

Birthright

Battle for the Confederation

Pursuit



Ryan Krauter

Birthright:

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Pursuit

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The Out of Nowhere Series: (Young Adult)

Out of Nowhere

Shadow of Doubt

The Fixer (click to follow link)

My Own Prison (short story) (click to follow link)

Acknowledgements

Ahhh, writer's block. How I have managed to hide from thee, my nemesis. I find that if I can just sit down and fire up the old electronic typing apparatus, I can manage to get some work done. And yet here I sit, not knowing who or what to acknowledge in the appropriately named 'Acknowledgements' section. Well, it's better than not having any idea how to end the novel, wouldn't you say?

I could thank technology, from my home built PC to my iPad and bluetooth keyboard, for allowing me to work on my novels anywhere I can find time and a place to write.

I could go the other direction, and wax romantic about getting away from the previously mentioned technology; going camping, setting some marshmallows on fire and slowing down a bit. That's a good time as well.

I think it's high time I pay respects to you, those that have shelled out a few bucks to read my works. I wrote the first two novels in the Birthright series before I realized I could put them up on Amazon and Barnes & Noble for sale. It's been about three years since then, and the Kindle Store is a very different place. There are seemingly exponentially more authors and subjects to choose from than when I started. If it doesn't create a generation gap, go ahead and picture Dana Carvey's Grumpy Old Man right now. "In my day, we had to grind up wood and make papyrus and then write using ink made from spit and berries, and we liked it!"

So thank you, dear reader, for reading my books. I hope you enjoy them, because I had a genuine good time writing them. It's more fun for me than watching reality TV and just consuming. I wanted to create something instead, and I sincerely hope you found it worth your time. There are a lot of authors out there today, and that's a good thing because as a reader myself I feel like there are a lot of people out there who are writing books I'll enjoy.

Cheers!

Dedication

As always, my work is dedicated to Krista, Colin, Chase, and Sydney.

CHAPTER ONE

The small moon hung innocently in space, turning the days away as it had done for the uncounted eons, orbiting a gas giant that had captured it from its trip through the solar system millions of years ago. Some combination of gravity from the gas giant as well as the composition of the moon itself had served to establish enough mass and a magnetic field to produce an atmosphere, even some peaceful oceans. It featured a small temperate zone at the equator whose conditions had attracted researchers and adventurers, some of whom had set up a fairly profitable mining operation for those unique elements that were below the moon's surface. There was a smattering of indigenous animal and plant life, though nothing that would excite the average biologist.

About the only interesting thing about the place was the task force of Confederation warships in orbit, high above the tranquil forests. There was a pair of destroyers, a cruiser, a Crusader class hunter/killer, a Starshaker class battleship, and even a Marine Assault Ship.

"The electromagnetic fields from the gas giant are playing holy hell with the sensors," muttered the officer at the Sensors station in the spacious briefing area at the rear of the Assault Ship's bridge.

"The miners down on the moon's surface supposedly had an algorithm figured out to see through all the garbage," the officer's partner quipped as he tapped some commands of his own. "Isn't it in the mission file anywhere?"

"Hang on; I'm looking."

The second sensor operator scanned the surface once again. The naval force was orbiting high above a former mining encampment; the biggest on the whole moon, in fact. It was quite an operation, with multi-story buildings, a fully developed town and housing for almost ten thousand, and two separate spaceports for taking ore up to orbit for shipment.

The only thing missing was the people. It had been almost a month since the Governing Committee and its head, Senator Zek Dennix, had announced the formal suspension of hostilities between the Confederation and the invading Priman force which had been cutting a swath through the galactic arm they resided in. Since that announcement, many settlements and interests along the frozen borders had been evacuated and abandoned; it was clear that Confed was leaning more toward

appeasement and cooperation than in protecting its pre-invasion territories, and many had seen the writing on the wall and had left for the relative safety of the inner planets.

Senator Dennix had even gone so far as to issue a list of places that were off limits to Confed civilians and military alike; only in recent days had he finally relented and given the navy a list of places they *were* in fact allowed to investigate.

That brought them here, to a moon claimed by the Galactic Ore Corporation. The minerals mined here were of some value, but more importantly this system was the farthest out that Confed units were allowed to roam. Fleet Admiral Privac had wasted no time in ordering a scouting force to recon and secure the moon. The navy had plans to install a listening post and do what they could to monitor Priman traffic outside Confed borders. The Fleet Admiral had been hampered by Rules of Engagement issued by the Governing Committee which required him to use minimum practical force so as not to possibly antagonize any Priman observers who might see them.

"Ok," the first sensor tech announced proudly, "I have the algorithm running. It's not exactly written with our hardware in mind, but I made a few changes and I think we're all right."

"Whatever would we do without you?" the second tech asked sarcastically, but with a grin that was born of much mutual ribbing.

Ignoring him, the first tech continued. "Ok. I see our landing force on the eastern side of the city. They've spread into the town under air cover from the Talons that escorted them down. Hovertanks and powered armor are moving up. Looks like we're on schedule. Still no life signs other than our people."

"I'll tell the captain; he's convinced the Primans are hiding behind every asteroid we fly past. Maybe now the poor guy can calm down a bit."

Captain Second Rank Kleth Orjon, one of the senior ground commanders from the Marine Assault Ship Aniteo, stood atop his hovertank and surveyed the countryside through his electronic field glasses. The young Drisk man had the traditional high-ponytail of his people and in fact loved anything with a tradition and heritage. While he could have used his data pad, the mini holo generator in his tank or the data projected on the faceplate of his helmet, he preferred to see things with his own eyes using the old fashioned magnifiers. As a result, he'd parked his command tank on the biggest hill just outside of town and surveyed his troops as they converged on and entered the city.

It was an honest-to-goodness town, not just some ratty mining encampment that had sprawled up and crept across the terrain surrounding the processing facility. There were shopping centers, entertainment complexes, apartments; everything he'd expect to find on a major planet. His troops hadn't been in a lot of urban combat; in fact, the few engagements they'd been in had all seemed to be over lonely Confed outposts and armories, usually in out-of-the-way locations or on airless moonlets. He wasn't going to pass up this chance to review urban operations, and had deployed most of the 500 troops and mechanized units at his disposal.

"Jumper One and Two," he said into his headset as he looked through his field glasses.

"Here," came two voices over the headphones. Kleth saw both companies of powered armor suits as they established their position on a hill and set up their perimeter.

"We're almost set here," Kleth continued. "Get ready to advance."

"Understood."

