieutenant's office and the view-screen shut off to once again become the window overlooking the Juggernaut's gigantic docking bay.

"Ciba Due," Beavy asked, "you gonna watch me teach these Dorans a lesson in advanced flight theory?"

Brody interjected, "If that was even possible, it would be a lesson I would love to learn, Human."

Ciba Due answered while turning to Xach for his opinion, "Are you sure this isn't just going to undo all the work we've put in to bring everybody together?"

"I am with Major Brody on this one," Xach sighed, "and it sounds like the Humans are scared. Regrettably the display shown out in the space field by the Space Force was merely the exception and not the rule."

"Oh Xach," Ciba Due stated unequivocally, "believe me, you got lucky once. There won't be a second time."

"These Humans figure out one maneuver and think they have Scherzo Squadron completely pegged," Brody prodded.

The group of them began to head for the exit and would continue to bellow back and forth all the way down to the spacestation's Docking Bay.

Beavy was absolutely astonished. "I can't believe they're talking this much shi-. Who the fu-- is Scherzo Squadron? Fu-- that, leave the lasers on, Terry!" His voice could be heard from all the way outside Marileva's office.

Edmund and Nadala carried on a much more subdued conversation as they left the room and entered the Cockpit Section. Things were starting to look like brand new all around SpaceStation Colt, and the renewed ambience was beginning to show its effects with a noticeable improvement in ship-wide morale. Even they, never ones to be emotionally down for any undue length of time, were much more spry in every movement as the foreshadowy can-do attitude took up its rightful place in each and every step.

Times like this always put Edmund in the mood for plotting. He turned to Nadala and first thanked her, "I really appreciate you taking Jago under your wing while we've been at work."

Nadala was not one to beat around the bush, "So what do you need now? Don't get me wrong, it's been a pleasure because your little boy is an absolute joy to be around, but I know that look."

"Information about the spacestation's resources," Edmund requested.

Reaching inside one of the drawers to her desk, the Lieutenant retrieved the plastic bag containing the Converter-X Adapter and slid it across the desktop toward Terry. "Will that help you get SpaceStation Colt up to being one hundred percent?"

Terry's eyes lit up as he stood up and stopped short of

ripping the bag apart in order to examine the long sought-after component. "Yes absolutely it will! There are very few things that can stop a fully assembled spacestation. I promise you, you'll never see anything like this when I get done. Where did you get this from?"

"Does the name Carlton Lenorox ring any bells?" Marileva asked as she came around the desk and leaned up against the front of it with palms laying flat and fingers dangling off the top edge now in close proximity to Terry.

"Honestly," Terry sighed, "it's a part of my past I'd like to forget."

The Lieutenant accessed her minicomputer and brought up a visual of Fineyes' cell on the mothership courtesy of the view-screen. "Unfortunately your privacy ends where the security of these ships begin. I'm considering transporting him to either the Doran Homeworld or Second Earth aboard the spacestation, so I need you to tell me everything I don't already know from Space Force Academy history journals."

Terry had a seat and began, "Friends and rivals. More rivals than friends however, but it didn't start with our generation. The Terrison's and Lenorox' are as household of names as Cipher is when it comes to the Space Force. Both of our fathers created SpaceStation Colt. Colt Lenorox is credited with the design obviously in namesake, but my father, Gitson Terrison, is the one who actually made the aerospace work. It's a lite and fluffy feud, but it made its way on through genetics to myself and Carlton. Tops of classes, successful in our own respective fields, and high-paid consultants on the side - it was nothing short of expected the Space Force would come calling.

Again the Lenorox designs were flawless. In the scheme of

things, it's actually an amazingly impressive bit of technological foresight their family seems to innately possess. But for as impressive as those designs were, are, and probably always will be, I still had to do much of the heavy lifting in getting it all to work."

"So I need to be concerned about his knowledge of this spacestation's interworking?" Marileva asked to confirm.

"Yes," Terry admitted, "he's the only one who knows these vessels as well as I do. From us being competitors, there's literally no way of knowing how many backdoor hacks, encrypted hooks into SpaceStation Colt, or offsite proxies actually exist. I know I'd lost track of all mine."

The Lieutenant did not like the sound of that and made the suggestion, "Can we scrub the entire ship all the way down to its code? The Juggernaut as well?"

