

THE
BLACKHEART

by Thom Bedford



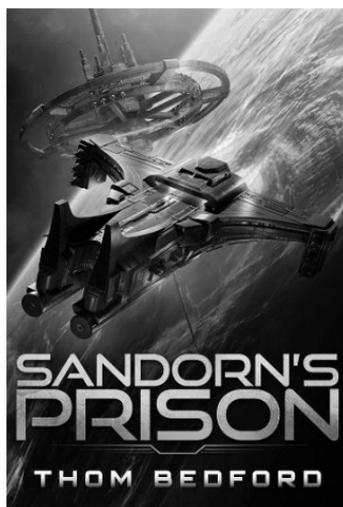
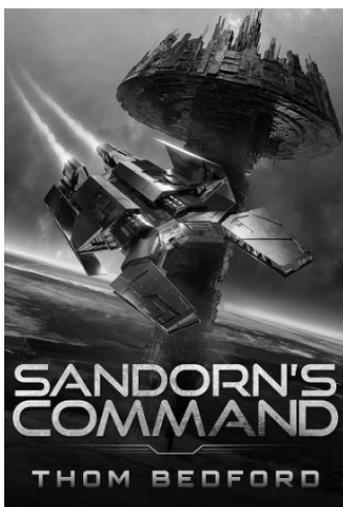
THE
BLACKHEART

A SPACE OPERA NOVELLA

THOM BEDFORD

ALSO BY THOM BEDFORD

Sandorn's Allegiance Series



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THE BLACKHEART by Thom Bedford

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CHAPTER ONE

EXETER STATION

“War’s coming.”

Four sky-bridges reached out from Exeter Station to meet the CSAN Blackheart as she came to a relative stop several meters away from the station’s docking ring. A muted clang and gentle jolt emanated from the airlocks as hard seals formed at each connection.

Captain Felysta Sandorn gazed out of the main viewscreen of the Blackheart’s bridge onto the various warships in local space. *“You don’t pull a strike wing back after only a fifth of its deployment period, unless there’s something big on the horizon.”* She contemplated, pondering politics while her crew brought them into dock.

The perry-class cruiser was large enough to maintain its own artificial gravity while docked, saving the crew from that uncomfortable sinking feeling when two separate arti-grav fields merge.

“All hands. Three days’ shore leave, departing at oh-nine-hundred on the third of the month. This recall is unexpected, so I want vigilance and full readiness at all times. Sandorn out.” Felysta lifted her finger from the transmission control on the arm of the captain’s chair then addressed her bridge crew, “same goes for everyone here too. Close down your departments and take a few days’ RNR. Vasquez and Lewis, that means you two, too.”

The bridge crew tapped at their respective consoles a few more times, then shut them down. Requests for resupply, personnel reports, status reports.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Vasquez approached Felysta from helm control, datapad in-hand after he’d shut down his console. “Starboard thruster four is *still* misaligned. This’ll be the third time the *plasma-monkeys* tinker with it. Permission to oversee the inspection tomorrow?”

“Granted,” Felysta said, without reading the document Vasquez had ready for her. “But make sure you get some downtime. It could be a while till we’re next off-duty.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

Eventually, only Felysta and her XO—Commander Nicholas Jameson—remained on the bridge, running the final set of checks to sign the ship over to the station’s crew for a few days.

“Only two months on patrol this time,” Jameson started. “Still wondering why they brought us back so early.” He was a tall man with a stiff posture and a flat-top crew cut. His wrinkles aged him far beyond his forty years and painted a permanent look of annoyance on his face.

“You know why, Commander.” Felysta looked at him knowingly. “Fleet HQ doesn’t want to get caught with their pants down.” The captain was above average height with a muscular build. Her face was stern with angular features, framed by straight dark hair and bangs. Both of their uniforms were pressed to perfection with crisp creases, looking brand new every day.

“Aye. Just seems a waste of time. We could’ve stayed out on the fringe for another ten months easy,” the commander closed his datapad and attached it to his belt, moving towards the door. “Seems like micromanagement on another level to me; HQ being officious shits,” he folded his arms and leaned up against the doorjamb.

Felysta hummed monotonously in

acknowledgment—but not agreement—as she finished up on her own terminal. “I like a well-organized, well-prepared navy. And this is their way of making sure we’re ready for whatever happens. What’s the alternative? All our captains get full autonomy to do as they please? We decide to continue patrolling out in the fringe, then we need to resupply just as a war breaks out?”

“Not full autonomy, no. I just mean... You don’t reload your sidearm after a single shot.”

The captain left her chair for the last time today and walked toward the exit. “This ship isn’t just a gun, Nicholas,” she rarely addressed her XO by his first name, only where she saw a teaching moment, and never with another officer in earshot. “It needs more than a simple oil change every six months. It’s an intricate ecosystem of machinery and people, both of which need to be nurtured. Remember the human factor.”

Here’s where the two officers differed in philosophy; Felysta’s holistic view and understanding of all aspects of the military, versus Jameson’s more focused view of the navy as a war machine. Though this disagreement worked well in their favor as a commanding team.

“Besides,” Felysta continued, “the Alliance needs sharp ships and crews now more than ever. Between the low recruitment rates for the past decade, the leadership reforms, and war on the horizon. If fleet HQ calls us back to resupply after two months, I trust they have a reason for that.” Felysta tilted her head, seeing through Jameson’s incredulous nod. “Come on, I want a beer that hasn’t been through the ship’s recycler eight times.”

They left the bridge and walked along various corridors together until they reached one of the cruiser’s airlocks,

leading across a sky-bridge to the station. They stepped through onto the docking ring concourse. Most people savored their first breath of fresher station-air over recycled ship-air; Jameson was no exception, taking a deep breath in. Roomier corridors and more frequent atmospheric recycling characterized the station. It was like the difference between living in a city and visiting the country, even though both of the former were essentially giant tin cans floating through space. Felysta preferred ship-air, though, with its metallic scent.

“Any plans for—”

A tremendous boom engulfed the air around them as an explosion erupted less than twenty meters away, causing a violent quake through the station, knocking countless people from their feet. Felysta and Jameson managed to steady themselves on the adjacent bulkhead, years of turbulence experience coming in handy.

Three maintenance staff were hurled across the deck away from the outer hull at speed, their bodies slamming against the interior wall with a crunch, then promptly sucked back out into the vacuum of space in the two seconds it took for an emergency atmospheric forcefield to erect itself across the breach. Somewhere between the explosion itself, the high-velocity impact against the opposing wall, the sudden decompression, and now the emptiness of space, all three engineers' lives were forfeit.

A loud twang and fizz accented the raising of the forcefield, and was quickly supplemented by the gush of fire suppression systems stoking the minimal flames between the two bulkheads the engineers had been working on. Deck lighting momentarily flickered, but another few seconds later, emergency lights came on and

drew a trail away from the area like a runway.

'Hull breach detected, please vacate the area,' an automated message played on the Tannoy, repeating itself intermittently between the sound of a siren.

Felysta instinctively ran towards the breach, assessing the situation as she moved, closely followed by Jameson. The deck was littered with several engineers and civilians in varying states of distress. One man lost half an arm and had blood spraying out from his elbow, forming a pool on the floor.

“Commander, tourniquet that,” Felysta threw her jacket over to Jameson before pulling out her datapad and tapping it against the closest wall-terminal. “Med-team to my location ASAP,” she spoke into the device with a few taps, “four wounded, one critical.”

Jameson slid on his knees towards the critically wounded engineer and tied Felysta’s jacket tightly on the man’s upper-arm. The four metallic red chevrons on the engineer’s uniform informed them of his rank—a chief petty officer.

“Chief,” Jameson shouted.

The engineer didn’t hear him. Tinnitus currently reigned supreme over every other one of his senses.

“What happened? Chief, can you hear me?”

It was useless. The wounded man couldn’t even see straight enough to read lips. As he turned his head to get a reading of what had happened, a spurt of blood erupted from his ear.

“Get Jones,” he said finally, in a strained voice. “L.T. Gryff Jones”.



Felysta controlled the situation, directing Alliance officers to either maintain a perimeter or perform what first aid they could on the injured engineers. The chief among them had perked up just enough to feel the excruciating pain throbbing throughout his entire body, but not enough to explain what happened. He writhed, groaned, and grimaced, holding his remaining hand against his head, alternating between stretching his fingers wide and clenching his fist tight.

“No one touch a damn thing,” Jones shouted as he jogged towards the accident site. He’d arrived within five minutes, which was an impressive feat considering the size of the station. *“Move away from the bulkheads.”* He came to a halt and caught his breath.

By this point, several dozen civilians were crowding the area, only kept at a short distance by a couple of security officers.

“Help’s coming, chief. Hold on,” Jameson reiterated, still kneeling next to the man, putting all the pressure he could against the stub where his arm should have been.

“What’s going on here?” barked Jones. *“You two, stand back from my engineering team,”* he gestured towards Felysta and Jameson. Ignorant of their ranks, he came across as pompous and unnecessarily aggressive—verging on territorial.

Felysta took a snap look at the officer’s rank—Lieutenant—and bit right back at him. *“I’m in charge here, Lieutenant. Stand down before I put you down,”* she held her hand out, instructing him to stop

moving. Her own rank was hidden from the Lieutenant, tied around the arm of the dying chief as a tourniquet. “Are you a medic? Doctor? Nurse?” her gaze burned through his own as she dressed him down.

“I am the XO of this station. Lieutenant Jones,” he said defiantly. “Move away from my crew.”

“I’m Captain Sandorn, and I don’t give a fuck who you are. Get me a goddamn medical team. This man needs immediate medical attention or he’ll die,” she signaled to the chief.

Insubordination, inflated ego, and ignorance. Three qualities Felysta hated in an officer, and she saw all of them on display in Jones. Trying to wrest control of a stable situation while ignoring a critically wounded officer and offering nothing of value.

“Captain,” Jameson called up from the floor.

Felysta immediately redirected her attention to her own XO and his patient, whose complexion had lightened several shades.

Jones’ attention was also pulled towards Jameson and the chief. “Fuck, what happened?” he looked up to the bulkhead where the temporary force field was still in-place, looking out onto the space beyond.

“I’m losing him, Captain,” Jameson spoke softly.

Eight medical staff sprinted around the corner at that same moment, directing everyone to make a path. Two of them ran directly to Jameson and the chief petty officer, opening a pair of medkits as they kneeled into position. One paramedic pulled out a diagnostic strip, tore off the adhesive backing, and slapped it onto the engineer’s forehead, much like a migraine patch.

“Pulse twenty-four, diastolic BP twenty-seven,” she lifted an eyelid to reveal a fully dilated pupil with no reaction to the light. “We gotta get this man to the hospital, fast.”

Another four paramedics arrived just after the first eight with a pair of anti-grav dollies.

Felysta and Jameson stepped back and watched as the patient was loaded onto one of the gurneys. Jameson now realized how much blood covered his clothing; his navy uniform looked black in the light.

“Permission to return to the ‘Heart and clean up,” he said, turning to his captain.

“Of course, Commander. Good job with the chief. If he survives, that’s thanks to you.” She gave him a quick salute, then dismissed him, realizing then that she too had a few spatters of blood on her white undershirt and navy trousers. Her jacket now quickly on its way to the infirmary.

Jones momentarily followed the gurney, but on getting no answers from the chief turned back to the remaining injured engineers nearby who were being tended to by the rest of the medical team. No others were in a critical condition.

Felysta approached, noticing Jones speaking in hushed tones with one of them and suddenly stopping as the captain drew near. Now that the immediate danger had passed, Felysta could focus less on disaster management, and more on investigation.

“Any idea what caused the explosion?” she directed her question loudly to all four injured parties.

The engineers looked at each other, shaking their heads.

“Chief was working on the weapons heat-dissipation system with Addison, Rothwell, and Porter,” one engineer spoke up. “Then there was an explosion, and those three got vented.” He paused and looked toward the gaping hole in the hull for a moment before exclaiming; “rest their fucking souls.”

“I’ll pinpoint what happened, Captain,” Jones interrupted, his voice shaking from some combination of shock, nerves, and remorse. “We’ll all need to submit a report on this to Commander Anderton and Administrator Gray.”

“Agreed,” Felysta said, “debrief your engineers and let’s get those reports submitted ASAP.” Glancing at the blood on her hands again, “I’m going to clean up. I’ll leave this situation in your... hands.” She toyed with using the word *capable*, but opted not to.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jones responded, still recoiling slightly from the dressing down he’d taken prior.