He watched as the powered armor units changed orientation and spread out for their advance into the city. Confed's latest generation of powered armor made the average soldier about a full head taller while wearing the suit. It was an exoskeleton, armored and powered by a fuel cell good for almost a week in sustained combat. They carried the venerable HMR-12 assault rifle, but most troops

also packed specialized weapons such as anti-aircraft missiles, flamethrowers, flechette guns, heavy machine guns, even EMP and Electronic Warfare weaponry. They'd be ready for whatever they came across in town, but unfortunately he didn't expect to see any Primans.

Aboard the battleship Renown, Captain Mora Grell sighed in disappointment. She'd just received the latest updates from the surface as well as the Marine Assault Ship Aniteo, named like most of the class for important worlds in the Confederation.

There was nothing to report. No ships on this entire side of the solar system. Nothing on the surface, either. That was the most surprising. With the mining company's presence gone, she'd expected thieves, looters, pirates, scavengers of some sort. There was a lot of useful equipment down there just begging to be removed from the planet. But there was no activity at all. This mission was turning into a great disappointment. Sure, it was the most action she'd seen in weeks, but she wished desperately that it was more than an operation to seize an uninhabited moon, grab some refined ore and plant a few sensor platforms. There were more Primans needed killing than sensors that needed placing, and assaulting an empty planet wasn't going to accomplish anything, no matter how convincingly they did it.

"How long until the main sensor platforms are deployed?" she asked her ops officer. With any luck they could at least patrol around the outer reaches of the system once they were done and maybe find out something useful.

"City secure," Captain Orjon heard through the tactical net. *Well, that's it then*, he thought. There was apparently not going to be anything interesting worth seeing here. Perhaps that meant the Primans were actually obeying the treaty and staying out of Confed territory? Not that the navy knew they were so hamstrung by their ROE that they couldn't even patrol much of their own territory near the DMZ between Confed and the occupied space around it and coreward.

"Alright," Orjon said over the net, trying to not sound disappointed. "Jumper One, you take your mechanized troops and head for the mining company's offices and secure as per the plan. Jumper Two, you take the spaceport on the other side of the city. Tanks, we're heading back to our rally point on the outskirts to set up a perimeter. Bring in the rest of the vehicles, dismount, and we'll search the city for anything interesting. Might as well be sure nobody got left behind."

Aboard the Aniteo, the sensor techs were about to go off-shift. Being the most experienced at their positions, they had been on station during the run-in and initial landings, but now with the system clear they were turning their consoles over to the next junior officers and would observe them at work.

"And we have this site over here marked for gunnery practice from the Aniteo's surface bombardment guns later," the sensor tech was telling his replacement as he pointed to a scrap yard outside of the city limits. Ground assaults were rare where the Primans were concerned, and the captain had wanted to get everyone some practice, even the crew of the huge surface bombardment batteries. "Hang on," he said, annoyed at the computer. There was a glitch now, a sensor shadow around an area behind one of the newly-deployed orbiting sensor platforms. "Stupid thing." He looked over at his partner. "Can you check Platform Four? We just lost a quarter of its scanning sectors."

"Sure. Stand by." Clicking, typing, swiping, the second sensor tech worked the controls at his

station while the junior officers stood behind them, eager to have their time on the consoles and trying their best to not look annoyed.

"Oh, sheifah," the sensor tech said in dismay.

"Captain!" Mora Grell heard the excited call from her comm officer and was about to mention something about maintaining composure until she saw the look in the woman's eyes.

"What is it?" Grell asked as she hurried to the station.

"The sensor platform feeding us this info just got scrambled and went offline, but it sent us this." She tapped a spot on the touchscreen and an image sprang up on the main holo display at the front of the bridge. It was a huge mass of Priman capital ships.

Captain Vol smiled as he surveyed the formation ahead of him on the main display of his bridge. He had two dozen heavy cruisers at his disposal; he'd learned a painful lesson not very long ago that one should never assume one had enough ships to deal with an enemy. As a result, he'd virtually demanded that his force for this operation had enough hulls to be decisive. Things had been uncertain until Representative Ravine, who had become a trusted comrade and now his patron among the senior military, simply assigned him the ships he'd requested.

Representative Ravine stood at his side now, sharing his knowing grin. She saw the incoming data and drew the same conclusions he did. The loyal Confed forces attempting to seize this moon could put up a solid fight, but Priman ships now carried the operational version of the EMP torpedo that was part of their new arsenal of electromagnetic weaponry.

"Disperse the flanking units," Vol ordered his ops officer. "We don't want any of them running Or surviving."

Ten of his cruisers split off to encircle the Confed ships. Vol's forces had been lying in wait, powered down and virtually undetectable. It would have prevented them from moving to intercept an enemy and so was of limited tactical value, but the Primans had known the Confed navy was coming and what they were after. Those forces were now backed up against the moon's atmosphere with his own ships converging on the sides to cut off escape; the Confeds had nowhere to run.

Captain Vol turned to Representative Ravine. "Would you care to give the order?"

Ravine acknowledged with an eager grin and nod. She turned to the weapons crew on the starboard side of the bridge. "Launch EMP torpedoes."

Captain Grell was just putting the finishing touches on a quick deployment order for her task force on her data screen when she heard the weapons officer call out a torpedo launch.

"Why the hell would they launch this far out?" she asked of the weapons tech as she stomped over to his station. "We'll have forever to let our point defense turrets generate a shoot-list and take them down. I suppose a few will get through, but that's a serious waste of weapons, especially considering they don't have reloadable tubes like we do."

"Agreed, Captain," the officer noted. "All launches came from external hard points."

Mora Grell wondered what the Primans were intending with such a long-range first salvo, when suddenly things clicked together and realized with stark horror what was heading their way. She'd only received the updated brief this morning and hadn't even had time to send it out to her crew yet; the Primans were rumored to have field-tested some incredibly advanced EMP weaponry. There was no reason a torpedo couldn't be equipped with the same tech.

"Start firing now!" she yelled. The weapons tech looked at her quizzically. "I know they're outside effective range, but those are EMP torpedoes; nothing we have can protect us. So start shooting now, dammit!"

The tech stabbed the override button on the computer's standard programming and released the AA/point defense turrets to fire at will.

Captain Orjon was standing on the top deck of his hovertank, switching between his field glasses in one hand and the comm unit in the other.

"Captain!" he heard from within the tank. His driver/gunner, a Drisk woman who was more proficient at stringing together off-color curses than anyone else he knew, popped up from the hatch and gave him a chilling look.

"What's wrong?" he asked, immediately sensing that something was seriously amiss.

"It's the Aniteo," she said in a rush. "They're reporting the Priman fleet just launched a huge spread of torpedoes at our ships and the planet itself."

"Well," he replied cautiously, "that sort of what happens when two groups of people are at war with each other. They'll do something mean to us, and then we'll do something mean back to them."

"No, dammit all," she continued, frustrated. "They warned us they were some new kind of EMP weapon. They said we might be on our own."