Terry nodded, "Certainly."

"The New Alliance managed to convert one half of the duo responsible for salvaging the spacestation." Marileva crossed her arms in coming to this conclusion, "That's very particular albeit uneasily peculiar. When did you happen to lose touch with Carlton?"

"It was midway through the salvage operation," Terry explained. "The Space Force held no plans to mass produce anything close to SpaceStation Colt on Earth but did want the presence of dual spacestations for the immediate protection of the Terran System. This meant that much of the finer circuitry and the rarest components were to be kept on Second Earth where the technology could remain safely secure under Space Force lock and key if you will."

The Lieutenant had heard about these security measures which

would have prevented some offshoot facility in a barely protected system from being compromised and allowing the most destructive of technologies to fall into enemy hands for possible reverse engineering. "I'm assuming Carlton went to Second Earth in order to retrieve that?"

Terry spun the Converter-X Adapter around once in the palm of his left hand before flinging it lightly onto the plastic bag atop Marileva's desk. "Correct." He knew exactly where she was going with that last statement.

"Not only is the spacestation compromised," the Lieutenant realized, "but the entire Space Force as well. For them to have this level of detail on your plans, your schedule, and your impact means the New Alliance has already infiltrated various levels of our hierarchy across systems."

"You can sniff out anybody who's been converted, right?" Terry asked.

Marileva replied, "Yes however we're stuck out here for the moment. That does the Space Force no good since the New Alliance has probably been able to weave their influence and solidify their positions or any bit of power structure going back decades. I don't even want to think about this right now, but it would further behoove us to link up with the Dorans because they have no way of detecting a double agent within their own midst, and the threat of New Alliance infiltration probably runs more deeply in the Aristocracy."

Terry looked up and at the Lieutenant when wondering, "How deep do you want me to go in the reformation?"

"Stop just short of removing the safety precautions on the Mulgulous Weapon," Marileva ordered.

Allowing all six fighter squadrons out for these drills netted an exuberance reminiscent a school bell signaling the start to recess. Even those not formally involved in any bit of piloting happened to be caught up in the emotion of the moment as sides were chosen and friendly wagers were made.

"Okay the rules are simple. It's Vex Squadron versus the rest of you motherfu--ers." Beavy stood up in his canopy with arms spread as he spoke to pilots throughout SpaceStation Colt and the mothership over his Ear-To-Mouth Com, "You Dorans always seem to need five on one odds in order to do any bit of damage, so I wanted to keep this fair."

Those were fighting words since they charged up not only Vex Squadron but Scherzo, Mezzo, Komodo, Durdeaghnott, and Sforzo as well.

Brody spoke from the darkened cockpit of his At-Ship Fighter, "Let us make this a little more interesting because I do not want any excuses when the legendary Vex Squadron suffers the most humiliating of defeats. Let this be squadron-for-squadron."

Beavy added, "Elimination rules?"

"I would not have it any other way," Brody agreed. "The first squadron to get wiped out completely does not advance to the next round. This process will continue until Scherzo Squadron emerges as the unyielding victor."

"Shi-," Beavy said while sitting down in his cockpit and closing the canopy, "then we're gonna be here a long as- time 'cause that ain't happenin'."

Ciba Due found Xach sitting alone in his At-Ship Fighter with the right canopy opening extended upward like a Lamborghini door. She did not want to break up the mood he was trying to

achieve but, "I thought you of all people would be a little more interested in the outcome."

Xach turned and acknowledged, "Major Dimry. I have garnered my first command responsibility, yet a part of me still yearns to simply continue on with the pilots."

"It's bittersweet isn't it?" Ciba Due reminisced, "I used to always wonder how people chose to be soldiers or sailors over pilots. They always seemed limited to the services we could provide in transport, defense, or offense."

"I am sorry," Xach offered out of nowhere. He began to manipulate a few switches as if to just hear them being utilized.

They effectuated no noticeable change from Ciba Due's viewpoint, but she was curious to know what Xach had meant when probing, "Sorry for what?"

Xach looked Ciba Due in the eyes, and there was no denying his earnest nature. He explained, "I am sorry because had I known the true Major Dimry, I would not have damaged your fighter and prematurely taken away from you this blessing."