Facilities and amenities aboard space stations were open all hours. Despite the current local time being midnight in the Exeter system, travelers, haulers, and military personnel alike rarely shared that same timezone. Some people stationside were waking up for breakfast while others were turning in for the night.

Felysta and her fleet mostly aligned to local time, resulting in many of them spreading across the various bars and socializing around the station’s amenities decks.

While most of the fleet dressed down into their civs, the

senior officers wore their uniforms even when not on duty. Phrases like *'duty never sleeps'* were never far from Felysta's mind in these situations.

Captaining a warship was a lonely job for anyone. The Blackheart and her crew held the utmost importance to Felysta—she'd die for them in a heartbeat—though she always maintained a stern and commanding presence among them. Some misconstrued this as cold or heartless, but the truth was quite the opposite. She cared more deeply for them than a ship's captain perhaps should. Her loyalty to her crew sometimes outweighed her allegiance to the Alliance, which occasionally led to conflict with more senior officers.

“You good, Vasquez?” She spoke at her datapad, knowing he was the only crewmember still hanging around the Blackheart at the time of the explosion.

“Aye, ma'am. Heart too. Station's damage didn't reach us,” Vasquez responded, his background betraying him as still being shipside despite the R&R directive. “I'll be stationside later on, too, don't worry.”

Felysta nodded, “stay safe, Lieutenant. Sandorn out.” She closed the datapad, grabbed a drink, and moved across the bar to a standing table.

Captain Zhōu stood opposite while the pair caught up over drinks. He was the commander of the Destemida—one of the weaver-class cruisers in the strike wing—and one of Felysta's closest friends, though they could rarely meet in-person because of their roles.

The conversation started with the usual various home-life updates, what Zhōu's daughter named their puppy, how Felysta hadn't sent her parents a message in nearly a year or heard from her brother in over four.

Felysta would be the first person to say that her crew were her true family in any case, though Zhōu would always encourage her to find someone to go home to.

“The Blackheart is the only home I need,” she’d say. And it was genuine. She had a stronger familial bond with her senior staff than to anyone of her blood.

After some time, the conversation naturally turned to politics, and the topic on the tip of everyone’s tongue in recent months: the legitimacy—nay, the existence—of the Free Planetary Union. Many politicians, including Hylar Sorr, the First Minister of the Alliance, referred to them as a myth, while news reports and articles often named them as *‘so-called’* to discredit them.

“Until the day we hail a ship and they identify as aligned with the Union, they remain entirely fictional to me,” Felysta said, garnering a strong nod of agreement from her fellow captain. “My XO still feels different, though. He’s adamant they’re a fully fledged government across several fringe systems.”

“Jameson? I always thought his head was screwed on tighter than that,” Zhōu quipped.

Felysta’s datapad chimed and vibrated with a priority message.

‘Captain Sandorn, please attend the station’s war room immediately. Administrator Gray.’

She fired off a quick acknowledgment and redirected her attention back to Zhōu, “looks like duty’s calling. If I don’t see you before tomorrow, fly safe.”

“You too, Sandorn,” Zhōu saluted.

DECLARATION OF WAR

TOP SECRET

Combined System Alliance

Distribution: Senior Naval Officers, Station Commanders, and Fleet Commanders ONLY

CLASSIFIED COMMUNICATION

2815-09-02 [*Second of September, twenty-eight fifteen, Earth date*]

A declaration of war is expected to be made within the next twenty-four hours. Fleet intelligence expects an assault on Alliance assets imminently.

This is not a drill.

Ensure full fleet readiness immediately. Station commanders to prioritize the maintenance, refueling and restocking of any military assets over civilian assets.

Further orders to follow.

Fly safe.

From the office of Fleet Admiral Orenn Knoll.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EDGE OF WAR

Felysta read the message as she walked across the amenities deck towards the station's central elevator shafts. "*War's coming,*" she'd been saying for months now, "*and now it's finally here.*" A shot of adrenaline ran through her veins, surfacing her senses of pride, protectiveness, and preparedness. It wasn't an excitement to fight or see action, more so a strong feeling of readiness; this is the moment she and her crew had been built for. Her fleet was mostly in orbit around the station, with only the Blackheart still docked undergoing a routine service.

Commander Anderton's reputation preceded her as one of the best station commanders in the region, and there was no doubt she was already prioritizing the Blackheart to get underway as soon as possible.

Reaching the elevators, Felysta boarded the car and rode it up to central. The passenger demographics shifted towards the military as they reached the upper decks. These areas were more restricted. Disembarking, Felysta walked the corridors to the war room. The security up here was tighter than the rest of the station, but considering they were on the brink of a galactic war, she'd expected a bit more in the way of standing sentinels. The Exeter system's location on the edge of Alliance territory made its strategic importance undeniable.

Scanning her datapad at the access point, she entered the war room and approached the main stage at the front, glancing up at the rows of desks assembled like a lecture

theater as she did so. Administrator Gray was standing in front of the information desk, manipulating various controls, raising his head as he noticed the captain approaching him. As he did so, the large holographic representation of the station above the information table dimmed automatically, the station's AI understanding a conversation was taking place imminently.

“Captain Sandorn, I presume?” He was olive-skinned with white hair, wearing a blue shirt. Station administrators were civilians, so he wore no uniform, but was still well-presented.

“Administrator Gray, it's good to meet you,” Felysta saluted. “I was hoping to meet Commander Anderton as well.”

“The commander is unfortunately unavailable tonight, however, she's granted me the authority to act in her stead.” The older man spoke, but continued tapping on the information table for a few seconds before finally looking up. When he did, a smile widened across his face, and he was finally ready to greet Felysta. “Welcome to the war room, captain. Thank you for responding to my summons so quickly.” He directed his attention to the side momentarily, “and another warm welcome to yourself, commander.”

Jameson hopped up the steps to stand alongside his captain, greeting the pair with a salute.

“Commander Anderton wanted me to brief you both on our situation stationside,” Gray continued. “Privacy,” he commanded, tapping the edge of the command table. A semi-transparent holographic field rose around the stage in a shade of pastel orange, and the area fell deafly silent. “This information is not to be shared. The explosion you

bore witness to earlier today was an act of sabotage by our own engineering team.”

The revelation painted a clear picture of shock across Jameson’s face, while Felysta masked her surprise more, simply frowning and tilting her head upwards.

“Lieutenant Jones—whom you’ve met, I believe—has confessed. He and several officers and engineers had been working to knock out the station’s defensive capabilities as well as half of the docking ring. Although they’d planned to do it without loss of life, one of their explosive charges detonated prematurely.”

The image of three engineers being vented during the explosion was still clear in Felysta and Jameson’s minds, not to mention the dismembered chief petty officer.

“We’ve interviewed dozens of station staff and officers extensively, and without any pressure, many of them have pledged allegiance to the Free Planetary Union.”

“The Union?” Felysta asked rhetorically. “Many say they’re a myth, administrator,” she looked at Jameson briefly, who she’d debated with extensively over the past few months. Their existence, their politics, their legitimacy, and their potency as a threat. “Is there any weight to their claims?” She still wasn’t wholly convinced they were an actual entity; every organized force she’d encountered had purported to be privateers. Never once had an adversary announced such loyalty.

“Nothing official, no,” Gray responded. “I was a skeptic myself, too. Until today.” He tapped the control panel, bringing several infographs relating to the station’s demographics onto the screen between the trio. “Commander Anderton has taken the unprecedented precaution to restrict access to a large portion of her staff.

We're missing several hundred officers and other personnel right now."

Suddenly, the understaffed security function made sense to Felysta, though she pondered the legalities of such a move. "That doesn't seem right to me."

Gray raised his palms in a calming manner, "these officers aren't imprisoned. Many have simply had some security access temporarily revoked. At most, some have been confined to quarters for up to twenty-five hours." Twenty-five hours being the day-night cycle of Exeter III, the most populated planet, and that which the station orbited. "We'd like to request some officers from the fleet be temporarily reassigned stationside in order to keep Exeter fully operational, and secure in case of any further internal issues, or any potential hostile activity in system."

Felysta nodded along. It wasn't an unreasonable request. Especially considering her fleet's recent reinforcement and its operation above optimal capacity. She was sympathetic to Anderton and Gray's situation.

"Understood. I'll coordinate with the ship commanders in our fleet. We should be able to spare two hundred total, across all our ships." She turned to Jameson, echoing her phrasing from earlier in the day, "Commander, the human factor we discussed, I trust you to organize a loan of twenty-five officers from the Blackheart." It was a more than a fair distribution of work—she'd be discussing issues with twenty-four other commanding officers while Jameson pulled a couple-dozen names from a hat.

"Aye, ma'am, I've already got a few names in mind."

"None of my bridge crew."

"Got it," Jameson nodded.

“Mister Gray, thank you,” Felysta garnered a nod from the administrator, too. “Will there be anything else?”

“No, just...” he paused and gazed out of the orange holographic field momentarily, looking to the station staff and fleet officers working away on their respective terminals. “Watch your backs.”

The two officers gave a nod and salute, then left the privacy bubble and stage.



“Emergency broadcast: All navy personnel requested to return to their ships immediately, all navy ships will depart at oh-nine-hundred. This is not a drill.”

The broadcast came loud and clear through every room across Exeter Station, waking every resting soul aboard.

Felysta reached to the bedside table and grabbed her datapad. ‘05:53’ local time. Her work with the other commanding officers hadn’t given her much of a sleep. She threw the cover back and swung her legs out of the bed, tapping her datapad to accelerate the room’s night-day cycle to morning.

The room’s viewport looking out to the underside of Exeter Station’s docking ring slowly reduced its opacity and raised the lighting level of the room. Exeter’s star was rising behind the planet, illuminating half of the world far below in a beautiful blue-green crescent. Sound dampeners in the room lowered and switched themselves off, replacing absolute silence with the gentle hum of the station underfoot.

Felysta felt a warm hand on her back as she rubbed her

eyes awake.

“Morning, Captain,” a breathy voice spoke behind her enticingly. “Duty calls, I guess?”

The sensation and question reminded Felysta of the company she’d chosen to bring back to her room from the bar late this morning; she looked over her shoulder. A young woman in her early-twenties with dyed blue hair. A beautifully ornate orange and blue bird adorned her upper chest, spreading its wings until their tips reached her shoulders, and whose long tail stretched down to wrap around her navel. Already out from under the covers, she kneeled on the bed behind the captain, smiling and gazing amorously. Many beautifully intricate tattoos decorated her fit, naked body.

“I’d love to,” Felysta smiled, “but I need to get back to my ship.” She reached out to trace the feathers of the tattoo down between the girl’s breasts onto her stomach. She leaned in for a deep kiss before pulling away and walking to the bathroom.

Returning to the room and ruffling her hair in a towel, her companion for the night was just finishing getting dressed on the edge of the bed herself. “Last night was fun,” she beamed at her lover as she stood to her feet. “Call me up again next time you’re stationside, okay?”

“You can count on it.” They shared another passionate kiss.

The woman hit the door control and stepped into the corridor. “Phoenix,” she said, gesturing at the vivid tattoo reaching out from the top of her spaghetti-strap tank top, “don’t forget!” She spun around with a flourish and walked away, leaving Felysta with a wry smile on her face.

Felysta sat down wrapped in a towel, her various effects

laid out on the desk in front of her. Her grading insignia was a dark blue metallic rectangle with four silver chevrons reaching upwards to a three-quarter circle at the top. This, along with her name tag—again in blue and silver—would adorn the left breast of her jacket. A flag of the Alliance garnished the right, again dark blue and silver, a pair of hands holding up a single chevron with a three-quarter circle atop.

Next to these lay her datapad and sidearm. The datapad was a versatile and durable folding computer used by everyone across the galaxy no matter their trade, from communications to commodities, from orders to observations. Eight hundred years ago every human carried a smart phone with them, this was the natural evolution.

She picked up the datapad and drafted a message to her parents. Last night's conversation with Captain Zhōu reminded her it'd been too long, leaving a pang of guilt that would only abate through action, particularly now that war was breaking out. To her father, a factual update, three deployments since they last spoke, all successful, then the start of a new one today. To her mother, a slightly more emotional update, mentioning she was happy and healthy. She bonded more with her father through their military careers, but wasn't particularly close with either, and was especially distant from her younger brother—Tanic. She didn't message him.

The guilt diminished, but didn't disappear completely. There was always the chance that this could be the last message she'd send them.