Captain Grell watched anxiously as her fleet maneuvered. She'd given the order to scatter, break apart as much as possible in the hopes that the effective radius of the EMP torpedoes was smaller than the volume of space her ships could occupy.

She watched as her point defense batteries choked space with rapid laserfire, chopping away at the incoming weapons. She wished these were just plain old torpedoes and she could roll the hull and just let them hit Renown's heavily armored keel. But there were just too many of them...

The first wave lost most of its members, only a half dozen torpedoes surviving to get within detonation range. One detonated on the aft of the Crusader class ship. The hunter/killer showed no apparent signs of trauma, other than the fact that over the course of several seconds every last light extinguished. The drives sputtered and went dark, their mysterious energies dispersed. The now-dark ship just coasted off in the direction it had been going, inertia destined to keep it on the same course forever, out into the reaches of interstellar space.

Two detonated against Aniteo, the huge Marine Assault Ship. A similar fate befell the behemoth. The same went for one of the two destroyers. The last one found Renown, and detonated against the battleship's starboard bow, a noncritical area that mainly contained the feed mechanisms for the forward torpedo launchers. For a second, Captain Grell hoped against all odds that nothing would happen, but it wasn't to be. There was a series of snaps, like electricity conducting across a gap to a ground, or a static electric charge. Then, the bridge went dark. It was eerie; she'd been aboard in drydock when her ship had undergone major refitting and had been almost entirely powered down. But there had still been some background noise; distant fans whooshing quietly as they recirculated the air, blowers and venting on the bridge equipment, the occasional thrum through the deckplates.

This, on the other hand, was a simple wrenching silence. Even her crew was silent; nobody on the bridge made a sound. Renown simply carried on, dead and silent. Even the gravity-generating deckplates were dead. She could already feel the reduced force of gravity from them, their pull less and less effective. In a few minutes their charge would be completely gone, and her crew would end up floating through the corridors of the warship.

She raced to the forward viewports. Unlike newer ships whose bridges were encased in armor and used viewscreens to show an outside image, the Starshakers had actual viewports. She looked out and saw more torpedoes exploding among her task force, both EMP and conventional. All her ships were dark now, and though she had thought it couldn't get any worse, she was wrong about that as well. She saw Priman heavy cruisers moving in, firing on the defenseless vessels and tearing them apart. The Priman frigate-sized ships known as Reapers, a post-invasion design bristling with AA batteries to counter the deadly threat of Confed's Talon and Intruder fighters, screened the main body of the force, picking off the few Confederation fighters that weren't already drifting lifeless in space. Grell swore an old epithet that she hadn't used since she'd made Captain. Her ships were being shredded and there wasn't a damn thing in the universe she could do about it.

On the other hand, the Primans were leaving Renown alone. It wasn't done out of mercy, though; her ship was headed right towards the moon's atmosphere.

"Nav," she said quietly as she turned her head a bit to look towards the navigation station. "What do you think? Steep angle, isn't it?"

"Too steep," the woman replied without having to think too long. They were coming in way too fast. There was no hope they'd just bounce off the atmosphere and get kicked back off into space, or even do a slow orbiting re-entry. No, they were going in nose first and would make a fiery show of it.

"Listen up," Captain Grell said, trying to muster her command presence. "Everybody get a vac suit. We'll move through the ship as far as we can in the next few minutes. Try to kick loose some escape pods. I know they might not have power, but it's our only shot. Tell anyone you pass. We can go EVA and maybe last a few days. Maybe someone will check on us before the Primans settle in here. Let's go!"

She clapped her hands once to get their attention, and in short order her bridge crew recovered and started to clear the room. She could have told them it had been an honor to serve with them, that they'd all be avenged. But that would have seemed like giving up. Not that their options were very bright in any case, but as long as there was some hope, it was worth putting on the show that they'd live to fight another day.

"Umm," Captain Orjon's gunner said as she looked up into the sky. "Is that one of ours?"

She was pointing at a large starship, burning its way through the moon's atmosphere and headed straight for the ground. It was already almost unrecognizable; the re-entry had peeled off much of the superstructure, which created a flaming debris trail far aft of the doomed ship.

"All units," Orjon said into his comm unit. "Regroup on my position. I say again, everyone regroup here on the double. We may lose comms at any time."

He knew what was going to happen. His gunner, Rola, had read the full text of the Aniteo's last orders. 'EMP weapon, no known defense. Effective on impact, unknown abilities with proximity burst. Orbit is lost; you're on your own. Good luck'. They were pragmatic, simple words that glossed over the fact that six mighty Confederation warships were most likely gone with all hands aboard. And they'd said to expect a surface bombardment next.

It was unbelievable. All Confed systems were shielded against EMP; it was standard, had been for as long as anyone remembered. But the text from Aniteo was very clear: it was an EMP weapon, and he couldn't do anything to protect his people from it.

A minute later, all his units or at least advance runners from them were gathered around his tank. He heard a deep 'boom' from up high and lifted his head to look. He saw contrails in the upper reaches of the stratosphere; he'd heard the sonic booms of the torpedoes entering the ever-thickening atmosphere as they descended. Finally, he saw them air-burst. It was sort of anticlimactic in a way;

just little explosions like dud fireworks, four of them scattered across the sky. They were not representative of what power the weapons held.

He didn't feel anything; no blast wave, no heat. He sort of expected some sort of physical effect. Instead, there were clicking sounds from inside his tank, the lift generators on the bottom surged once, twice, and then fell silent. The tank dropped unceremoniously to the ground with a crash, crumpling the skirt armor under its own weight.

"Holy sheifah," murmured Rola.

His troops started to murmur, the low-grade commotion of people who needed to hear something that would give them some answers.

"Alright, folks," Orjon yelled as loudly as he dared without seeming angry or off-balance. "Short version; our fleet's taking a pounding and we've just been hit with an EMP weapon. It's all new stuff, but we can't sit here and stare at each other." He surveyed the crowd and saw he was getting them back with him. He turned to his gunner. "Rola, get back in the tank and see if you can tell what exactly happened to our electronics." He picked out the next unit commander he saw and pointed. "Take an inventory of all your unit's weapons; tell me if anything at all is still working." He pointed at the other unit commander, a Trin who was built like a professional fighter. "Hilt, I need you to get us organized. The Primans probably see this town from orbit. With our vehicles humped, we need to make a stand. Get me a plan to defend this city, and then get me a plan to retreat through it. I'm not sure where we're going yet, but until we know what we're up against, we need to plan for both options."

"Captain!" Orjon heard from behind him. He turned to see two soldiers approaching with another man between them, hands cuffed in front. He was human, athletic, maybe thirty or so. Didn't look exactly like a soldier, but he was no mine rat, either.

"What's this?" Orjon asked as the party of three drew up to his now-silent tank.