"Soldiers follow orders," Ciba Due dismissed the apology, "very rarely do they make decisions. The only reason I didn't want to believe this earlier was because I didn't want to admit the Lieutenant was right yet again."

"Nevertheless," Xach pleaded, "I offer you my At-Ship Fighter in making amends for my previous actions. In my current position, I doubt I will ever be afforded the opportunity to fly this again, but you still have the ability to lead all the spacestation's squadrons. The fighter should not go to waste, and I know it will not with you as its new pilot."

Ciba Due thought for a moment, "The fighter that shot me down, eh?"

Xach repeated one of his favorite lines, "The universe is old and fraught with many great ironies."

"I'm curious about Doran aerospace technology. Well you haven't had your last flight yet, Xach. You gotta take me up and show me how everything works," Ciba Due suggested while crawling inside the cramped cockpit meant for only one occupant. "Scoot over."

The right canopy opening enclosed Xach and Ciba Due within what at first glance would appear to be a darkened sensory deprivation chamber. That was until, all of a sudden, a three hundred sixty degree view of SpaceStation Colt's Docking Bay Section appeared on the internal walls of the fighter with an ultra clarity rivaling the vision of the naked eye.

A console interface powered up and appeared in front of them on a diagonally protruding-out monitor designed to handle the primary functions of things like communication and environmental options. Everything was described in clear-cut English, so the controls were seemingly intuitive from a novice inspection - initially more instinctive than having to pilot a ship from a species who spoke a completely different language altogether. Random button pressing, from the computer's perspective, could prove to be dangerous in said instance.

Similar to a Class III Fighter, the At-Ship Fighter also featured a twin yoke, but the Doran version was vicious. Each yoke consisted of a pad with twelve buttons set as four rows of three on its top two-thirds of the main controller. The bottom third consisted of a silvery disc. This setup would take some explaining.

Xach pointed to the yokes, "Flight control," raised his arms to the three hundred sixty degree view, "targeting systems," and

then pointed to the console which would normally sit between a pilot's legs had they not been sharing the canopy, "tertiary functions."

Ciba Due was simply astonished at how similar the twin yoke structure was to a Class III Fighter, but it made sense if Fineyes truly was Carlton Lenorox and had designed the At-Ship Fighter for the Dorans. "Piloting is self-explanatory, but what are all these buttons and this dial for?"

Xach went into it, "The buttons are meant to be intuitive presets for whatever you can conceive of putting there. Please notice the goal of Doran design is to make it so the pilot does not have to think. In talking to Houser, I realize this is in complete contrast to the root of how Human design is."

"No," Ciba Due replied, "it's not so bad. Not bad at all actually." She began a vertical takeoff and the view was initially disorienting.

"At first, your senses will betray you, but the sooner you let go of those senses and simply let the fighter guide you, the sooner you will understand its true capabilities." Xach helped to steady the fighter and used the disc on the left yoke to spin the fighter around in the direction of the spacestation's open Docking Bay doors. "Just fly now."

And Ciba Due was flying. It felt like her entire body was flying from the amazing view the internal walls projected. Clearing SpaceStation Colt's Docking Bay Section was the first hurdle meant for her to catch her bearings. This exercise, performed before many times over, would create some semblance of a parallel between the actual in-flight characteristics of the At-Ship Fighter and her former Class III Fighter.

The next hurdle came from clearing the shield/shield dome

tandem which was newly added to each of the docking bays throughout the Juggernaut. In this next challenge Ciba Due was to demonstrate patience and further flight control while manipulating the readout on the tertiary functions console.

Once clear of the mothership, Xach proceeded to explain the targeting systems, "You can see Major Beave and Major Brody's training exercise being played out all around you. Go ahead and pick a few targets with your finger."

Ciba Due reached out and pointed at several of the various fighters. They were each highlighted as targetable bogeys. The cockpit chair was actually gyroscopic, but Xach was unable to demonstrate this feature due to the both of them being inside. Even so, she was already starting to get a feel for how these clever, little fighters were able to bring her down so easily.

"Simply depress one of the four side buttons, two on either side of each yoke, and weapons will be away. Point and click," Xach stated. He happened to catch sight of the gleam in Ciba Due's eyes - the excitement of having perceived an endless amount of battle possibilities.