Dressing in her freshly washed and pressed uniform, she affixed all the extras, finally picking up her sidearm. This

one was an oddity amongst her belongings, being the only item that wasn't standard issue. Navy-supplied sidearms came with biometric sensors locked to their owner, but Felysta's was an heirloom passed down from her father and grandmother before that. Few exceptions were made for personal firearms, only strong career officers with a generational history of military service were granted such privileges.

A final glance around the temporary quarters, and she left to return to the Blackheart.

Marching along the outer-most corridor of the docking ring, looking out into space as she passed each viewport, she noticed a giant beluga-class freighter. The same class of ship her younger brother owned. A completely irrational wave of irritation ran through her body as she recalled him turning his back on the navy to follow a career in freight. She didn't get the same feeling of guilt about not contacting him as she felt for their parents, despite them not having spoken in over four years.

He was a disappointment in every way. To her, at least. A promising officer, turning his back on service shortly after being awarded a medal of valor and advancing to commander. Felysta hadn't been awarded such a medal herself, but this wasn't jealousy. Maybe if he'd stayed in the fleet, she'd feel a twinge of envy, but no. Just disappointment and irrational—no, *rational*—annoyance.

Not far from the Blackheart, a dozen engineers worked to repair damage from the recent sabotage. They'd have station services back up and running in no time.

She tapped her datapad to open the airlock.



Perry-class cruisers were the most fierce of their grade across the entire fleet, and the Blackheart was no exception. She sported a four-hundred meter-long hexagonal hull that gently increased in thickness from fore to aft, with a mix of energy and conventional weapon hardpoints laden along her angled flanks. Up front, six large torpedo launchers complemented the hexagonal cross-section of the ship, recessed slightly behind the six eaves. Here, the hull measured just eighty-by-forty meters, tapering up to be one-sixty by eighty in the aft. Attached to the aft of the long primary hexagonal hull, a secondary hexagonal hull housed propulsion, main engineering, and a shuttlebay.

Felysta stepped through the airlock onto the Blackheart, where Commander Jameson was waiting inside to greet her.

“Captain,” he threw up a stiff salute and stood at attention.

“Commander, report,” Felysta responded with a salute of her own.

“Fleet HQ has sent orders,” Jameson held out his datapad for Felysta to tap, “we’re to move to BK-tack-fifteen-eighty-two, the Wan-Nakhon system. There’s a small pirate fleet there that we’ve been ordered to eliminate.”

Felysta tapped her datapad to Jameson’s, then proceeded along the corridor as she read through the document. “Personnel transfers completed?”

“Aye, captain, we’re twenty-five officers lighter from the

junior staff. I'll send the list across for your review," he tapped his datapad a few more times.

They boarded the elevator and made their way to the Blackheart's bridge. At every station, personnel readied themselves for departure from Exeter Station and the system. The Blackheart was her absolute pride and joy, and the crew her true chosen family.

"Captain on the bridge," Jameson announced, stepping through the doorway moments before his captain.

Felysta walked to the captain's chair in the center of the room, observing the various salutes from her bridge crew. "Stand easy," she said after a moment while taking her seat. "Mission ops, what's our fleet comp?"

"Twenty-five ships total, including ourselves. Three weaver-class cruisers, the Destemida, Valente, and Primaria," a voice announced from the rear of the bridge. "Six destroyers and fifteen frigates, standard strike wing composition."

Felysta much preferred the versatility and maneuverability of a lighter fleet. No battlecruisers or battleships, let alone capital ships to slow her down. In the twenty-third century—half a millennium ago—behemoths and titans flooded space, slugging it out against the blackness of space, before propulsion technology enabled smaller and smaller vessels to travel faster than light. The idea of ordering a battleship's crew to sit and point their ship in one direction for minutes at a time was her idea of purgatory.

"Great. Lieutenant Vasquez, pull us away from the station, set a fleet formation, standard warp pattern, align us to adhere to Wan-Nakhon." She addressed her helm officer, briefly tapping the controls on her chair to put the

local grid up on-screen. There were still dozens of civilian ships waiting two-kilometers from the station, waiting to dock, following the issues on the docking ring. “Comms, open a channel to the fleet.” The communications officer, Lieutenant Lewis, gave her a nod.

She took a quick look at the clock on the main viewscreen before broadcasting. *“Exeter strike wing epsilon, this is Captain Sandorn of the CSAN Blackheart. We’ll be departing Exeter in seven minutes. Our destination is the Wan-Nakhon system, where we’ve been tasked with clearing out a pirate fleet. Form up behind the Blackheart, and notify when ready. Sandorn out.”* She tapped the console built into her chair, closing the transmission.

The twenty-five ships gracefully moved around the station, positioning themselves in free space, and aligning towards a distant star. As the fleet-warp command was given, every ship disappeared from the local grid simultaneously, accelerating to nine-point-six aups—AU per second—the maximum speed of the slowest ship in the formation. In this fleet, those were the weaver-class cruisers.

External cameras transmitted the transition to faster-than-light travel directly to the main viewscreen on the bridge of each ship, which was buried deep within the ships’ cores, giving the illusion of it being the window of a cockpit. Dull gray streaks drew themselves across the screen, and space dust occasionally illuminated the warp differential force field in effervescent blue sparks that quickly dissipated, like raindrops on a windshield—though were Felysta to see raindrops on a windshield, she’d likely reverse the analogy.

Wan-Nakhon was just three days’ travel at this speed,

The Blackheart

not giving the crew much time to drill, particularly those teams who were down an officer or two from the recent transfer. Under Felysta's command, though, the crew would be ready for whatever awaited them in the coming days.

CHAPTER THREE

WAN-NAKHON

“Alright, cap, let’s work that right. Jab, uppercut, hook.” Vazquez changed his stance, holding up his right pad to head-height. He was a boxer in his youth, joining the fleet and training up to be a competent and trusted Helmsman, now using his former training to coach other crewmates.

Felysta adjusted her own posture and started reaching out, connecting her glove to the pad. *‘Thum, thum, thum,’* the rhythm began, three hits while she controlled her breathing.

“Good, cap. Again.”

‘Thum, thum, thum,’ she continued. It was late into the day and she was nearing the end of her workout. Tomorrow morning they’d arrive in Wan-Nakhon, so she savored this last full workout she might fit in for the next few days. *‘Thum, thum, thum.’*

“Careful, watch that footwork. Your back leg’s pulling out on the hook.”

‘Thum, thum, thum.’ Felysta blew sweat from her lips as she exhaled, counting as she lunged with a *‘one, two, three,’* then resting with a *‘four, five, six.’*

“Good, that’s it.”

Jameson approached from the back of the gym to stand at the edge of the ring watching for several minutes, watching his captain work up a sweat, having just done the same in his own routine. “Looking for a sparring partner?” he asked.

Felysta stepped back and turned to face Jameson, prompting Vazquez to lower his pads. She caught her breath for a second before speaking, “alright, get your gloves on, let’s see if you do any better than last time.” She turned to address Vasquez again, “thanks, técnico,” tapping his shoulder with her glove and giving him a nod.

Vasquez stepped out through the ropes and helped Jameson into a pair of gloves, eventually providing both parties with their mouth guards, then the three of them gathered back into the ring with Vasquez refereeing. Felysta and Jameson often sparred together, being fairly evenly matched, two of the best fighters on the Blackheart. “Alright, touch gloves and let’s go.”

“Ready for some action tomorrow?” Jameson asked, mouth-guard in-cheek.

“Tomorrow could bring all of nothing, but we’ll be ready for whatever’s thrown our way.”

They touched gloves, rolled their jaws to replace their guards, and began sparring.

Jameson was defensive, keeping his gloves high while he watched his opponent circle him.

Felysta threw the first punch. A solid right-hook, but deflected. Jameson immediately responded with a right jab, but just a fraction of a second too slowly as Felysta pulled her arms back up in defense.

Several more exchanges took place before they broke.

“Never one to make the first move, are you?” Felysta asked, working speech into her breathing pattern.

“That’s why we make a good team, Captain. You act, I *react*,” Jameson developed his footwork, bobbing laterally. “I wait for you to occupy our enemies, then jump in when

they're at their weakest.”

They readied up again. This time it was a lot more even, though Felysta's punches had less of a snap than Jameson's.

“Getting tired, captain?”

“Only way you have a chance to win, commander, coming to me when I'm already fatigued,” she quipped.

Felysta doubled her resolve, this time waiting for her opponent to make the first move and find an advantage in it. She ducked Jameson's jab and responded with a strong uppercut, landing squarely on her opponent's jaw, pushing him back.

“Just one solid strike is all you need to win a fight, commander,” she said, stepping back towards the ropes panting. She gave Vasquez a nod, who walked over to help her off with her gloves. “Thanks for the spar, but that's it for me.”

Jameson nodded, waiting to be helped out of his own gloves. “Thought any more about the Union?”

“The *Free Planetary Union*?” She breathed deeply, untying her hand wraps as Vasquez moved over to the commander, brow raised incredulously. “Some massive galactic power bigger than the Alliance, being oppressed and exploited like some colonial-era settlement? If it existed like you said it does, we'd know a lot more about it. Especially in our position. A command-cruiser, bouncing between fringe systems, keeping the peace against pirates?”

“And small, warring factions,” Vasquez added, untying Jameson's gloves. “Always one colony against the next, never a *united* front,” he mocked the *'Union'* part of the

organization's moniker.

"Yes, that one," Jameson responded to Felysta, only acknowledging Vasquez with a cursory look. "You really think it's not even a possibility?" As soon as his gloves loosened, he shook them off onto the floor impertinently and started unwrapping his hands.

"The way you talk about them is very different to how they're portrayed by our admiralty and in the media. Nothing's impossible, commander. But improbable, sure," she rubbed her hands as they were finally freed. "Besides, there's a big difference between a simple ruse of war and perfidy. If the Union existed in this capacity, they'd need to declare themselves under inter-planetary law."

"And what if there were people out there being oppressed?"

"If there were an oppressed group of people in the galaxy, the Alliance would be there to help them. We're en route to Wan-Nakhon now on a report of a pirate fleet raiding cargo ships. It's our duty to protect those people. There are two groups we deal with out here: pirates and innocents, neither of which ever claimed to be part of a larger political power."

Vasquez added, "And if those civvies *were* oppressed, we'd be there fighting for their liberation."

The three officers stepped out of the ring, tidying up their respective equipment. "Thanks Vasquez," Felysta called out to her friend as he moved to leave.

"Pleasure, cap."

"What I'm saying, captain, is," Jameson continued, "what if it's true? Which side is right? Which is right?" He repeated himself.

They'd been back and forth with this so many times over the last year with varying levels of intensity. Whether it was real, the rumors, the facts. But Felysta was right, no one had ever identified themselves as aligned with such an entity to them on the field. If anyone *had* met a Union fleet, it would've been them.

"Morality," she announced. "The side that has true morality. The side that fights for humanity, that empowers people, and makes the galaxy a better place. And from where I'm standing, I see our Alliance helping to defend the freedom and lives of our colonists, *and* the colonies outside of our territory. That's the side I'm on—the side of humanity." And it was true. Her first priority was the protection of innocents, the fight for everything right. The Blackheart and her crew came in at a close second. She closed her locker door and moved to the exit. "If you can give me solid proof that the Alliance really *is* some oppressive empire like you suggest, tyrannically exploiting the galaxy, I'll rethink my position. Until then, I serve the Alliance and those who cannot fight for themselves. The same as you."

She tapped the door control and held her arm out for Jameson to step through. "We're bound to them by contract and honor. *'This we'll defend,'* remember?" She added, echoing a motto of a great historic military power.

"Aye," he stepped through the doorway. "I just hope we're on the right side of history."



The third moon of Wan-Nakhon's ninth planet was the

only habitable celestial object in the system, with water covering over ninety percent of its surface. Its single pangaeon continent always faced away from the planet it revolved around, creating the illusion of a twenty-four-hour rotational day despite the moon not rotating at all itself. Perpetual darkness shrouded the inward-facing hemisphere, only lighting up from the gas giant's reflection of the local star like a constant moonlight.

Nearly two-hundred million people populated the moon, Keasam. A small station hung in a static orbit above the small continent, from which the moon and planet resembled an eye. A lush dark-green pupil surrounded by a pale-blue iris, and orange sclera. Life planetside was a peaceful and prosperous one for the millions of souls below. A lack of any significant natural resource deposits in the system meant that the Alliance had little interest in investing here, so it was relatively tranquil.

Strike wing epsilon dropped out of warp. Light blossomed out in front of the ships in a shockwave that glistened as it expanded, like the shattering of an enormous pane of glass. Blue and silver microscopic particles dissipating into space. The tiniest shreds of space dust that had collected on the ships' warp differential shields, now free to find a new home for themselves, light years from where they started.