"This guy approached us out of town after we got your message to RTB," one of the men began. "He said he's with Confed."

"You scanned the city earlier and found no life signs, correct?" Orjon confirmed.

The men nodded.

"I didn't want to be found. Until now, that is," the stranger said. "My name's Mithus; I'm a SAR operative."

"Sure you are," Orjon said easily. "Me too, in fact. It's easy to claim that since you know SAR personnel records aren't something I can access." He turned to the two that had brought Mithus in. "Go find a place to stash this man while we get ready."

The two placed their hands on Mithus and started to turn him around to march him away.

"Check the general code database," Mithus called as he was grabbed. "You know there's a physical hardcopy in every Confed command vehicle. I have a recognition code for you."

At that, Captain Orjon paused. This man Mithus was right; every week, some low-ranking officer from Aniteo's Intelligence branch had to go and stuff hardcopy printouts of certain procedures, codes and plans in every place a commanding officer might need to access them. The bridge, C3, fighter craft belonging to the CAG, briefing rooms, vehicles, even the escape pods designated for bridge crew.

Grudgingly, Orjon looked down into the tank to see Rola looking expectantly at him. She already had the small sealed folder in her hand. He'd always mocked the anachronism of printing out orders on physical transparencies, something he'd thought was just busy-work to give the Intel nerds something to do, but suddenly it all seemed perfectly logical.

He held out his hand and his gunner gently placed the envelope in it.

Mithus shrugged out of the grip of the two men holding him. "Go to this week's recognition

code for detached covert operatives," he began. He hated to break cover, especially in front of all these people, but it was acceptable under the circumstances. In addition, he had to allow for the possibility they might all be killed or imprisoned soon anyway. "The sequence is *Plaza, Turn, Seventy-Six*."

Orjon flipped through the pages, creasing the thin printouts and dropping a few out of the sheaf he held. He didn't notice. Mithus had given the correct passphrase for the week.

"Last week's should still be in there as well," Mithus continued. "It was *Quality, Valet, zero four*. Next week's will be *Motor, Enjoy, forty-three*."

"I was under the impression the words were generated randomly the day before issuance," Orjon said, though not as doubtfully as he would have imagined.

Mithus just chuckled. "You'd be surprised. I know a guy."

Orjon waved at the men who held Mithus and they backed off a few steps. Mithus shrugged his arms and removed the stunner cuffs from his hands.

"Where did you get a code key to release those?" asked Captain Orjon of Mithus.

"Don't need one," the SAR operative replied. "I just thought it would be courteous to leave them on until we were all good with each other."

Orjon hopped down off his tank deck and walked up to Mithus, eyeing him up carefully. "It appears we have a lot to talk about."

"And not much time to do it in."

Representative Ravine watched with satisfaction as the last of the Confederation ships disappeared. The battleship *Renown* had barreled into the ground a continent away from the mining town that was contested, creating a crater miles across and throwing up a debris cloud that would obscure the sun there for weeks.

"And now we begin the second phase of the operation," she said confidently to Captain Vol, who turned and nodded to his ops officer. The Priman female in turn started entering commands into her console which ordered dozens of dropships to churn forth from the hangars of his three escort carriers. He hated that his people had needed to adapt to a Confed tactic, but he also had to admit that the cruiser-turned-light-carrier design was a very important niche vessel to have. They had brought the thousands of troops that were now in their dropships headed to the moon's surface.

"Those mineral resources will be ours within the hour," Captain Vol said confidently.

Ravine just nodded, for though she knew he was being optimistic, she didn't think it was worth admonishing him over if it meant putting a damper on the crew's spirits. They were showing a swagger that had been lacking lately, and she fully approved.

Only Ravine also knew that the second phase was really only a part of the operational plan. Of course they were in orbit to appropriate the valuable resources that the Galactic Ore Corporation had been kind enough to leave stockpiled here. Those elements would be turned into fuel cells, blaster packs and various types of explosives and catalysts. But the operation in general had been conceived as a way to eliminate more Confederation forces. They'd been lured to this moon to die, and she intended to follow through.

Mithus was thinking fast, trying to decide how much to tell Captain Orjon. He'd been ordered to the installation to take inventory of the ore the mining company had supposedly left behind. On orders from the Governing Committee, the moon was on a list of approved targets, and once he'd verified the ore he'd called it in and was told to wait until the friendly forces had recovered the ore and

left before he would depart as well. Those plans were obviously long since obsolete.

—He and the captain were walking the perimeter of the city while inspecting the fortifications. Overall, it was a fairly defensible position. A large open plain to the east of the city was the best place to land. The mountains to the west and north, with their mines underneath, rose far up into the skies and created a natural barrier to easy movement. Dense forest to the south wound back behind the mountains, forcing any attacking ground force to approach from the east, just like Captain Orjon's Marines had.

He also knew about the EMP weapon. The SAR operatives had received a briefing cobbled together from many sources whose reports were more redacted information than text, and the end conclusion was that the Priman EMP weaponry was a game-changer. There was no available countermeasure other than the possibility that some equipment wouldn't be affected if powered down. They weren't even sure if the weapons needed some sort of physical contact or if a proximity burst was all that was needed. However, this evidence was not properly validated, and so was considered unreliable. He could only guess as to why the nanites that inhabited his bloodstream were still functional. Maybe it was because they were designed to repair themselves as well as him. Maybe it was because they were more biological than artificial, or there weren't enough circuits to corrupt anyway. In any case, it didn't help him all that much now.

"I saw the fleet's transmissions," Mithus began. "And they're right; we can fight, or flee. But the Primans are going to come down here and get what they want from this place. There's just no way we can stop them without top cover. Do you have any orders that cover this?"

"You mean in case all our warships were destroyed and we were left down on the surface in a shooting gallery?" began Orjon in an exasperated tone. "No, I don't think they wargamed that scenario out." They walked on in silence for a handful of steps. "Alright," the captain continued, "sorry about that." He took a deep breath and continued. "I assume they want something from this mine, probably the same raw materials we were going to collect. If not, they would probably have just bombarded the surface until they'd created a nice glass-bottomed parking lot. You agree?"

Mithus nodded.

"So, I figure it's only right if we not let them have those materials. We could drop them back into the mine, blow the entrance, is what I was thinking. I wouldn't mind finding a way to not die in the process, either, but first thing's first: we need to hump their day."

"That, we can do."

The Priman ground commander, Azul, was done organizing his troops. His people hadn't fought any ground battles in the last few centuries, but had simply adopted Confederation and Talaran doctrine and copied their vehicles. In reality, this operation was an aberration; Primans fought in space, controlled the orbits above planets. They didn't have enough manpower to fully occupy and pacify every planet they'd taken, and had found it just as effective to leave capital ships in orbit that would obliterate anything on the surface that offended them. Having to land his own ground forces in order to capture these admittedly desirable raw materials was not his first choice of fights. Better to demand the Confeds on the surface do it for him or risk destruction. A civilian population would comply, but he'd learned from hard experience that the men and women of the Confederation military took a perverse joy in being difficult.