In that, a moment they shared briefly as it was, established mutual respect ripped away from them when a stream of dogfighting ships thundered past throwing Xach and Ciba Due into one another, pulling the yokes with their flailing bodies, and taking the fighter off course.

Fingering her Ear-To-Mouth Com, Ciba Due shouted, "What's the matter with you fu--ers?"

Xach helped Ciba Due up before lugging himself back into position on the gyroscopic chair's ledge and stating, "In my prime, they would not have dared to be so insolent."

"Well even in retirement," Ciba Due announced, "we still

have enough experience to teach these little shi-s some respect.  
Would you mind co-piloting my first time?"

"Gladly," Xach smiled.

#### Week Four

Upon returning to her cabin after the start of a fourth straight week of long days filled with extra hours of overtime and not enough hours of sleep, Marileva heard a piano melody. She passed the entrance walkway to see Edmund in front of the window holding a microphone!

The beat kicked in and Edmund, who also held a sheet of what would appear to be lyrics, began:

"People think music is about groupies and fu--in' bitc-es /  
That ain't the business, and they were never faced with  
deadlines to hit / In the studio and it's past 2am - tasked  
with finishing your shi- / No weed smoke, no alcohol, no  
distractions - just me and the lyrics / Got the soft porn  
flick on the tube as I sit down to do what I gotta do / No  
video dancers, no lap dance at the club - let's keep this  
true / True to form which is true to myself - fu-- the  
immaterial wealth / Yes sex does sell, but that's not quite  
the story I'm trying to tell

It's about this guy I know who got burned - has a heart of  
'cold' / Closed himself off from the rest of the world -  
watch the events unfold / Before your very eyes or ears,

this shi- was years in the making / You need to realize years of loneliness were quite the undertaking / For this guy I know, those feelings started long ago with Princess Leia / Then enter Stefano acting a fool - solidified with Roman and Marlina / And their wedding the emotions the feelings the bliss / It was a shame, he thought True Luv was a prerequisite to happiness

Rather than the road map to disappointment it really fu--in' is / For those who found it, he made comparisons - he was almost envious / Until he analyzed, dissected, then commenced to reconstruct the concept / This motherfu--er sat down and wrote a book on how he envisioned the shi- / That nobody read - you pour your heart into something, see what happens? / Time and time again - hardheaded, he would never learn this lesson / But fu-- that shi-, there was nothing else that anybody could teach him / He was prepared to be alone if he never found anybody to hit The 10 Criterion"

The Lieutenant was stunned as she walked slowly with a hand covering her mouth to accentuate that astonishment, a flutter in her heart warming the very core of her existence, and a threat of teary eyes approaching.

Edmund belted out the second verse:

"If you can't cuss about it then you're just not passionate / That was his mindset but wrote himself into a corner - what'd he expect / Would happen with the teddy bears, video games, and Japanese animation? / He wasn't

willing to bend in order to make the fu--in' love connection  
/ Therein he drew the line, and it da-n sure wasn't thin -  
it was thick / Watching others in luv and the way they act  
made him sick to his stomach / And what they did to get it -  
an argument could be made that it wasn't them / Tried to be  
another person, but nothing changes - it's just latent

Maybe all that acting out was by his own intelligent  
design / To narrow the field down - not waste his motherfu--  
in' time / What would he look like having to give up what  
was truly enjoyed? / Married but hollow like a fu--ing toy,  
and that he wished to avoid / So somewhere between college  
and now he made a fu--in' come up / Mentally, physically,  
financially - eligible like who the fu-- wants some? /  
Females came and went and left again - never felt worthy  
enough to stay / Their words, not his - everybody would  
marry him but not date

Except you can't get to home plate without first touching  
third base / Lucky not to have made any mistakes - their  
flight was his saving grace / Stuck with the garter, his  
friends all got married - it wasn't fu--in' fair / Parents  
don't understand, and friends don't have the fu--in' time to  
care / What did he do to deserve this, shoulder this -  
godless, friendless / He was glad for their happiness, but  
it also beget a deep sadness / He began to question shi- -  
this punishment, but God did not exist / Because a god that  
would put a person through this wasn't worthy of worship"

This must have been what it would feel like if Edmund had

proposed to Marileva, but the only difference was where that might have been culturally expected, this was not. This was spontaneous. This was fresh. This was a moment she did not want to end, although she realized this was merely a welcome preview of things to come in their relationship.