They flashed into existence around twenty kilometers from the station, the local space around which was markedly dead compared to Exeter.

"Signals. What're we looking at, Carter?" Felysta said as static space replaced the murky gray streaks of warp.

“Seventeen ships, excluding the fleet, ma’am. Plus Keasam orbital. No hostiles in the area,” Carter responded, tapping his control panel to bring up various details of the system on-screen.

A two-dimensional map appeared of the local grid, centered on the station, with varying icons dotted about. The usual combat overlay of chevrons and triangles was no use here; every ship out there was civilian in nature. Instead, less angular semicircles, circles, figures of eight, and waves depicted ships like shuttles, haulers, freighters, and atmospheric craft.

The only exception to this, though, was one square icon anchored next to the station.

Felysta stood from the captain’s chair and walked towards the main viewscreen. “Carter, push in on the docked object,” she said, gesturing towards the square icon.

He swiped the terminal in front of him, sending a magnified image of the ship and station up in front of everyone. The small station, a disc, measuring only around half-a-kilometer in diameter was dwarfed by a monstrous corvette carrier, over eight times that in length.

“Looks like a carrier, ma’am. Registration’s not showing up on the database, though.”

Jameson rose from his own chair and approached his captain to offer some advice. “Pioneers out on the fringe use these old things as colony ships sometimes.”

Felysta nodded, intrigued. “Run the serial number through decommissioned ships,” she directed her signals officer. “See if that gives us a match.”

The ensign manipulated his console again, searching as

instructed. “You’re right, here it is. Corvette Carrier Hermes, decommissioned and sold off to a civilian corp nearly a century ago.”

“Damn, that thing’s a relic,” Felysta added, staring at the colossal vessel on-screen.

The carrier’s trapezoid cross-section didn’t just dwarf the station, but everything else in the local grid. As they watched the icons fritter around on screen, it became apparent that the other ships weren’t really interacting with the station at all, but the carrier instead.

“Looks like she’s got a full complement of corvettes, too. Fifty roaches,” Carter added, turning to his captain. “Are those legal for civilians to own?”

“Only for a corp with a permit and a direct contract with the Alliance navy,” Felysta turned to Jameson. “Commander, can you take an action?”

“Aye, ma’am. I’ll check it out.” The XO nodded, pulling up his datapad to make a note.

After several moments of surveying the field, Felysta turned to her communications officer. “Lieutenant Lewis, hail the station.”

“Aye, ma’am.” The officer started tapping her console. Getting in touch with an orbital should only take a few seconds, but after a minute, Lewis continued to manipulate her controls, trying various different channels and frequencies.

“Is there a problem, Lieutenant?” Felysta asked.

“They’re not responding to any Alliance frequencies, ma’am. Attempting broader ranges.”

Several seconds later, the station’s administrator appeared on-screen alongside the local grid map and

various intelligence pertaining to the system.

“*Ab,*” the man cleared his throat. “*Welcome to Wan-Nakhon. I’m Administrator Tyrell of Keasam orbital. Your visit is not unexpected, though the, uh, pirate fleet is, uh, holed up in the asteroid belt starward.*” He seemed oddly nervous, almost as though he’d been caught in the act. What act he’d been caught in, though, was anyone’s guess.

“Administrator Tyrell, Captain Sandorn of the CSAN Blackheart. Glad to meet your acquaintance. We thought it best to head here first. Make sure everyone’s safe, then head to the belt and clear out the nest.”

“*Oh yes, captain, all safe-and-sound here.*”

Felysta narrowed her eyes. “Noticed you’ve got an old corvette carrier there, the Hermes, right?”

A young woman jumped into the shot. “*All legal, captain. The roaches are used as landing craft, modified for atmospheric flight. She’s used as a colony ship only, nothing military. We’ve got all the permits needed if you want to see.*”

This young woman’s interjection amplified any suspicions Felysta harbored previously. She wasn’t worried by any of this behavior; her fleet was configured for fighting smaller craft, the three weaver-class cruisers she had on her wing were fitted out with fast-tracking frigate-blasting turrets. She was confident she could run rings around the carrier if needed. But the behavior was still strange.

“Nothing to worry about. We’ll gladly review your documents,” she said, holding her hands up to ease the administrators’ tension. “When was the last time you saw any pirate activity? Do you have any fresh intel for us?”

“*Ab, pirates, yes,*” Tyrell fumbled. “*They’re based in the*

asteroid field. We've not seen them in..."

"Yesterday," the woman interrupted Tyrell's repeat response. *"They raided a small mining operation in the belts yesterday. One of our haulers was destroyed. I'll transfer you the intel we have on their fleet now."* She started tapping at a console in front of the pair.

Felysta turned to Lewis, who gave her a nod, then swiped the information up onto the main viewscreen. A short list of icons and ship counts appeared, along with a set of coordinates.

"Great, thank you both for your time," Felysta said. "We'll formulate a plan and keep you posted."

"Thank you, captain," Tyrell said. He paused for a few moments in another awkward silence, then closed the communication feed.

"What an odd man," Jameson said as the screen flicked back to displaying a view of the station, moon, and planet. He turned from the center of the bridge back to sit in the XO's chair just right of the captain's.

"Hmm," Felysta pondered, "signals, is there any way we can verify the intel we've been sent?"

Carter tapped at his console, scrolling through the data. "Yes ma'am, they've included the lost hauler's black box in their dump, their data in there can't be tampered with."

"Thank you, lieutenant," Felysta turned and took her seat in the captain's chair, turning to Jameson. "Take a good look at those permits, commander. I don't trust those civs, and I don't trust this system."

Jameson nodded, taking notes on his datapad.

"He didn't seem to be too concerned about the pirates. More surprised to hear from us," she mused.

The Blackheart

“A civilian gets a knock on their door from the cops, they automatically feel guilty and give off a suspicious vibe, whether they’re criminals or not.” Jameson responded. “He seemed very jittery to me. Mind you, not everything traded outside of core space is always legitimate, he could be dealing in contraband.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Felysta pulled out her own datapad to read through the intel summary and plan their excursion to the asteroid belt. Contraband trades didn’t bring them to Wan-Nakhon though, a pirate fleet did. “I want a report on those docs ASAP. If there’s something to be worried about, it’ll be tied up in that carrier and those permits.”

“Aye, ma’am.”



The fleet spent the next two days scouring the asteroid belt. Splitting into four groups, they started at the coordinates supplied by Keasam administrator Tyrell and worked their way outwards. Every ship remained on high alert. Minimal light drills were carried out, and officers worked out a sleeping pattern to keep every station fully operational.

But nothing happened.

On the third day, Tyrell contacted the Blackheart from Keasam orbital. His voice was shaky and nervous again as he spoke.

“Captain Blackheart—sorry, Sandorn. Captain Sandorn. We’ve had new intel from one of our mining vessels out in the asteroid belt. We have a new set of coordinates for you, just a couple of AU from

your current location.”

“Morning, administrator Tyrell. Any intel other than a simple set of coordinates?”

Tyrell looked to his left and right, hoping for an answer from a member of his team. *“No, captain. Just the coordinates. Transmitting them now.”*

A few seconds passed before Lewis gave her the nod.

“Thank you, administrator. Any news from fleet HQ?” The last few days had been quiet since they arrived in Wan-Nakhon. They’d received various standard galactic updates available through the Alliance network, but no specific communications directed to their fleet in particular.

Again, Tyrell glanced off screen, then responded with a *“no, captain. We’re still having trouble with our inter-solar comms array. If we get anything through, we’ll let you know immediately.”*

Before she could say any more, Tyrell cut the feed. Felysta looked quizzically at the screen for a moment. “Either this guy’s never spoken to a fleet officer before, or something else is going on.” She addressed her XO, “we need to go into this with all our senses. Something’s not right.”

Felysta gathered the fleet back into one cohesive unit and had Lieutenant Vasquez lay in a course. Within an hour, they were ready. No longer in search-mode but at full alert, expecting to engage a hostile fleet.

“Captain Sandorn to strike wing epsilon, ready up for fleet-maneuver. We’ll be traveling a short distance around the asteroid belt, after which it’s likely we’ll be engaging in combat with a small pirate fleet. Full action stations. The warp will take us two minutes. Fly safe.” She nodded to her communications

officer—Lieutenant Lewis—who closed the feed.

Within thirty seconds, the main viewscreen showed twenty-five ships with green ready icons alongside them.

“Take us in.”

The helmsman executed the command, and the ships accelerated as much as possible over the short distance, only to decelerate before reaching any significant speed.

Wan-Nakhon’s star barely moved in the ships’ external cameras, and two minutes later they were dropping out of warp. There was no shockwave on arrival. The fleet hadn’t moved far enough to accumulate the amount of space dust in the ships’ respective differential shielding to cause such a scene. They simply blinked into existence on-grid.

“Ensign Carter, what’re we looking at?”

“Scanning now, ma’am.” The signals officer tapped away at his console. Being near larger celestial bodies—planets and moons—was much easier than arriving next to an asteroid field. The first pass-through collated and categorized every object in local space, the second pass filtered those down to objects of interest. Basically, anything man-made. “Nothing, ma’am. Just ‘roids.”

Felysta leaned forward in her chair, staring at the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge, watching the large hulks of rock spin slowly. She turned to her XO and spoke to him in a hushed voice. “What the fuck is going on?”

Jameson loosened his grip on the arms of his chair and relaxed his shoulders post-warp, turning to face his captain. “Your guess is as good as mine, captain.”

After a minute of staring into empty space, Felysta spoke up again. “Damn it, I wish we had an agitator with

us.” Agitant-class cruisers had the most advanced sensor arrays of their size grade. The frustration of repeatedly scanning local grids and getting nothing back was beginning to irritate her.

“Alright, let’s split the fleet up again. This time, just two squadrons. Maintain combat formation at all times, full readiness when we’re in the field.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Jameson responded, tapping on his own console to send directions to the fleet.

But before anyone could enact a single order, Ensign Carter drew everyone’s attention forward.

“Captain, we’ve got company.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AMBUSH

The viewscreen at the head of the Blackheart's bridge glowed with various panels of information concerning local space. Most prominent was the link to an exterior-mounted camera at the ship's fore, looking out into space. Text in the top left corner listed system information, closest celestial objects, in-system coordinates, basic ship statistics like heading and speed, and other neutral information. A column to the right listed every non-celestial entity on the local grid, below which a basic, top-down, two-dimensional view of the grid presented these objects.

An icon accompanied each object, and for the other ships, they depicted the size or class of vessel. Small ships like corvettes and frigates appeared as basic chevrons, medium-sized destroyers and cruisers as concave kites, larger battlecruisers and battleships as triangles, then capital ships like corvette-carriers and heavy-battleships as squares.

The screen displayed only twenty-five objects before Carter pulled everyone's attention to it; fifteen chevrons, and ten concave kites, including the Blackheart herself. After the call, a further seven icons flashed into existence; a triangle, two kites, and four chevrons. A battleship with a limited escort.

The external camera picked up small blue flashes in the distance as the new ships appeared. This was more than Tyrell's intel suggested of a *'small pirate force'*, and each

moment that passed increased the risks to strike wing epsilon. The battleship was particularly unexpected. Privateers don't normally deal with such immobile equipment.

"What the fuck is this?" Felysta asked rhetorically, standing up and stepping towards the viewscreen. "Comms, hail them."

"Channel open, ma'am," Lewis called from her station.

"Unidentified squadron, this is Captain Sandorn of the CSAN Blackheart. Requesting identification and intentions." She grasped her hands behind her back, her standard power-stance.

No response.

The seven ships sat in silence.

"Ensign, push-in on those ships," Felysta ordered over Carter's shoulder, who obliged, zooming and focusing the camera in on the origin of the blue flash moments ago.

A candia-class battleship, two weaver-class cruisers, and four edics-class destroyers. A few key-presses by Carter and this information appeared on the overlay, along with their distances. The ships stayed relatively stationary, only adjusting their pitch and yaw to point towards the Alliance fleet.

'Menacing,' Felysta thought to herself semi-sarcastically, before turning to her communications officer.

"Split the fleet. Three squadrons. Destemida and Valente to lead two, Primaria with us. Equal division." She named each of her own three weaver-class cruisers in turn, the equal division would give each squadron a cruiser, two destroyers and five frigates; powerful little detachments in their own right.

"Aye, ma'am," Lewis tapped away on her console.