"Move up all elements," he said into his comm unit. Three swarms of Priman troops and vehicles surged away from their transports and lumbered towards the mining town.

CHAPTER TWO

"You're sure it will work?" asked Orjon of Mithus with a skeptical glance.

"Sure. Probably," Mithus conceded. "Look, we get enough debris in the air; even Priman sensors will take a beating. Your troops all have adaptive camouflage cloaks that will help as well. We occupy random buildings so they can't gauge our numbers, falling more people back every time we give ground. Then we take care of the mines and head all the way back through the forest to the southwest and back behind the mountain. Yes, they have the advantage and sooner or later they'll find us, but this gives us a chance. At the very least it'll buy us enough time to get those minerals destroyed."

Orjon had to admit it was the best of the unpleasant options open to him. Mithus wanted to conduct a running retreat through the city, making the Primans fight their way through while the Confeds used guerrilla tactics to slow them down. Oh, and he also wanted to set the city on fire. He said that if they could generate a big enough firestorm and smoke/ash cloud, it would drastically hamper the Primans' ability to track them, which would give them time to accomplish their work at the mine and give them a chance to sneak out of town. It was a decent sized city; if the whole thing went up, it would make a hell of a mess.

Orjon had trained in urban tactics as well and together they'd laid out a plan. Only about one out of every ten of his soldiers had a functioning weapon, though they'd managed to scrape together and cobble up an impressive array of explosives.

They stood now a block in from the eastern edge of town, watching as the Priman invaders approached. All of the Confed troops were using their adaptive camouflage cloaks to hinder the Primans' ability to detect them. They'd considered the city secure and stored the camo cloaks by the time the EMP torpedoes had gone off, and as a result they had powered right up. The cloaks attached to the shoulders of their web gear and received power from their body armor. Their function was to mirror their surroundings, helping them blend in instantly wherever they were. In addition, they masked IR and messed with silhouette detection gear. Couple that with their positions hidden in the buildings edging the town and the Primans were at a loss as to where their enemies were. It wasn't as good as the Confeds having their powered armor back, but it was better than nothing.

Azul scanned the buildings with his long range scanners and gave a frustrated sigh. His gear could detect some of the signatures that must be the Confed soldiers, but there were obviously a lot more in that city than he could see. Since their Assault Ship had been destroyed, he couldn't conduct a head count. He knew the ships could carry around 5000 troops, but he had no idea how many were on the surface. At least they didn't have a lot of technology to draw on.

"Send in the scouts," he said to the officer next to him. Maybe the Confeds would just let him have the minerals in the hopes that he'd leave them alone afterwards. False hope, yes, but it would make his life so much easier if they were wishful thinkers.

A pair of scout fighters rose from the grassy plain behind him. They were atmospheric craft, streamlined and swoopy, with powerful lift thrusters so they could hover in place or land vertically. They flashed overhead, racing to the mine entrance and the storage buildings close by.

The pair circled the mine opposite each other, getting lower and lower each time they completed a circuit. Finally, they both settled into a hover just above the tops of the warehouses as they scanned for their quarry. They were sitting ducks to the hidden soldiers who popped out of windows and vehicles and opened fire with the majority of the functioning weapons that were on hand. One of Orjon's people had even found a surface-to-air missile among the working weaponry and let it fly from the tube on his shoulder.

The missile struck one of the scouts and it exploded right there, raining parts and flaming debris down in the parking lot. The other one peeled off as ribbons of holes were stitched in the sides by armor piercing rounds from a mass of HMR-12 assault rifles. It disappeared over the edge of town, trailing smoke and flames.

"Excellent work," Mithus said to Orjon as the wounded Priman ship flew overhead.

"They are really not going to like that," was all Orjon could say softly.

Azul was irate. These Confederation types were supposed to be such fierce warriors, and they were hiding in the city striking at his people from the shadows? It was time to end their pathetic little game.

"Southern Force, Northern Force, attack," he barked into his comm unit. Though not technically southern or northern since their direction of attack was from the east, one unit was attacking from the southeast and the other from the northeast. Both would advance until contact was achieved. Wherever the Confeds offered battle first, that unit would dig in and try to fix the Confeds in position with heavy fire. Meanwhile, the other unit would pivot and move through the city, attempting to approach the enemy's flank. Either way, the defenders would have to deal with Azul's forces attacking through two different axes through the city. Wherever one unit bogged down, the other unit would try to advance, and eventually the Confeds would have to choose one spot to defend. Then they'd either have to withdraw or get caught in a pincer; the mineral ore would be his and the enemy would be eliminated.

"Well," started Mithus neutrally, "they seem to have the basics of urban assault. Now we'll see if they're familiar with the finer points."

Captain Orjon smiled as he nodded at a soldier next to him. She dashed from the building to the strongpoints, alerting them to proceed according to the plan. "I just heard from the mine detachment. They need another fifteen minutes to dump the ore down the tunnels and rig the charges."

"Remember: lots of booby traps," Mithus reminded Orjon.

"Oh yes; they're having a lot of fun with those. And they're going old school. No electronic sensors, pressure pads, that sort of thing. If the Primans can disable electronics and detect damn near anything, we need to use simple things that a scan won't see. My people are rigging tripwires, mines, all kinds of great things."

The Primans advanced slowly to the edge of the city and both elements reached the first major streets at the same time. Their hovertanks were smaller than Confed's, which made them more agile but also less armored. Dismounted infantry accompanied them, marching along and scanning the buildings, ready to react.

Suddenly, the side of a building detonated, the explosion ripping into the enemy vehicles and troops. The Primans dispersed and started firing into the building that had exploded as well as the or

on each side. The tank traversed its turret and started firing heavy blasts through the torn up wall as well.

"First unit has made contact; they're already on the way out," Orjon replied.

Mithus nodded his approval. He hated having to fight this way, darting in the shadows, but if the Primans had to slow down and clear the blocks the old fashioned way, it would take hours to get through town. And the Confed forces didn't need to occupy every building; just enough to keep the Primans from putting together a pattern and adapting to the tactic.

As if in response, Mithus and Orjon both heard a noise above at the same time. It was another round of sonic booms, and they both looked down at their weapons in time to see their displays flicker and die out.

"Well damn," Orjon said in disgust. "Now what?"

Mithus dropped the useless Hammer rifle and pulled a knife with a blade as long as his forearm from a sheath on his back. "We do this the old fashioned way. I'll take a squad and start hitting their flanks. You get started with your end run to the southwest and head behind the mountains. I'll catch up."