One of Edmund's closest associates back on Earth had always warned him about leaving a significant amount of emotional capital on the table by, as he would put it, 'not being a fan of organized religion' and missing out on moments like proposal, engagement, and marriage - all drilled into the psyche of Humans since birth as societal norms. The Lieutenant knew she could never get her (then) man down the aisle because of the religious and vanity aspects, but some women were not to be denied however. In a prenuptial compromise of ethereal proportions, his (then) lady friend had become his Goddess, and their big secret was death would do them both apart.

Marileva would have never held the marriage thing against Edmund, but there was something almost territorial to be said about the comfort that came from being able to call him her own. It was at this moment she stopped in her tracks simply shaking her head in the awe of appreciation for this effort.

Edmund let the refrain play through while organizing his papers before saying his rap of the third and final verse:

"Here we are, coming upon the climax - can he resolve these feelings? / Well I'm a closet romantic, and I like happy endings / So I hope so, motherfu--ers don't know that he found True Luv / Found his Goddess to share the throne - it's The One I'm speaking of / Someone to go after this shi-

and share this shi- with / There she was - something forced  
her to make eye contact / As a result, she missed her  
elevator car on a whim / So he only had milliseconds to  
project his elevator pitch:

Often I hold back, at times I can't express ideas verbally /  
So I have to sit down in order to express those thoughts  
lyrically / To break down all the things that are most  
important to me / Immortalized in words for all time, and  
now you have this in writing / And I swear to your god  
because I can't speak to my own / Remember I may not be  
religious, but I'm extremely spiritual / As far as the  
physical is concerned, that is not my goal / In the end, all  
I need is your heart, and you can have my soul

Now see that last part was deep - even for me, I-I mean  
him... / I need to quit with the third person omniscient and  
finish this shi- / We face each other for the first time -  
eyes mesmerized / Completely immobile - freezing time and  
space as if by rite / What's more, I've seen you smile - I  
can't dishonor you / I refuse to fight you, I don't even  
have the strength to argue / I fu--in' luv you! - hey, never  
gave up hope, what more can I say? / Except that I am worthy  
to be loved and I'm glad you feel the same way"

There was a hook at the end, so Edmund finished the song:

"I fu--in' luv you!

I fu--in' luv you!"

With joyously tearful sobs, the Lieutenant was all smiles when she took hold of Edmund and held him tightly.

"I fu--in' luv you!

I fu--in' luv you!"

The music ran out, and the two stood there swaying gently. Visibly Marileva had let her guard down in Edmund's presence, but he was also clearly enthralled by her. From the look of his distant response to the reaction, it was almost as if he was savoring the euphoria of the earnest feelings she felt for him.

The Lieutenant began to wipe her face clear of the streaming tears while she looked Edmund in the eyes, said, and meant, "I love you so much." And he could also delight in the comforting fact this goddess was his as well.

"You've been working so hard for the survival of everybody else," Edmund explained, "and I just wanted to give you a moment to call your own."

Fingering her Ear-To-Mouth Com, Marileva composed her choked up, cracking voice enough to be able to say, "Xach, I'm taking the day off today."

Xach came back over the Ear-To-Mouth Com, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you," the Lieutenant replied before terminating the feed. "Okay what's on the agenda?"

It was officially a date, so Edmund discussed the plans, "I realize it's kinda late, but I pulled some strings over in this Living Section's fine dining establishment, and a fully catered

multicourse meal should be arriving here shortly. You don't even have to go anywhere. They're bringing it right to you! After dinner, I figure we can wind the evening down with some video games and then we can fall asleep in each other's arms staring out at the lovely view of the window overlooking the mothership's gigantic docking bay as the smooth sounds of spacestation reconstruction set the tone for the romantic ambience."

Marileva laughed, "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Almost forgot," Edmund mentioned, "our son is spending the night and, since it's already tomorrow, the day over at Nadala's. You'll be able to enjoy your day off with no disturbances. My Goddess, the Dorans' Queen, and the captain of this spacestation deserves at least one day of rest."