“Candia-class battleships wield forward-facing mass-drivers, tell our ships to stay clear of their line-of-fire,” Felysta added, re-reading the viewscreen listings. She took a moment to watch the ships floating on the viewscreen. They weren’t moving, just sitting, waiting, as if for some sort of signal. She moved back to her chair and pressed a button on the arm. *“Unidentified fleet, you have one minute to respond before we classify you as privateers and destroy you.”*

The Blackheart’s artificial intelligence listened to Felysta give the ultimatum and added a countdown timer to the bottom-left corner of the viewscreen.

Friendly icons on the top-down grid view split up and began merging into separate formations as ordered, three concave kites symbolizing the cruiser and two destroyers respectively, and five chevrons denoting the frigates of each formation. One cruiser wasn’t moving into position, though, drawing Felysta’s attention.

“Is that the Primaria?” she asked Carter, pointing to the isolated shape in front of them.

“Aye, ma’am. No response to orders, hailing them directly.” He gave a momentary pause, then added, “no response.”

That ship should be falling in-line next to the Blackheart. Felysta gave an audible thoughtful hum, though internally she was steeling herself for whatever came next. She pulled out her datapad, messaging the captain of the weaver-class cruiser with an urgent alert. She looked to her XO for his reaction.

Jameson had pulled the terminal attached to his chair’s arm up to him, and was furiously tapping away.

“Commander,” Felysta said, tilting her head,

“thoughts?”

He pulled his attention away from the arm of the chair to the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge. “These look like the pirates we’ve been looking for, Captain,” he asserted confidently. Much more confident in their designation than Felysta was, at least. “Though the BS is unexpected, you’ve a solid plan. I say engage when the timer reaches zero if they keep us in the dark,” he gave an affirming nod.

“Contact,” Carter interrupted, prompting Felysta to face forward and Jameson to return to his terminal once more. A new square icon appeared on the right-hand side of the screen as another blue flash illuminated the main window, bringing one more vessel onto the grid. “It’s the Hermes,” he announced with an air of uncertainty.

As soon as she arrived, the corvette carrier began unloading her full complement of fifty roach-class corvettes, like a flurry of rocks pouring out from a meteor’s impact epicenter. They flew outwards and arranged themselves into five separate formations of ten, each with a well-rehearsed choreography linking up to support the rest of the ships already lined up.

“Roaches,” Felysta commented. Small ships with a minimal crew and no warp-capabilities, but enough firepower to match a frigate. The enemy outnumbered them nearly three-to-one, but they weren’t necessarily outgunned. The timer fell to twenty seconds. She pressed another key on the arm of her chair, opening a broadcast to the fleet as she sat down, while simultaneously tapping on the other arm to identify targets within the hostile fleet.

“Strike wing Epsilon, this is Captain Sandorn. Destemida squadron, focus attacks on this cruiser.” She tapped one of the

hostile weaver-class cruisers to broadcast it. *“Valente, this cruiser,”* she marked the second hostile weaver. *“Pull them from the center, we’ll take the BS. Corvettes are primary targets, protect our frigates.”*—BS referring to the only battleship on-grid.

Three...

Two...

One...

“Engage!”

Just as the word left her lips, a blinding flash of orange filled the viewscreen of every ship on-grid originating from the pirate battleship. Four intense beams momentarily sliced through the fabric of space, distorting the very stars for several seconds after it dissipated.



A cacophony of alarms and alerts filled the bridge as a brief shudder ran through the Blackheart’s superstructure, while nearly every ship in the fleet sprang into action.

“Captain, the *Primaria* is gone,” Carter announced as the main viewscreen simultaneously registered the attack, the icon depicting the cruiser flashing with a large X crossing through it, then unceremoniously vanishing.

Four contrails dispersed into space, originating from the front of the battleship opposite, extending through the wreckage of the unfortunate cruiser that found herself the target of the immense siege weapons. The turbulence on the Blackheart resulting from the *Primaria*’s total annihilation.

“Helm, take us in, target that battleship,” Felysta said without missing a beat. “Tactical, all fast-tracking weapons on the corvettes. Heavier ordnance on the BS. Target their thrusters, kill their maneuverability. Don’t let them track any of our ships with those drivers.”

The Alliance ships broke apart and headed for their respective targets. Unlike the pirate corvettes that organically mimicked a flock of birds, this movement was much more mechanical in nature. Each squadron of eight ships moved as one, first branching outward, then angling back in towards the enemy fleet.

“Commander, find out what the fuck happened to the Primaria. Check for escape pods, see if their black box is transmitting,” the captain returned to her seat. “Whatever you can find,” she said to her XO.

“Aye, captain, already looking into it,” Jameson resumed tapping away at his console.

Turning back to the front, Felysta relished in her tactical preference of lighter, faster ships against more stationary vessels as her squadron dove straight past the hostile battleship and her accompanying corvettes. They left a trail of explosions in their wake. Not a single gun was cold, with any that couldn’t target a corvette firing on the battleship, whose shields flashed a bright blue towards the rear, rippling like a river in a storm.

“Four roaches disabled, ma’am,” Lieutenant Page called out from the tactical station as they cleared the formation. “One frigate lost.”

“Don’t just disable them, dammit. Shoot to kill,” Felysta said, tapping the arm of her chair to bring up a three-dimensional holographic representation of the battlefield just in front of the main viewscreen. She

anchored the view on the battleship, being one of the two most stationary objects around, and watched as various other icons danced around each other.

A kilometer from the battleship, the Blackheart's squadron turned on a dime to go in for another pass. Another flurry of ordnance and explosions filled the viewscreen. If not for the ship's AI dimming the explosions, the bridge crew would be constantly shielding their eyes. But they needn't worry.

"Five more roaches disabled, Captain. They're making chase this time," Page said.

"Let's take 'em for a ride," Felysta nodded, disappointed they weren't being destroyed, but satisfied for the time being that she was winning the melee. "Helm, change formation, put us at the rear. We'll soak up their fire. Protect our smaller ships."

One of the ten-corvette squadrons sitting by the Hermes broke off in pursuit of the Blackheart along with the one remaining roach escorting the battleship.

Conventional gunfire and modern beam weapons pelted their shields from behind, causing the ship to rumble as they drew a swirling evasive pattern through space. The corvettes were nimble, though. Just as nimble as a frigate, and could easily keep up with a perry-class cruiser at sub-light speeds while jinking to dodge a lot of the incoming fire.

"Captain, the Destemida's hailing us urgently," Lewis called.

"On-screen."

Captain Zhōu appeared in front of them, looking disheveled. "*Captain Sandorn, we've...*" he took a deep

breath and checked his surroundings. *“We’ve had a mutiny, Captain. The Destemida must withdraw temporarily.”*

Felysta jumped from her chair, stepping forward and squinting to get as good a look at Zhōu as she could. It was unbelievable, but he wasn’t lying. The open uniform, the blood on his chest, the scruffy hair. This man had been brawling for his life.

“Acknowledged, Captain. Get to safety.”

Zhōu threw up a salute and ended the communication, his hologram replaced with the three-dimensional overview of local space once more. The concave kite representing the Destemida pulled away from its skirmish with an equal icon representing one of the two pirate cruisers.

“Commander, any update on the Primaria? Could it be connected to what happened on the Destemida?”

“Unsure, captain,” Jameson responded, this time without tearing his focus away from the terminal in front of him. “I’ll contact Captain Zhōu directly and get some more intel from him as soon as possible.”

“Captain, the cruiser the Destemida was engaged with is chasing her down,” Carter called out from the signals station.

‘Zhōu,’ Felysta mused on her closest friend for just a moment. He was out of the fight temporarily. She couldn’t let that cruiser kick him while he’s down. And with these odds, she needed to keep as much firepower in her favor as possible.

“New target,” Felysta announced, turning her attention back to the main viewscreen. “Take us to that cruiser.” She pulled out her datapad, tapped it to lock in the target,

then returned to the captain's chair. "Hit it with everything we've got. Keep the Destemida safe."



As her new orders were being carried out, Felysta leaned across her chair to address her XO quietly. "Get a security team to the bridge, Commander. Officers we trust. We might have a mutiny on our hands." Unlike any battle encounter she'd been a part of in the past, this felt different. The situation gave her a deep chill all down her spine, and for the first time since she became captain, she had to force herself to consider the possibility of a mutiny against her and the crew she held most dearly.

Jameson looked up from his datapad momentarily to give a quick "aye, ma'am," before returning to the handheld device.

A sudden flash of realization ran through Felysta's mind as she thought not everyone aboard the Blackheart might be on the same team. A pit opened in her gut to the thought that any of her crew—let alone her bridge crew—would betray the Alliance, much less *her*. Surely this was a preposterous thought? Still, a few reliable security officers would alleviate her concerns.

Any lingering thoughts of trepidation were quickly interrupted though as a violent jolt pulled her clean out of her chair.

"Report."

"Ordnance from the hostile cruiser, Captain," Carter called out. "She's turned all guns on us now the Destemida's withdrawn."

Like an agitated ring fighter coming into round two, Felysta wanted blood. No more disabled corvettes; it was time to make a real dent in the opposition. A weaver-class cruiser was no match for a perry-class, and she wanted everyone on the battlefield to know it. She moved over to Lieutenant Page at the tactical station, whose console flashed with various targets and a target prioritization of engines over any other system.

“Lieutenant, target every weapon on that cruiser, target their power core,” she ordered, leaning over him. “Fuck their engines. I want them blown to pieces.”

Page nodded, “aye, ma’am,” as she tapped the console in front of her to bring all weapons to bear forward. If she’d been pulling her punches before, she wasn’t going to this time.

“Lewis, give an order to our squadron. Every gun forward, target that cruiser. I want to see nothing but space dust when we fly past.”

“Aye, cap,” Lieutenant Lewis responded confidently, in a tone Felysta knew she could trust.

The squadron sped towards its target, still being pursued by a small swarm of corvettes. As the order went out, every gun in the formation turned from their respective smaller targets frontwards, pausing briefly as they refocused. Then a steady stream of rockets, conventional bullets, and beam weapons all reached out ahead at once, the most powerful of which emanating from the front of the formation.

The Blackheart.

She led the charge, bearing down on the pirate cruiser with all her might. Wave after wave of ordnance was unleashed, a queue of high-yield torpedoes formed,

waiting to reach their target.

The hostile cruiser turned and burned towards the gigantic Hermes carrier, but it was too late to outrun the firepower of the Alliance squadron.

First, the beam weapons wore down the cruiser's shields at specific entry points for other attacks. Second, the conventional projectile weapons landed, fizzing through the shielding and causing mostly superficial damage to the ship's outer hull. Third, the smaller, faster missiles from the edics-class destroyers arrived, resulting in moderate damage across the superstructure and draining the remaining energy from the shields. Finally, the torpedoes arrived, and with no shielding to worry about, they tore straight into the inner hull of the cruiser. One. Two. Three. Eventually, six high-yield torpedoes reached their target, all striking the ship at different points.

Blue fizzing turned to molten red rain, then bright yellow bursts, until six fiery eruptions ran along the cruiser's hull. Flying within a hundred meters of their target, the Alliance guns tracking as they passed, piling on as much material as they could while still in range. The weaver-class cruiser let out a last flurry of explosions before blowing completely. Debris ejected in every direction.

The corvette squadron in hot pursuit found itself having to duck and dive in every direction it could to avoid large chunks of molten metal as they burst out. Two roaches came in direct contact with spinning hulks, adding to the firework display the Blackheart left in her wake.

"*Yes.* Good shooting," she returned to the captain's chair. "Comms, to the squadron: all guns back on the swarm of roaches we've got following us. Helm, fly us by

the other cruiser. Let's turn the odds into our favor."



Four security officers arrived on the bridge, rifles in hand. They weren't geared up in full tactical armor like a marine from the army corps, but their thicker and heavier bullet-proof uniforms were easy to distinguish from standard fleet attire. Well armed and armored for a fleet officer.

"You, you, on the doors," Jameson ordered, standing from his seat and directing two of the officers to opposite sides of the bridge. "You two, to the front of the bridge. Keep an eye on things." It was the most animated he'd been since the battle began.

Felysta glanced from one officer to the next, wishing she were wearing similar armor. Her attention was divided. The threat of some sort of mutiny breaking out across her ship loomed heavy on her mind. Meanwhile, a fleet battle raged in local space. There were fifty hostile ships out there and twenty friendlies, all needing her attention. But unlike the officers on the Blackheart, the viewscreen and holographic representation of the battlefield clearly marked who was friend and who was foe.