Azul fumed. His offensive had bogged down. The Confeds were obviously not strong in number, since their ambushes were scattered randomly and infrequently. Still, it was slow going. Unwilling to commit all of his thousands of troops until he knew more about what to expect, he'd been forced to wait and see what the Confeds had in mind as far as their tactics went. Both of his forces were working their way through the city now, though most of his tanks were disabled, smoking wrecks left abandoned in the streets, and his reserves were on the edge of town just waiting to be committed to whichever force gained momentum. But his enemy had accomplished their goal. He'd heard a massive, muffled series of explosions; felt them through the deck plates of his command tank at the edge of the city. Then he saw the dust cloud rising over the mine and knew what this had all been about. The Confederation troops weren't trying to fight him to the death, just stall long enough to try and destroy the ore he'd come for.

In addition, they'd apparently decided to set the entire city on fire. He assumed it was to cover their withdrawal to the mines as well, since he hadn't heard any reports of fighting since the explosions. Still, the choking smoke completely obscured his view past the center of town, and the combination of smoke, flames and charred cinders were fouling even his advanced sensors. He knew they'd been moving to the mines, but as of now everything on the west side of the city was one large, distorted sensor blob.

He'd considered just ordering a charge to the mines, because even if they'd destroyed the entrance, given enough time his people would clear the tunnels and resume production. Then they'd have the reward of hunting down the Confed troops inside the dark caves they'd apparently chosen as their tombs. The problem was that he'd lost an entire squad to what appeared to be a single man. A survivor, uniform in tatters and smeared with blood, stumbled back to Azul's position with reports of a Confed leader with a gigantic knife hacking his way through Priman troops.

So Azul had regrouped and gone back to the doctrine: building by building, street by street. Approach, fire, grenade, clear, move on. It would take the rest of the day to make their way to the mines at this rate, but in the end he admitted that since the damage to the mines was already done, he didn't need to lose any more soldiers because he was rushing. Besides, once this chaos all died down the ships in orbit would start the search, and then these enemy soldiers would be his.

"They are fierce fighters," Captain Vol allowed as he and Representative Ravine stood in his cabin while they prepared to send off a briefing to the Council and the Commander. They'd obviously fallen short of their immediate goal of total destruction of the Confed force and retrieval of the ore, but in time they'd dig the ore out and flush the Confeds from wherever they were hiding.

"If only they weren't such an unruly lot," commented Ravine, "they might be worthy of being called our children. They inherited our fighting spirit, at the very least."

"Yes, apparently so much so that they've even declared war on each other," replied Vol with a grim smirk. "Why they'd let themselves fracture apart and attempt to wage a civil war on each other is beyond reason."

"It's working wonderfully for us though, wouldn't you say?"

Senator Zek Dennix, head of the Governing Committee and for all intents and purposes in control of the Confederation of Systems, didn't hear a word his aide was saying. They were sitting in the Senator's spacious office alone, all of their staff having been sent home for the night.

His chief aide, Enric Shae, was recounting something or other that had gone according to plan. Or maybe not according to plan; Dennix just didn't care at that moment. The last month had been a disaster. He'd never expected so many planets to secede from the Confederation, especially considering all the threats he'd made about what would happen to them.

The split had been fairly uniform; the core of the Confederation had stayed loyal to Dennix and his government, while the systems further out- closer to the galactic core, contested Talaran/Priman/Enkarran space, the border areas where the fighting was heaviest- had banded together in a new alliance. And the worst part was that a quarter of his military units had defected with them. It had been a fairly uncontentious event; senior officers had turned over command and left ships filled with loyalists, captains had given crew safe passage off vessels where the loyalties were the other way around. Sure, there had been a few skirmishes, soldiers arrested, but he didn't know if the civility was good or bad for his cause.

At the direction (more like *demand*) of the Primans, as relayed through Enric Shae, he'd even ordered actions designed to initiate hostilities. He'd sent a task force to retake a planet that had revolted, and that force had been met with an even larger force of defected Confederation ships. There had been a standoff, and, against standing orders, his loyalist forces had withdrawn, citing overwhelming enemy presence.

And so nothing happened. He'd relieved admirals and generals, put in people he'd thought were more pliable, but there seemed to be a systemic problem in the military in which they didn't want to fight, at least not against each other.

In fact, the only party seemingly happy with events was the Primans. Naturally.

And that led to this dismal turn of events. It was obvious to him by now that they'd gotten to Shae when he'd been in Priman space 'negotiating' the treaty he'd been forced to sign. Shae had come back with lots of positive things to say about how the Primans were going to make the galaxy right again, and that he and Zek would be a part of it. But they'd also made Shae his handler. With Tana Starr dead, they'd needed a new person to ride herd on the Senator and feed him orders. And now that it was open knowledge that Primans were capable of masquerading as Humans, Drisk, and others, they'd never get one of their own by his side again. That wouldn't be a problem, apparently, because Shae was cheerfully regurgitating every order he was given through the various clandestine sources he'd been shown. He'd picked Shae as his right hand because the man was ambitious enough to turn o

his former Confederation colleagues, but at this point he was also sure that Shae wanted his job as well. ~~He'd have to do something about that.~~

"Also," Shae continued as Dennix tried to catch up with the conversation, "the trap you approved on the Galactic Ore Company's facility went off well for the Primans." Shae shuffled a stack of secure data pads, trying to piece together the story from different sources.

"I didn't approve a trap," Dennix said gruffly. "Don't play with the semantics of what I was forced to do. They gave you a list, you gave it to me, I gave it to the military."

Shae just looked up over the top of the data pad he was reading and continued. "Of course. In any case, it went well for them, bad for us. We sent a Prowler in-system last night and it didn't see a single Confed ship, just a task force of about two dozen Priman cruisers circling the planet. We can assume they'll have the ore soon."

Dennix just brooded, and then fixed Shae with a glare. "A month of this truce as they call it, and we've lost almost as many ships as if we were openly fighting. Except now, they're hardly losing anything at all because the navy is walking into Priman traps."

"I think we both knew what their agenda was," Shae said softly. "We pull back, they pick apart our fringe worlds and wear down the navy. Eventually we've pulled back far enough that we're not a threat to them and then we're back on our own."

"Under their thumb, of course," Dennix spat. "And until they decide to alter the deal again."

"We were aware that was how this would ultimately end," said Shae reasonably. "And this civil war angle works perfectly, to be honest. The planets that are the biggest threat to them are the ones that revolt against the core systems. So, we don't have to defend them against the Primans. They take on all of the rebel planets, we don't have to take the blame. It looks even better for you. And the loyal military has orders to stay close and not get in the way out there. With any luck, this will be over before we know it."