"Well I'm glad one of us sees it that way," the Lieutenant admitted. "But for as bad as things can conceivably become, I'll gladly take you up on this offer. Edmund, thank you."

Edmund smiled, "No problem, Marileva. I'm just glad any bit of what I've done has brought you a measure of happiness. It's getting harder and harder to top dying for you, so I was grasping at straws here."

A series of six high-pitched yet tolerable tones sounded in quick succession as the doorbell, so the Lieutenant playfully pushed Edmund aside and said, "Stop it. Death was just the key to get you in the door," before heading to let the caterers in.

The pungent odor of damp dirt emitted fragrantly from the freshly watered plants. It had been a chore of keeping a plant healthy let alone upright aboard SpaceStation Colt, but it was all about survival as a principle of determination for Nadala. How

apropos was it for the Head Doctor to have projected those identical sensibilities onto her houseplants?

Perhaps the most enigmatic passenger of them all aboard the spacestation or the Juggernaut, Nadala's very existence was enshrouded in mystery. Now this was saying a lot seeing as though she shared residence aboard the exact, same vessel as Terry who was just about as guarded except for the fact he tended to open up when necessary or prodded to do so or he simply felt like divulging a small yet calculative piece of the puzzle to further his otherworldly cause - whatever that could possibly be.

For Edmund and Marileva to have entrusted their child to this woman on a whim, it spoke volumes for Nadala's personality and stature in their eyes. The Head Doctor's loyalty to them was unflinching as long as it meant the allegiance could further her very own survival. As things stood, they were perhaps the best bet in all the universe.

As with anybody, betrayal could occur at any time, but it simply blew Nadala's mind when she realized the two's only choices capable of babysitting Jago were also two of the most dangerous figures aboard SpaceStation Colt. Something was to be said about keeping friends close and enemies closer, and then something else was to be said of entrusting a firstborn child to a complete stranger with a doctored Space Force file.

A major benefit of the umbilical marriage Edmund and Marileva experienced was the invariably improved ability of them to be on the same page regarding decisions and strategy. Whereas Edmund tended to wear his heart on his sleeve, Marileva obviously (or not so obviously) had the poker face in their relationship. Despite this subtle difference, there was no mistaking the empathically linked two were a theme - a 'team of one' that would

be seemingly impossible to defeat in cards.

And yet, this was not a competition for if it were, Nadala knew Terry would play in deference to statistics in order to overcome Edmund and Marileva's bond. But this was Terry. The only bit of leverage she had was access to their child, and that terrified her with how shrewd a staunch, unyielding competitor the Lieutenant was.

Nadala was quite literally backed into a corner because Marileva fully understood when an adversary already knew how a person played their hand, it was best to allow the hand to show in order to leave the adversary wondering. This strategy practically dared the Head Doctor to make the wrong move, but she literally could not and was ultimately made to become indentured to her superior officer.

No Nadala had to take that back. This was not some whim or spur of the moment decision on Edmund and Marileva's part. Perhaps that would be the case if they had entrusted Jago to a high school babysitter from down the street rather than her admittedly seedy self. But no, this was yet another example of leveraged loyalty, and it left the Head Doctor to wonder who the title of most dangerous truly belonged to - even outside the spacestation's walls. Whatever was hidden in her past, she realized it was nowhere close to the level at which the two were playing, and it goaded her to check yet again on the well-being of their child.

Jago was actually up and stirring in the back room of Nadala's cabin, so she went to see what that was all about. The light was on and everything as he sat on the bed outside the covers clutching his teddy bear.

Really for the first time, Nadala thought lesser of herself for even considering to harm Jago. The sight of him there brought

out an unselfish feeling of putting his well-being above her own - above all else, a feeling that had long since subsided in this plight she led. "It's past two hundred hours in the morning. What in the universe are you still doing awake?"

"I'm afraid," Jago admitted.

With a jaw falling through the floor in astonishment, Nadala realized she did not need this type of conversation at this hour for sleep's sake, but turning out the light and closing the door would probably net a bad report. She proceeded to sit on the bed next to Jago and allowed him to talk things out. Ironically he was possibly the most protected child in all the universe.

He went right into it, "I'm afraid of death."