The bulkheads shuddered again as the Blackheart took on more attacks, prompting Felysta to return to her chair.

"Same drill as before, when we get within range, unleash all-Hell on that cruiser."

Thousands of kilometers had opened up between the various skirmishes in Wan-Nakhon, such that it was taking some time for them to open the engagement envelope,

giving everyone a short breather.

“Captain, the Destemida. She’s rejoining the fight, ma’am,” Ensign Carter announced positively.

“Great news. Hail Zhōu, bring them under our wing. Let’s take out this cruiser together.”

“They’re already en route to rendezvous with us.”

Seconds after the order was given a wave of static distorted the main viewscreen briefly, and the hologram flickered and died.

“Carter?” Felysta quizzed her signals officer in a tense voice, standing and walking towards the screen.

“Not sure, ma’am. Checking now.”

More static scrolled down the viewscreen, and as it cleared, so too did the two-dimensional representation of local space along with the list of ships.

“Where’s our intel?” Felysta asked in exasperation, extending her arm towards the monitor and looking in her signal officer’s direction. “We’re flying blind.”

Carter fumbled. Not a single control on his console seemed to do a thing.

“Ops?” the captain turned to another station.

“Nothing, captain.”

“Tactical? Can we still acquire targets?”

“No, ma’am.”

“What the fuck is happening to my ship?” Felysta’s attention darted from one officer to another, hoping to get an answer from anyone.

The bridge was split. Some crew members were frantically tapping away at their consoles, trying to get some sort of response, while others appeared to be much

calmer.

Jameson was currently one of those furiously working on his datapad.

“Commander, what’s the situation?” Felysta asked, standing a meter in front of her XO.

He kept quiet for several seconds before the static on-screen finally dissipated and the holographic image of local space buzzed back to life. Many of the icons had changed color, though, indicating a change in allegiance. Most of the ships on-grid had become friendly and were moving towards the larger hulk of the corvette carrier.

Only three frigate-sized ships were now marked as hostile and were being pursued by half a dozen corvettes each. Three of strike wing epsilon’s frigates, loyal to the Alliance.

The viewscreen—and the Blackheart’s computer systems—were no longer aligned with the Alliance, but with the *Union*.

“Captain,” Jameson rose from his chair, “I’m afraid I’m going to be taking command of the Blackheart.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ESCAPE

“Like fuck you are,” Felysta drew her sidearm and aimed it towards Jameson’s head.

Simultaneously, the two security officers standing alert at the front of the bridge raised their rifles and each took a single clean shot at their counterparts guarding the doors. One collapsed on the spot, clutching at a wound on his neck, while the other took a slug to the chest that propelled him into the wall.

Felysta spun around and dropped to one knee, taking a shot at one of the mutineering security officers, hitting him square in the head. Her non-standard issue sidearm sending a bullet through the man’s skull, out the other side, and into the bulkhead behind, leaving a mess of blood splattered up the wall.

The other mutineer adjusted her target and fired a shot towards Felysta, who dove behind Carter’s terminal. The slug took a chunk out of the captain’s chair that she’d just moved away from.

Ensign Carter drew his own sidearm and fired at the security officer, landing a hit on their leg, just as another bullet hit him from the side. He fell back into his seat within arms-reach of Felysta and called out in pain, clutching his abdomen.

Lieutenant Page had joined the fight, putting a second bullet in Carter before taking a bullet herself from Felysta, who was using Carter’s console as a shield.

“Captain!” Jameson shouted over the gunfire. He’d

positioned himself at the back of the bridge, standing—mostly covered—behind a pair of consoles, aiming his weapon at Carter’s console.

Six seconds was all it took for the bridge to plunge into chaos, and as Jameson called out, only he and four other people were left alive. Felysta, Vasquez, Page, and a security officer. Page was bleeding profusely and wasn’t long for this world, but still shakily aimed her gun at Felysta. Lieutenant Vasquez had dropped to the floor at helm control, and was aiming his own sidearm at the security officer, who was targeting him right back.

“It’s time to surrender, Captain,” Jameson said calmly.

She weighed her options, taking just a moment to breathe. Vasquez and the rifle-wielding security mutineer canceled each other out from a tactical perspective, which left just Page and Jameson. Jameson had an infinite advantage in his position, good cover, and a gun pointed straight at her. She was a good fast shot, but not as quick as she needed to be to best both of them.

She needed time.

“Why?” she asked, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She only needed to say one word to convey the betrayal she felt.

“The Alliance is a plague on the galaxy, Felysta,” Jameson responded, not lowering his gun for a second. “Humanity’s bravest and brightest pioneers explore new worlds, create beautiful habitats, and extend their reach to the stars. Then we suddenly appear once they’ve confirmed it’s safe, doing the hard work for us.”

He slowly walked out from behind the safe cover of the bank of terminals behind the command pit to check on Page’s now-motionless body, talking as he moved.

"We arrive masquerading as philanthropists," Jameson continued, "like we're saving the colonists from something. Then we take over, pushing out history's greatest explorers, and sending them onto the next planet. All so we can expand this cruel imperialistic hegemony."

Felysta traced every footstep he made, mapping out the bridge in her imagination and placing everyone like pieces on a chessboard while she pondered her next move. Her options were limited, but like chess, this was a game of patience. "The Alliance brings security and prosperity to these worlds. Yes we're imperialistic, but every system welcomed into the Alliance becomes richer and safer under our protection."

Jameson reached out and checked Page's pulse. Nothing. "Do you know your history, Captain? The Romans of the first century? The Europeans of the seventeenth? The Coalition of the twenty-fourth? We're no better than any of them. We move into other people's territories and displace them by force, taking what isn't ours. As long as this goes on unchecked, of course members of the Alliance will enjoy sizable wealth. But it's on the backs of billions of suffering victims. You're spouting the same narrative as those Europeans and Americans did a millennium ago while they *'manifested their fucking destiny'*."

By this point, Jameson was just over a meter away from Felysta, still aiming his gun in her direction. Felysta could see Vasquez's left hand protruding from behind him, clenched into a fist with the thumb sticking out. He was ready to fire on her command.

"If there *were* billions of suffering victims out in the fringe worlds, why do we never hear their grievances,

then?” She asked. “Every system brought into the Alliance does-so with open arms and gratitude. If what you’re saying is true, news would reach the core systems of fighting and rebellion. We don’t see that.”

“What do you think *this* is?” Jameson opened his arms to gesture broadly at the room.

Felysta sensed the exasperation in his voice and chose this moment to enact her plan, however foolhardy it may be.

She read her XO perfectly. Jameson became complacent for the briefest second in his frustration, taking his attention away from his target, who leaped from her position towards the Commander. With her contorted body, she couldn’t bring her sidearm up fast enough to shoot him, so barreled into him at full-force, tackling him into the bulkhead opposite.

Three gunshots sounded out through the bridge within a millisecond of each other, but thankfully, none hit Felysta.

Both of their guns fell to the floor underneath Jameson, who slammed his fists down onto Felysta’s back, trying to force her to release her grip.

She did so, pulling back briefly to steady herself. “Call it off, Nick. Call off the fucking mutiny.”

“*I can’t.*” He lunged at her, narrowly missing her face with a right-hook.

Felysta threw a punch back in response, connecting with Jameson’s torso. He dodged a follow-up strike aimed at his head.

They brawled for a short time, landing multiple body shots and tiring each other out. Felysta countered

The Blackheart

Jameson's size advantage with her nimble agility, managing to both avoid and land more assaults. This wasn't the same as the spar they had in the gym a few days back. *This was real.* And whoever won the fight, won the Blackheart.

Eventually, Jameson dropped his guard on his left, letting a fearsome punch through from his opponent.

A direct shot to the face.

He collapsed in a heap on the metallic floor, unconscious.

Checkmate.



There was no time to lose. Felysta immediately turned her attention back to the remnants of the battle, both in local space and on the bridge. Those three remaining frigates aligned to the Alliance had been destroyed, leaving a battlefield full of Union ships.

And the Blackheart.

By all intents and purposes, she'd switched sides.

"Ughh..."

"*Vasquez,*" she called out, running to his side.

"Just a flesh wound, cap," he grunted, his right shoulder streaming with blood down a limp arm. "I can still help with helm control," his left hand fumbled around his jacket to reach the bullet hole.

"Can you check the bodies?" Felysta asked, as she darted across to the captain's chair to analyze the situation. Jameson had sent a message to the Union fleet stating he had full control, and was setting an autopilot to join their

formation while he cleaned up the ship. Perfect. That gave Felysta some time to organize a retake.

“On it,” Vasquez started checking pulses and securing weapons, albeit slowly.

She didn’t know how deep the mutiny had run. No idea if similar gunfights and fistfights had broken out across the ship. All she could do was hope most of her crew were still loyal to her and the Alliance.

“We good?” Felysta asked Vasquez while tapping on her chair’s controls rapidly, securing every entry point to the bridge. Thick sets of security doors dropped down at each entrance, locking the two of them in with a pile of bodies.

“Aye, cap. All dead bar Jameson, and all weapons secure bar mine and yours.” The helmsman finished tying his jacket around his shoulder with his teeth and functional hand. A pile of sidearms and rifles cluttered one corner of the bridge at the front, each with their clips removed.

Felysta glanced back at Jameson, who was still unconscious, but now also cuffed to one of the handrails by the door, well away from either of them and his own weapon.

“Lock down all communications shipwide except in and out of the bridge.”

Seeing reports of gunfire throughout the entire ship, Felysta tapped the arm of the captain’s chair to send a message to the highest-ranking—living—officer of each department.

“Attention all department heads.” If they weren’t previously, they would be now. *“An attempt has been made to take control of this ship. That attempt has failed. Every officer loyal to myself and the Alliance, report in immediately.”* She released the key and

turned to Vasquez. “Check comms. We need to see how fucked we are.”

Vasquez jumped across to the comms terminal, pushing a lifeless Lieutenant Lewis back in her chair from the console, and started tapping away. “Reports coming in, cap. We control... engineering and weapons. No response from medical or any other department.”

“That’s all we need. Take the helm, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Vasquez exclaimed with adventure, full of adrenaline and ready to follow whatever order it took to get them back home.

Felysta moved to the tactical station and pulled Page’s lifeless body out of her chair. Every touch of a mutineer resurfaced her sense of betrayal, but she had a job to do, and needed to act quickly. The body was dumped unceremoniously on the floor. “Sorry Leah, I need your seat.”

“Autopilot’s still carrying us into formation with the Union fleet, captain,” Vasquez called out.

“Alright, I need you to set a warp-course back to Exeter system, then on my mark, get us clear of the fleet and out of here.” She lowered her voice and spoke to herself, “and I’m gonna do as much fucking damage as I can on our way out.”

She couldn’t engage the targeting computers, the enemy would detect it. Instead, she marked a dozen corvettes manually as high-value allies. When they were ready, she could easily reclassify these to hostile.

“Course set, captain. The autopilot’s put us right in the middle of this fleet though. Our shields have been lowered, and we’re too close to everyone else to raise

them. I'll need at least a minute to get us clear enough to raise shields, and another thirty seconds to get us aligned and ready for warp."

Ninety seconds.

It was a desperate plan, for sure. But they were in a desperate situation.

"Alright, give me a moment," Felysta moved across to the operations console and set the shields to raise as soon as they were far enough from the fleet to avoid an electromagnetic collision. As soon as she was done, she jumped back to the tactical station. "Ready, Vasquez?"

"Ready."

Felysta took a deep breath.

"Mark."



The Blackheart's engines lit up, illuminating the hulls of every ship around her. She banked to port and tipped her nose down to navigate through the myriad of corvettes and other ships, many of whom she'd been allied with just a couple of minutes ago.

Felysta monitored their motions closely, waiting for someone to react.

She didn't have to wait long.

The late Lewis' console started to ping with incoming hails, pulling away Felysta's attention briefly. "Ignore it." She focused back on the tactical console, watching the screen closely, looking for a target lock or some other opportunity.

The Blackheart

Thirty seconds into their escape, the target lock sounded, giving Felysta all the incentive she needed to open fire. She reclassified all the *'high-value allies'* she'd previously marked into foes and unleashed the full power of the perry-class cruiser.

Every weapons hardpoint spun into action. Conventional Gatling guns drew bright dashed lines across the blackness of space like a thick meteor shower. Pulse lasers sliced between ships, causing splashes of molten red metal. Four torpedoes launched from their tubes and headed directly for the one remaining cruiser that had arrived with the Union fleet.