Dennix pondered Shae's logic for a few seconds. He had no doubts that Shae had the ear of the Primans directly, and that if he thought Dennix was getting cold feet there might be unpleasant changes for the Senator in the works. If the Confederation was going to be absorbed by the Primans anyway, it might as well be with him in charge; it was time to move forward. "Ok then," Dennix started fresh. "In that case, we need to decide who we're backing in the mid-term elections." He grabbed a data pad and called up a list of names. "We help our friends stay in office, they back an extension of my Committee's term in charge."

Shae nodded happily and they got to work. The Senator was right about one thing in particular: the Primans would keep altering the arrangement until they were happy with the results, and it was more likely than not that the Senator was no longer part of their long term plans.

Commander First Rank Loren Stone was trying hard, and actually managing, to relax just a bit. Call it a 7% reduction, down off the 100% stress level he tended to keep himself at. The location deserved the most credit for the accomplishment, he had to admit.

He was sitting in a portable survival chair taken from the equipment locker of the Freedom class transport sitting on the hard sand close to the tree line. As for Loren, he and his chair were sitting in much softer sand, right at the water line where the gentle tide came hissing smoothly up towards him and his friends. Despite the sun and clear blue skies, the temperature was quite comfortable; he wasn't even sweating in his standard shipboard jumpsuit and boots thanks to the light salty breeze that brought in enough cool air to keep at bay the heat that was building farther inland.

He was surrounded by his friends and comrades from aboard Avenger; Captain Second Rank Corinne Sosus, CAG of all Avenger's fighters and skipper of the twelve-strong Intruder attack wing.

There were Commanders Merritt Elder and Web Exeter, Merritt being in command of the twelve ship Viper squadron flying the venerable Talon fighter. That bunch all had their boots off, bare feet in the cool sand to be found just under the top layer. Loren had issues with cleaning sand off of his feet, socks, boots, duffels, chair, etc, and wouldn't be joining them in that past-time, but he was happy they were enjoying themselves.

Others had come and gone from their circle over the past twenty months, and all would return again sooner or later, Loren was sure. But this group was their core, the people that made up the bunch he trusted his life with and who would help him end this war with the Primans. All that was missing was the small detail of exactly *how* they'd do it, but he knew it would happen. He had faith in them.

"So nice of the admiral to arrange a meet someplace civilized," Cory said lazily, enjoying the breeze from behind dark sunglasses and a wide brimmed sun hat.

"Of course," countered Web, ever the one to see the shifty side of things, "I find it very interesting he wouldn't give us the catalog number or coordinates of the place. Just asked us if we remembered the tranquil planet we staged over while looking for the Priman DNA virus a while back. Didn't even want Avenger in orbit."

Loren nodded knowingly. And that was exactly how Admiral Nodam Bak, secretly in charge of the most covert aspects of the war with the invading Primans, had wanted it. It made Loren think this was another of the man's off-the-books assignments, though these days he had just as much reason to keep information from his own government as the enemy.

Since the dubious truce that the Senator had announced was made policy, Confed's military had been on the defensive both at home and afar. The Primans were still chopping away at their numbers through ambushes and skirmishes, but the Confed navy was prohibited from seeking engagement or even probing disputed territory. Officially, it was so they didn't jeopardize their fragile truce by antagonizing the Primans. Unofficially, Loren and a handful of others suspected Senator Dennix had been compromised by the enemy and was somehow doing their bidding. His chief advisor had been a Priman agent, and under the influence of powerful truth drugs had described the procedure of how they gave orders for him to carry out; he belonged to the enemy. Proving it was going to be tough, though, especially since the entire government was infested with yes-men whom the senator had put in place in the weeks and months after his rise to power following the Primans' opening move of the war when the enemy had kidnapped the entire Confederation government.

The proof would have to be airtight, without any dispute. The testimony of the Priman agent wouldn't be available, as she'd committed suicide in confinement before any official statement could be taken.

And so, here they were. If they came forward with charges now, they'd be labeled traitors, rebels or Priman sympathizers, and run off in disgrace.

"Anybody up for joining the rebel systems yet?" Loren asked casually, though it was not by any means a light topic among the Confederation military. With almost a third of Confed's navy defected to the outlying systems, nothing could be taken for granted anymore.

"Are you going to get us a signing bonus or anything?" asked Merritt.

"Hey, I'll be honest; I had to think about it, if just for a little while. But while I hate the idea of taking orders from the senator, I'm enough of a pragmatist to know that the best way to take Confed back is from the inside. Once we get the government straightened out, everyone will be back and things will be normal again."

"Well," added Web, "as normal as they ever were."

Loren just pointed at Web in a gesture of agreement.

They all stared into the waves in silence after that, letting the soothing sound of the breakers lull

them into tranquility.

~~Loren's ears perked up at a faint noise. It was barely audible under the sound of the waves, but was different; a constant sound, maybe getting louder in fact, but not the back-and-forth of the waves either. It sounded like thrusters.~~

He sat forward in his chair, eyes squinting behind sunglasses as he searched the sky. He looked over and saw that everyone else must have noticed it, too. Pretty soon they were all standing, backs together, as they quartered the sky in search of the mystery noise.

Finally, it resolved into definite engine noise. It approached from the east, volume building as closed, then the noise was past them and fading. Loren never saw anything.

"What the hell?" he heard Cory ask.

"Roger that on the 'what the hell'," Merritt added.

"Stealth," Web stated simply. "A mag-field like Avenger is the only thing that makes sense."

Loren nodded again, but the thought was pretty far-fetched. Still, it was the only thing that fit.

Then the noise was back, only this time it built and seemed to stop moving, instead growing in intensity back by their transport. Loren had a split second of panic that this was another Priman ambush and their ride out of here was about to be destroyed, but it wasn't anything to fear.

Over their ship the air shimmered, so much so that his eyes watered. He blinked the tears away to see something that brought a smile to his face. The shimmer disappeared and in its place was a smooth, flat black Prowler. The advanced recon ships carried a crew of four, with engines above and below each of its short wings. It pivoted and changed orientation until it was pointing nose to nose with their much less graceful looking transport, then dropped gear legs and settled into the sand. As soon as it was on the ground, the engines spooled down and the side hatch dropped.

It was no surprise to Loren that Admiral Bak stepped down the stairs and onto the sand, smirk on his face.

"You like my ride?" he asked casually, sweeping an arm behind him at his ship.

"I didn't know anyone ever tried to put a mag-shield generator in something that small," Merritt admitted.

"That's an 'E' model Prowler," Web said approvingly. "You can tell by the missing hard points and bigger heat stacks by the engines. Weren't more than a handful built; they were intended as test beds for new technologies and were deployed without most of the sensor systems that they're usually crammed with. Lots of extra weight available; if they could built it small enough, that Prowler could definitely lift it."