This was unfortunately a topic all too familiar to Nadala in her capacity as the Science/Medical Team Lead. Rather than cut the conversation off with some cold utterance regarding inevitability, the Head Doctor remembered her most basic medical training that put an emphasis on listening, so she let him to continue.

"Not mine," Jago specified, "I could care less about my own soul and would welcome give it up if it meant my parents would never die."

That was unexpected - noble but unexpected. Nadala was a little unsure as to how to handle this discussion and silently permitted him to go even further.

Jago offered his teddy bear to Nadala, who accepted it, and then proceeded to speak with his hands, "Why does anybody have to die? It's not fair. The universe is pretty big, so why can't we all coexist? I just don't understand the purpose of death, and it scares me that Mom and Dad might leave me one day plus leave all those who care about them. How can I stop it?"

"Some say if there wasn't such a thing as death, then people

wouldn't appreciate life," Nadala told him, "and yet and still, some others claim death doesn't exist on a genetic level as long as the species continues to live on through the continued procreation of future generations."

"But I do appreciate life," Jago pleaded, "so much so I'd give mine up to allow them to live on. I don't even know what death is other than it seems to separate the ones we love. It's like, who makes this stuff up? Anyway that's what I've been wrestling with all night. Any ideas?"

Nadala replied, "Unfortunately and I keep having to tell your family this, my expertise ends where death begins."

Jago asked, "What about you? I mean am I off base here? Wouldn't you give it all up in order to save someone you loved?"

"Absolutely," Nadala nodded. "Now I can't sit here and just tell you what you want to hear because honestly I don't even know the answer. Your parents are much closer to the subject, and the fact we're even talking right now is proof positive of and a testament to some additional, otherworldly phenomena I don't even understand. The only thing I'm sure of is in the interim - until you figure out the ethereal, never take your parents for granted. Without them you most certainly would not exist, but because of you is why they persist."

"Thanks, Doctor Agënt," Jago said, "I'll do well to remember that."

Nadala handed back the teddy bear and ordered, "You take this back and crawl over there to get some sleep. I think you get the point, but I'm just in the next room if you need to talk further. Please try to get some sleep though. Some of us have to work in the morning, you know?"

Jago obliged by worming his way back between the covers and

allowing her to tuck him in snugly. "Thanks again for hearing me out. Have a good night."

A simple flick of the switch next to the door turned the room's lighting out, but before Nadala shut the door, she left him with one last pearl of wisdom, "Throughout all my travels across this universe, I've encountered countless species who just assumed death was an impending certainty - something written in stone as a given. As for where this all ultimately stems from, you've got me. Subscribe to your own conventions, Jago. Who's to say you're wrong, and even if they do, who are they? It's odd they'd seemingly have the answer to a question they themselves refuse to even ask. I'd like you to look up Robert Frost of Earth on one of the Science/Medical Section computers when we get in - in the morning. He appears to have made some fans out of your immediate family. Goodnight."

On the long-awaited twenty-ninth day, the intraship communications feeds between SpaceStation Colt and the Juggernaut were overflowing with messages of heartfelt goodbyes. There was no telling when next these two respective crews would get a chance to see each other again, but it was an awkward moment they had all worked so hard toward because of the necessity of the split - to address a much larger set of challenges and any number of successive dangers involved with the forthcoming missions.

The fully repaired spacestation was being turned around a full one hundred eighty degrees by the rotating floor of the mothership's gigantic docking bay where she would finally be allowed clear access to the opening doors.

Xach sat in the captain's chair of SpaceStation Colt's Cockpit Section staying in contact with Houser and Hubbard on the Juggernaut's bridge by way of the giant view-screen and their own mutual feed. He made mention, "It's nice to see you again, Major Hubbard. I was able to reiterate to the Juggernaut's crew the Humans are to be respected, so you both should not have any further altercation. If any other foolishness occurs, please know I am merely a communications feed away."

Hubbard could merely offer a smile.

"That's much appreciated, Xach," Houser replied.

Ciba Due stood on Xach's right and requested, "When you get back to Earth, drop us a line to let us know you-all arrived safely."

Houser countered, "You guys do the same. Ours is actually the much easier trek, so keep us posted on your progress."

"You know your whole universe is about to come crashing down around you - upon you? I've finally found you after all this time, old friend. Did you think you could avoid the New Alliance forever? Yes I surmise this was your thought process. You who would be the master of lying by simply not bringing up the truths. History has in fact repeated itself for the last time, but the result is still the same. You lose once more, Terry.