The close proximity of the ships mixed with the dropped shields was catastrophic to the Union-aligned vessels. Bullets ripped straight through the hulls of several corvettes, where they'd otherwise anticlimactically fizz against energy fields. Every pulse of burning red laser cut a deep hole into its target ship's core.

In just ten seconds, their assault destroyed five corvettes and disabled a further three. All four of the Blackheart's torpedoes connected with their target cruiser, which caused it to explode in a dazzling fireball, breaking apart into hundreds of metallic shards that flew outwards, colliding with other ships.

But then came the response.

Every hostile ship in the fleet broke formation to put some distance between them and better engage with the command cruiser, including the Destemida and Valente. The same firepower that Felysta dealt out to the hostile fleet was now being paid back with interest.

Thousands of bullets began colliding with the Blackheart's hull. Again unprotected by any shielding, the

outer hull saw hundreds of tiny breaches. The candia-class battleship fired her mass drivers in the Blackheart's path, narrowly missing the ship. Various rockets impacted her hull, resulting in countless small craters.

The ship shuddered and shook from side to side with each impact, and even in the depths of her superstructure on the bridge, Felysta and Vasquez had to raise their voices to be heard over the rumbling.

"Ten seconds 'till shields, captain," Vasquez shouted. It couldn't come quickly enough.

Two heavy jolts in quick succession threw Felysta from her station to the floor, while Vasquez just about managed to hold on to his console.

The turbulence threw all the detritus on the bridge around, including the bodies and guns that littered the floor. The room was in chaos.

"Torpedo hits," she called out, jumping up and dashing to the operations console. "Major damage to the engines, but they're still operational."

The shields came to life, just in time to absorb the impact of two more torpedoes. Though the reverberations were still felt by everyone aboard.

"Bringing us around to align for warp now. Fifteen seconds," Vasquez said, returning to a reasonable volume now as the violent rumbling subsided.

"Fire crews aren't responding," Felysta sat down in the operations chair, trying to coordinate damage control across the ship. "As soon as we're at warp, we might need to get our hands dirty," she said to her helmsman, finally feeling hopeful that they'll make it out alive.

A loud bang resonated through the bridge.

But this wasn't another torpedo connecting with the hull.

This wasn't a battering ram against the security door.

This was the sound of a bullet leaving the barrel of a gun.

Jameson had regained consciousness through the commotion, picked up his captain's sidearm, aimed it at his commanding officer, and pulled the trigger.

Vasquez had accounted for every weapon on the bridge except for his own and Felysta's, whose non-standard sidearm had been wedged underneath Jameson's unconscious body.

The bullet entered her head near her ear and exited through the other side of her neck. Felysta had just enough time to see a flash of crimson coat the console in front of her before blacking out.

"Cancel that warp, Lieutenant," Jameson ordered, pointing the gun at Vasquez. He shot the cuff binding him to the wall and started marching towards the helmsman. "I won't ask twice."

Vasquez jumped up to attack Jameson with his one remaining arm. He knew there was only one chance left now to save them.

Jameson pulled the trigger once more, approached the helm, and canceled the warp.

"This is Commander Jameson. I've regained control of the Blackheart. Cease fire."

The Blackheart was his.

CHAPTER SIX

VICE ADMIRAL OYEKAN

Calm fell on the battlefield once more, as the swarm of corvettes began their return trip to the Hermes. Every ship fell back into formation, though this time spread apart with shields raised in case of another unexpected outbreak.

The Blackheart was in flames. She'd taken significant damage during her escape attempt, and while currently able to maintain her position in the fleet, her hull burned. Billows of smoke poured from her engines, and minor explosions erupted across her midsection.

"Dock with the Hermes, Jameson," Vice Admiral Oyekan said from the bridge of the corvette carrier. *"We'll send across security and engineering crews to patch up your ship."*

"Yes, Vice Admiral, I'll bring her round." Jameson said, sitting at the helm. He'd brought a few friends up onto the bridge, but it was still less than a skeleton crew. Many of his on-board allies were continuing the ongoing struggle to wrest control from the still-loyal remnants of the Alliance crew.

"When you're docked, come and see me in person. Immediately." Oyekan ended the transmission.

Jameson swallowed hard. The ominous sound of the summons formed a pit in his stomach. He'd been talking to this admiral for nearly a year now through encrypted messages planning this operation, but hadn't actually spoken to him directly until today. Messages could often be misconstrued as rude or unnecessarily blunt without the sender's intended intonation, but Jameson was quickly

discovering that Oyekan was exactly as direct as his messages conveyed.

Various bodies still littered the deck, including that of his former captain, from whom Jameson had taken her sidearm, the non-standard issue pistol, the heirloom. He'd keep it close by from now on to remind himself of what had transpired today. It was a beautiful piece, but now it carried an extra importance to him.

The Blackheart swung around and eventually came to a stop a couple of meters from the Hermes, who extended a series of sky-bridges outward from various airlocks. Hard seals were made, and a contingent of two hundred marines quickly swarmed the decks of the command cruiser, followed by several hundred engineers and fire control personnel.

The daunting size of the carrier was very apparent at this distance. A four hundred meter long cruiser looked like an ant compared to the three-point-three kilometer behemoth.

Jameson made his way through the corridors of the Blackheart to the airlock, passing several dead officers and damaged conduits on the way. The ship's interior had fared quite well considering the circumstances, although her crew was very much in tatters. Small pockets of officers loyal to the Alliance still held out, even though it was inevitable now that they'd be captured or killed.

Union-aligned marines prowled the decks.

The Hermes was in good condition despite being over two centuries old. Stepping through an airlock from one vessel to another was always accompanied by a slight dropped-stomach sensation and change in air quality or temperature. The transition from the Blackheart to the

Hermes was much more exaggerated due to the carrier's age. The air tasted stale, and the sensation in Jameson's gut was less like a bump in the road, and more like a roller coaster loop. Despite her appearance, the capital ship's internal organs—at least the artificial gravity and atmospheric recyclers—obviously needed some work.

He marched down the corridor to the carrier's lower rapid transit system, one of two maglev loops that enabled fast passage horizontally throughout the ship. Every five hundred meters, a station combined the horizontal with the vertical, accompanying the maglev rails with elevator shafts. These two-dimensional transit systems in larger capital ships have since been replaced with fully integrated three-dimensional cars, but the Hermes hung onto her archaic system. It was a ten-minute journey for Jameson to reach the Hermes' Combat Information Center—CIC.



The carrier and her role within a fleet were too large to be controlled from a single classic bridge, and instead a large room structured more like the war room of a space station was the focal point of all command activities. A big information table sat right in the middle of the room in an area colloquially known as 'the pit', where up to eight individuals could collaborate in command. Banks of terminals then stepped up on either side of the pit facing each other, and the rear of the CIC hosted several smaller information tables for subcommand purposes.

Several dozen people were working hard to organize the new fleet, recover survivors, repair ships, and process prisoners of war. The room was filled with chatter.

Vice Admiral Oyekan was standing at the head of the main information table, directing several other high-ranking officers on their duties as Jameson approached the foot of the table and stood to attention.

“Alright, all roaches except CR-fifteen. Get them redocked, we’ll scuttle that one. Send out scav crews to the debris field, prioritize the two cruiser wrecks.” Oyekan waved his hand around the three-dimensional holographic representation of the now-silent battlefield, directing his senior staff on where to go. “We’re here for twenty-four hours, then we’re gone. Put your departments on triple shifts if we have to. They can sleep when we warp. Dismissed.”

Murmurings of confirmation rippled throughout the other officers before they all stood up straight with a salute, then dispersed on their various tasks.

“Commander Jameson,” Oyekan greeted. He was a tall and muscular man, around sixty years old, cleanly shaven, with short graying natural curls.

Jameson threw a stiff salute. “At your service, sir.”

Oyekan tilted his head and rubbed his chin while looking the turncoat up and down. Jameson’s uniform was untidy, his face and jacket both had dried blood on them, and his cheek had swollen since his scuffle with Felysta half an hour ago. He knew it wasn’t a good first impression, but standing to attention after wresting the Blackheart from his commanding officer, and coming out of it with various bruises and a bloody lip, he was sure the admiral would show lenience.

“You must be the worst-presented officer that’s ever greeted me in my CIC, Jameson.”

“Vice Admiral, I—”

“What happened on the Blackheart, Commander?” Oyekan’s brow furrowed deeply as he spoke. “One minute we get confirmation you have control of the ship. The next minute she’s breaking formation and causing hundreds of lives to be lost. Not to mention trillions of credits in damages,” he paused for two seconds before commanding; *“you will answer,”* when Jameson didn’t immediately respond.

“Vice Admiral,” Jameson was sweating already. This was the opposite to the reaction he’d hoped for. “Captain Sandorn, sir. I underestimated her. She took back control of the bridge momentarily before I killed her.”

“And why, pray tell, did you not just kill her straight away?” Oyekan touched his fingers together, pointing them towards the commander. To him, the answer was beyond simple.

“Sir, I—” he had no answer. At least none that would be acceptable to the admiral. He straightened his stance. “You’re right, sir. I should’ve eliminated all resistance as soon as I’d taken control of the systems.” He looked straight ahead, avoiding eye-contact with Oyekan, holding onto the most rigid at-attention stance he’d presented since the academy.

“Yes, you should have.” The admiral tilted his head back and looked down his nose at Jameson. “You know what you definitely shouldn’t have done? Given a speech about Alliance corruption.” He leaned forward and spread his palms wide on the information table in front of him. “You cost the Union dearly today, commander.”

It was obvious that Oyekan had already downloaded the Blackheart’s logs and watched through the recordings of the bridge to try to ascertain how things went so wrong, so

quickly.

“My apologies, Vice Admiral. But we have the Blackheart now and many other ships. We’re net-positive from this operation.” Jameson cleared his desert-dry throat.

Oyekan raised his brow. “What’s left of her,” he stepped back from the table and took a deep breath. “Go back to your quarters and await further orders. Dismissed.”

Jameson saluted, still standing rigidly to attention, turned on his heel and marched towards the exit of the CIC, gritting his teeth so hard they could chip any second.

“Oh, one more thing,” Oyekan called as Jameson reached the doorway. “You didn’t kill your captain. She’s in a coma in the infirmary. If she survives this, she’ll hold a vendetta against you for the rest of her life. Or yours.”



Jameson made his way off the Hermes. Another ten-minute solitary journey. He didn’t feel inclined to speak with anyone en route, standing silently on the Hermes’ tram as it hummed through the carrier.

He felt the same atmospheric shift stepping back onto the Blackheart as he had before, but was slightly more prepared for it this time. The cruiser felt much different now. The crew was split, with some officers cuffed and others holding weapons. Even though Jameson knew this day was coming, and knew exactly who was on each side, it was still a surreal experience watching crew members from the same departments now on opposite sides of the

war.

Still not wanting to make conversation, he avoided eye-contact with every one of his officers, no matter who their allegiances lay with. Standing at the door to an elevator, he finally had his first confrontation with a former subordinate.

“Commander,” a younger lieutenant questioned in a confused tone. “Commander Jameson?” The elevator doors had opened and the lieutenant was being herded towards the Hermes with a group of other officers.

Jameson locked eyes with the man. Lieutenant Richman, a senior gunnery officer. He’d spoken to Richman earlier in the day during a department briefing. “Lieutenant,” Jameson greeted him with no salute or friendly gesture.

“You?” Richman said, his tone shifting to accusatory as he put the pieces together. “*You piece of shit!*” He lunged forward at his former XO, falling to the ground just short of his target as an electrical current surged through his body from the cuffs on his wrists. “You... fuckin’... *traitor...*” he blurted through gritted teeth, muscles completely seizing up.

Jameson sighed, crouching down to meet Richman’s eyes. “I’m sorry, lieutenant. This was the only way.”

Richman kept fighting against the current, a string of drool dropping to the floor as he grunted.

“Go on, take ‘em,” Jameson said to the marines accompanying the prisoners of war, standing and stepping to the side to let them pass.

The elevator back to the command deck was empty, as was the short walk from the lobby back to his quarters. The damage—and therefore the crew—was focused

towards the outer hull of the ship, so the areas this deep into the ship's superstructure had barely a wall panel out of place.

Jameson's quarters were completely untouched, save for a coffee mug that had fallen to the floor and broken into several pieces during some of the turbulence. The commander calmly picked up the pieces, tidying them away to the trash, then walked around to his living area and sat on the sofa, leaning forward.

No distractions and no other personnel to communicate with.

Alone with his thoughts.

"Shit."