Admiral Bak smiled approvingly. "Excellent identification, Commander."

"No markings that I see," Cory prodded.

"No," stated Bak. "This particular spaceframe is listed as destroyed after testing. Of course, you'll have noticed that the testing seems to have been successful. The problem was that the stealth systems worked for the most part, but there was no room left for the sensor systems that the Prowler needs to carry, so all we really created was an invisible transport that could move a quartet of lightly armed infantry. Frankly, I saw a need for a ship without a registry, IFF beacon, plus stealth systems, and managed to stash it away against a future need. I used it now because, as you have probably guessed, we need this meeting to not have ever officially taken place. The Primans can't know, and for the love of all that's holy our government can't know, either.

"Why don't you all come into the Prowler and we can talk?"

CHAPTER THREE

The five of them crammed into the rear compartment of the Prowler. Originally outfitted with sensor stations and equipment racks, this particular one was stripped down and instead sported a small table and a half dozen chairs on sliding mounts around it.

Once seated, Admiral Bak got right to it. "We have some big things in the works," he began, "and you are all going to be involved." He shifted in his seat and looked at Web. "First, Commander Exeter, you've been requested personally by the commander of a small team we're assembling." Web's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "We're going after the Dennix ring data that Velk told us about."

Now everyone looked shocked, and Bak held up his hands to keep them quiet while he continued. "First, some good news. The morning after you captured Ms. Starr and we discovered the fact that we had Priman moles disguising themselves with those biometric rings, we conducted a raid across the capitol of Delos. We arrested a half dozen of them and stashed them in dark, quiet holes across the Confederation. And no, of course it didn't make the news. Frankly, I expected to find more, but perhaps Starr was right when she said there weren't that many.

"In any case," he continued, "Velk offered, very grudgingly, to assist us in getting a hold of the recordings of Senator Dennix's activities since he started wearing his former Priman aide's ring."

"He'd turn on his own people?" asked Web.

"Not really turn, as we might consider it," Admiral Bak corrected. "Velk thinks his people are being corrupted by their time here and their subversive dealings with us and other powers they're trying to take over. He fears for the purity of his people, so he says, and he wants those in power to step down. The way it's been explained to me, based on what we know of the Priman command hierarchy, is that a Commander stays in place until he or she accomplishes their set goals. However, as was the case with Velk, the Commander can be replaced sooner if their Council feels the Commander has failed in their job. It's Velk's hope that the next Commander would be a more moderate voice, willing to work with bodies like the Confederation and Talarans instead of just trying to crush them and start over. He fears a repeat of the conflict a thousand years ago."

"Do you buy any of this?" asked Cory, doubtfully.

"To a degree, yes, I do actually," replied Bak. "We know they subtly altered and guided most of the species in this galactic arm all those millennia ago. They want to return to take their place here, but that's where their camps seem to diverge. Velk claims many would be happy to simply return and take a place in the galaxy, offering help and guidance in the hopes that they could help all of us advance as some sort of continuation of their experiment. The other half of them would be fine with simply annihilating us all and taking the galaxy by force. He feels there are enough moderates that he can broker a peaceful solution."

"But what could Velk possibly gain from helping us?" Loren finally asked. He had a slightly deeper understanding of the internal politics of the Priman people than the rest of his friends, and things had for the most part made sense until now. "I mean, it seems like this is a huge gain for us, but pretty risky for him."

"Well," said Bak, "our interests coincide. If we remove our compromised leaders, obviously it's great for the Confederation. It might make us much stronger against the Primans, which makes you wonder why Velk would help us. The flip side is that us doing well in the war weakens the position of

the Priman Commander. If his machinations don't pan out and his attack stalls or fails, it opens the door to his replacement or a change in strategy. Velk wants to sneak back into Priman space at some point to try and rally support for more moderate dealings with us and the rest of the galaxy."

"So he wants his own people to fail," said Web with a doubtful look in his eyes. "I still don't buy it."

"Short version, then," said Admiral Bak. "Expose Senator Dennix and remove our corrupted leaders. Unify the Confederation once again and end this ridiculous civil war. Weaken the Priman Commander and help Velk pave the way to new leadership that is more receptive to a brokered solution to this war. And to be honest, we get everything we need out of that bargain regardless of how it works out for Velk. Maybe he gets back and manages to find a way to get the next Commander put in place and it turns out he's been a man of his word; the Primans, under new management, turn out to be more receptive to coexistence now that they've seen what their little science experiments have turned out to be. But worst case, Velk dies. We lose nothing. Win-win for Confed, right there. So, the mission's on. Web, you'll be part of a covert team going to Callidor to attempt to retrieve the ring data on the senator."

"Callidor?" Web asked. "You mean the heavily fortified planet that's the command center for the entire Priman invasion?"

"You got it," said Bak with a grim smile. "Velk will give us some data and emissions profiles that can identify the purpose of a particular building. Find the building that matches that profile, and you've found a place that should have access to the ring data. We thought about sending you to another Keeper facility in that ship you stole, but Velk surmised and we've confirmed that the locations we knew about have all been abandoned or moved since your little escapade- you remember the time where you ransacked one of those secret facilities and kidnapped Velk and stole the DNA virus data?"

"Yes," Loren said with a smile. "I remember it fondly. My only regret is that we didn't get to blow up more of the place."

"Fondly?" asked Cory in shock. "That's the place where you blew out a compartment into vacuum and almost died, if I remember correctly."

"Hey, you were all there to save me," he said reasonably.

"And now the second operation," said Bak, more gravely this time. Loren's curiosity was piqued. "Loren, I'm giving you orders to take back to Captain Elco for Avenger. At the request of Senator Dennix himself, Avenger is to conduct a diplomatic operation, calling on several friendly powers throughout the galactic core area. You're to go to these places, establish contact and give them a briefing on the current situation, then ask if they're interested in providing any kind of support whatsoever. Remind them that the Primans have already broken through our little spiral arm into the core and beyond and are spreading like a contagion."

Nobody said anything for a few heartbeats.

"What?" Loren finally said shortly. He looked at Cory and Merritt for support. "You want us to go shake hands all over the galaxy while the Primans are taking over bit by bit here at home?"

Bak looked at Loren impassively, and Loren couldn't tell what the man was getting at.

"You'd prefer this mission had more meaning than that?" Bak asked conversationally.

"Yes," Loren replied immediately.

"Ok, then," Bak replied with a smile. He spun his chair and tapped the wall monitor, bringing it to life. It showed an oblique map of most of the galaxy, with big splotches of color highlighting Confed, Priman, and other major territories clear to the other side of the galactic core. There were a handful of yellow waypoints scattered throughout the arms and core. Admiral Bak tapped one and it became centered in flashing brackets, mission information now scrolling up the right side of the

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