Tell me, how do you think it'll feel when these rejects you attempt to build up in your image learn of your unyielding treachery? You dare to call the New Alliance evil when all we wish to do is put a stop to your cold and vicious ways. I bet they have no idea who you really are. Oh I'm sure the Lieutenant suspects your deceit, but even

she is incapable of comprehending the extent of your villainy. And what of Edmund? How will you explain yourself? How could you possibly explain yourself?

Or maybe an even better question: How many lives will be lost this time around because of your selfish efforts? How many have been lost to this point? Your megalomania knows no bounds. Maybe I should spare the crew the agony of having to unravel this menace you've perpetrated across how many universes is it now? Each time we're there to pick up the pieces of what you destroy, and this'll be no different. Your ostracism from these peons you call friends has already been fated because you missed the one chance you were given to come clean.

I should've been killed and dumped in space, and you could have made that happen. Instead I live, and we're coming. We've played you perfectly yet again. You wanted to play God when you didn't fully understand the game's rules, and now your friends will all die, your faction will crumble, and your power will be added to the New Alliance when this universe also falls completely under our control.

Sound familiar? All I suppose except for the part where you're finally eliminated. The baby has had his way for far too long - for the final time. Everything I've said will come to pass. No matter how many equations or variables you've accounted for thus far, the end result I've foreseen is completely unavoidable. Filth should never amass such power, and we'll take great pleasure in dismantling it," Fineyes said without words from the spacestation's newly reconstructed Security Section.

Terry noticed he was visibly shaking, and it was not a reaction to the temperature. A mix of fear and rage were swirling inside him at the realization of what was about to come to pass. True it was much easier to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission, but this said nothing of the fact he would savor every moment of killing Carlton 'Fineyes' Lenorox.

"Everything alright, Terry?" An engineer asked. "I wanted to let you know final checks will begin soon."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Terry said before going about his business of ensuring a successful takeoff.

Marileva entered the Cockpit with Edmund, who had Jago draped over his shoulders, by her side. Their son actually wanted to witness a liftoff firsthand, so they were more than happy to oblige.

Xach stood up and aside as he was relieved of the captain's chair by the Lieutenant taking up her rightful position. She fingered her Ear-To-Mouth Com and started the process of running through final checks, "Terry, can we become airborne?"

"Of course," Terry responded back. "SpaceStation Colt is functioning optimally at one hundred percent."

"Nadala," Marileva asked, "are all essential spacestation personnel on board?"

"Ready and waiting, Ma'am," Nadala announced from the Science/Medical Section, "performing final checks on all their respective systems."

"Beavy and Brody," the Lieutenant contacted next, "is the entire crew prepped for vertical takeoff?"

Both Beavy and Brody burst inside the Cockpit Section completely winded as if having put their ship-wide check off until the utmost last possible moment.

Beavy simply said, "Check," before leaning over the railing to the central area in order to catch his breath.

Brody was about as worse for wear, so it was becoming clear to Marileva, Xach, and Ciba Due that Beavy had a horrible influence on his peers.

"I don't do goodbyes, Captain," Houser stated.

The Lieutenant nodded, "No goodbyes, Captain."

With that, Houser made a downward motion with his right hand disconnecting the feed.

"Commence the procession," Marileva ordered.

Dexterous fingers tapped diligently about the keys ingrained in the panels on Left Com. This started SpaceStation Colt's twin one hundred seventy-five meter long thrusters to pulsate - completely powered up of solar energy.

"Engage the stabilizers."

All around the spacestation, tiny thruster pockets fired simultaneously to start and altogether as needed sequentially over whatever was to be the duration of this procedure. Indicatively she now stood perfectly level while beginning a vertical takeoff and leaving the floor of the mothership's gigantic docking bay.

"Adjust the stabilizers, retract the landing gears, and take us out."

The engines purred with an ambient, futuristic fervor as SpaceStation Colt exited the now hollow, mammoth innards of the Juggernaut; turned on target of the Crystalline System; and soared freely albeit purposefully in the direction of whatever was to come.

With the spacestation safely away, the mothership headed for Earth.



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