He could sit and dwell over the loss of a twenty-year career in the Alliance Navy. The fading agreement of commanding the Blackheart, the crewmates he'd betrayed. Of course, these things all crossed his mind, but they were all short-term issues. Selfish thoughts. Unimportant.

Instead, he thought of the promises made by President Ormund Colwill of the Free Planetary Union: the freedom of the Union. The dissolution of the Alliance. The beginning and end of a very brief war, that'll welcome an age of peace and prosperity across the galaxy. This was the end-goal: the end of oppression.

He'd been working on this for over a year. For many it was over a decade, and for a few it was a lifetime of work. A meticulously planned rebellion and hasty exchange of power, then peace for centuries to come.

But what if it wasn't *very brief*?

A wave of guilt washed over him, muddling his thoughts, distracting him from his mission.

While he knew the Alliance wouldn't go down without a fight, the battle of Wan-Nakhon showed just how zealous some of her captains could be. His words to Oyekan reverberated around his skull. *'Captain Sandorn, sir. I underestimated her.'* But had he? Or was he simply desperate to bring her on-side?

And what if the other mutinies—no, *takeovers*—What if other takeovers were as *FUBAR* as this one? The Union barely came out even. Trillions of credits and hundreds of lives lost. That's what Oyekan said, and this was a small task force. Operations were underway all across the galaxy to take fleets, space stations, entire systems. Even the station they'd left a few days ago in the Exeter system should be in the hands of the Union by now, but what if it wasn't? Lieutenant Jones' sabotage attempts were failing when he'd arrived stationside with Felysta, and the XO had been arrested by the time Jameson had left the system.

The more he sat in silence, the stronger his subconscious grew in tormenting him. He felt overwhelmed; in over his head. He had to busy himself with something.

A quick shower, a change into a clean uniform, and Jameson was looking much more presentable, discounting the black eye, of course.

He headed for the bridge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SPOILS OF WAR

“Commander on the bridge,” a faceless lieutenant announced as Jameson stepped back into his leadership role. The room was the same one he’d left an hour before, but the bodies were gone, and he didn’t recognize a single person. The Hermes had assigned several new lieutenants to manage each department in getting the Blackheart back up and running to—at very least—get her to a shipyard.

“At ease,” Jameson said, walking across to the captain’s chair. Muscle-memory placed him in front of the XO’s chair momentarily before he corrected his positioning, sitting down and surveying the room.

Several pools of blood had accumulated on the floor and chairs where officers had died. Spatters of blood and gore lined the walls from gunshots and fistfights. Jameson’s gaze rested for the longest time on the weapons terminal where he’d left his captain dying in a slump.

He turned to approach the operations terminal, nearly slipping in a pool of blood. “Ops, get a cleanup detail in here ASAP. It’s like a damn abattoir.”

“Yes, sir,” an unfamiliar voice responded.

“How’s she looking, lieutenant?” Jameson asked of the same man.

“Sir, the Blackheart sustained a lot of hull damage, but her bones are strong. She’ll need a reskin. At least two months’ worth of repairs to get her battle-ready again. And that’s at a well-stocked shipyard.” The operations officer’s prognosis was unsurprising to Jameson, but it still wasn’t

what he wanted to hear.

“Understood, lieutenant,” Jameson turned his attention to the helm officer. “Helm, where’s the closest shipyard we can get this bird fixed up?”

“Sir, the Union, uh...” the officer turned to look at the commander with a confused expression. “The Union doesn’t control a shipyard anywhere near this side of Alliance space with that capability. The closest one is about a month away, but the engines are damaged too. We can’t make that journey without some interim repairs, or at least several stops along the way.”

“And it’s unlikely they’ll have the materials to patch her up, sir,” the operations officer added. “We’d need to fabricate a whole new hull.”

Jameson felt that roller-coaster drop in his gut again. There were dozens of shipyards across core space that could do the repairs, and the materials were readily available. But that was core space. Core *Alliance* space.

Those systems—those shipyards—were no longer friendly territory to him. He’d need to retrain his brain to accept his new home. He took several seconds to process the news in silence before responding. “Understood, carry on.”

As he sat in the captain’s chair, he pondered every change that happened in the last few hours, and the transition that not only he’d have to make, but everyone involved in the battle. No. Everyone in the Galaxy. He contemplated his own feelings and realized that it wasn’t regret or guilt he felt, but grief. It was the end of a life and loyalty he’d known for years, but it wasn’t necessarily a sad grief. More an optimistic desolation. A dutiful emptiness that needed support.

It was time to get to work.



Eight hours passed as Jameson worked harder than he ever had before, fueled partially by his grief, but mainly through his enthusiasm to see the Union's utopia come to fruition. Organizing repair crews, helping process prisoners of war, carrying equipment. Whatever he could do to prove his worth. As time wore on, the bruising on his face grew more visible; a painful reminder of his betrayal. He skipped eating anything other than a grainy ration bar as he labored until he finally got a message from Oyekan.

Hermes CIC. 30 mins.'

He moved away from the group of engineers he was working with and sent an acknowledgment. He recalled the admiral's words *'worst-presented officer that's ever greeted me'* and took a quick detour back to his quarters to make himself as presentable as possible before heading over.

The mood on the ship was much more settled now. Most of the hull breaches had been sealed, all the Alliance POWs had been processed and removed from the ship, and the Blackheart herself was looking pretty presentable along the exterior corridors once more. Sure, she still needed a new skin, but like the operations officer said, her bones were solid, and she'd be fit to operate under her own steam again soon enough.

Jameson arrived in the Hermes' CIC five minutes early and stood to attention by the entrance, spotting Oyekan hovering over a pair of terminals with several other

officers. He watched as the admiral finished his conversation and walked back down to the pit.

“Commander Jameson,” Oyekan noticed him. “My office,” he walked to the opposite end of the CIC and through a door. Jameson followed suit.

The admiral’s office on the carrier was grand. Beyond that of any stateroom Jameson had stepped foot in on any other vessel or station.

Not only was it grand, but surreal as well. Half of it had been adorned in wood paneling, with a large bookcase and glass cabinet full of strange and wonderful ornaments. A large leather chair and couch formed a triangle with the planetside-looking wall coverings, and several wooden tables completed the illusion. An old fireplace or wood-burner wouldn’t have looked out-of-place here.

Oyekan walked over to the antique drinks cabinet and poured himself a drink slowly from a decanter, a blue liquid that seemed to bubble when agitated but settled immediately after being set down. “Drink?” he offered, gesturing with the decanter. “It’s an ale from the Grendel system called the Blackjack. Quite the experience.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jameson nodded, still standing rigidly to attention.

Oyekan poured another glass, glanced over at the comfy-looking chairs, then walked in the other direction, sitting at a modern metallic desk and placing both drinks in front of him. “Sit, commander,” he directed Jameson with his eyes, who followed the instruction. “Commander, we have a problem.” Oyekan leaned back in his chair and sipped from the tumbler, blowing smoke like from a cigarette after swallowing. “In fact, we have two problems. Your loyalty to the Union, and the state of the

Blackheart.”

“Vice Admiral, I can assure you—”

“You’ll get your chance to speak, Jameson.” Oyekan declared, silencing the commander. “First, I want to discuss your loyalty. Your reservations about killing your captain have cost this fleet dearly. This can’t be overlooked. You were promised a conditional captaincy on the delivery of the Blackheart. That ship has not been delivered.”

“Sir—”

Oyekan’s eyes widened and his face tensed. Jameson’s interruptions weren’t helping his case. “You’d do well to keep your mouth shut until I request your input, Nicholas.” He took another calming sip of his drink, blowing smoke out once more.

Jameson stoically controlled his breathing, straightened his posture, and fixed his eyes directly forward.

“Which brings me to point two. The Blackheart. My chief engineer tells me she could be fixed up in a couple of months if we were in core space, but out here, the time and financial costs outweigh the benefits of repairing her.” He shook his head. “She’s driftwood to the Union.” He pulled out his datapad and tapped on it several times, ignoring Jameson for a few moments as he finally sat in silence, though Jameson knew this time not to say a word. “I have a few options on how to move forward, but now is your opportunity to respond.” Oyekan placed his datapad gently on the table, then touched the tips of his fingers together and looked into Jameson’s eyes.

“Vice Admiral, I deeply regret my actions aboard the Blackheart,” Jameson started. He was already flustered, but maintained a calm voice. “They were reckless, and they

came at a high price. My loyalty to the Union is absolute, and while I may not have delivered a whole ship, she can either be repaired or broken apart for salvage. Her core systems are all still intact, and she's worth the spend, sir."

"Hmm," Oyekan hummed, pausing momentarily to weigh the options. "I think I'll let you decide your fate here, commander. You have three choices. Option one, you take a demotion to lieutenant, and you'll work a department aboard the *Hermes* where I can monitor you."

Jameson's stomach took a dive again. He was a proud man.

"Option two, I send you to the nearest airlock and have you executed for treason. Treason against both the Alliance and the Union, funnily enough," Oyekan remarked in a cold jape, the tiniest hint of a smile nearly breaking through his stern expression.

Option one suddenly seemed much more tempting.

"Option three, we send you back to core space with the cruiser and a skeleton crew, and hold you as a sleeper-agent. You'll hold your rank and fifty of your current crewmates, and we'll call on you again when we need you."

Jameson looked down at the tumbler of blue liquid he was yet to touch in contemplation. "Sir, as soon as we return to Alliance territory and put the *Blackheart* in for repairs, their analysts will look at the ship's logs and see what happened out here."

"We may not be able to alter what's in the ship's logs, but we can take a figurative plasma cutter to the black box, and leave them with just half a story. We'll make it so it's down to your acting skills. And their interpretation." He tapped his datapad a few times to bring up several camera

recordings. “Besides, we already have footage of a conflict, and thanks to your former captain, we have ninety percent of an escape. We can leave a few breadcrumbs, then you’ll have the opportunity to return to core space, a hero of the Alliance.” He spread his arms at the end of the sentence, making it sound glamorous and prophetic, though with a tinge of sarcasm. Any time Oyekan mentioned the Alliance, he did so with disdain.

Jameson breathed deeply, analyzing the glass of Grendel Blackjack again before looking up and responding. “I’ll do it. I’ll return to the Alliance at your authority, Vice Admiral.”

Oyekan finally smiled and raised his tumbler to toast, which Jameson mirrored. They both took a sip of the drink, but it knocked Jameson off his feet. The sensation burned like the combination of an insanely spicy chili mixed with the first ever inhalation of cigarette smoke, while the taste was sweet like a coconut-based soda. For three seconds the pain was intense as Jameson spluttered the smoke from his throat, then suddenly the sensation was gone and a cool tingle ran up his spine, instantly relaxing him.

“That’s something else.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOMECOMING

The journey back to Alliance space was slow. Perry-class cruisers had a maximum speed of around ten AUPS—five thousand times the speed of light—but with the damage she'd sustained in battle, the Blackheart was limping along at half that. This gave Jameson nearly a week to reflect on the events in Wan-Nakhon. For the duration, he was forced to sit still and process what happened, unlike with the fifteen minutes he spent in his quarters following the fight.

He went through every stage of grief for his past life, gradually replacing it with a sense of anticipation and duty to the Union. He quickly conquered acceptance, and by the third day he was fully in control of his destiny once more, reciting plans he'd discussed with Vice Admiral Oyekan prior to their departure. Exeter was their destination, the system this entire operation originated from. The sabotage they'd witnessed back then was meant to be a precursor to the Union occupying the station. Unfortunately for the Union, however, the plan had failed. Every weapon stationside was still fully operational when the inbound invasion fleet arrived, making short work of the Union ships. Jameson's fears at this being a long drawn-out war were slowly being realized.

Union intelligence determined that thanks to this disruption, it'd be much easier to fool Alliance analysts in the region to accept Jameson and his skeleton crew back into rotation. All he had to do now was play his part.

As they dropped out of warp on the sixth day, Exeter Station was abuzz with activity. Just as they left it. The main viewscreen on the Blackheart's bridge lit up with hundreds of icons, prompting the signals officer to recalibrate the view, filtering out a lot of the noise. What remained were several clusters of military ships, notably a small detachment of damaged vessels flagged as neutral.

Jameson rose from the captain's chair, stepping towards the viewscreen. "That must be the invasion fleet," he said to no one in particular.

"Aye, sir. Sensors picking up the Leonidas in the center, minimal power signals detected," the signals watchstander responded. The particular ship he mentioned being a state-of-the-art battlecruiser, a powerful craft, the model often used as a flagship of larger fleets.

"Hail the station," Jameson directed his voice at the communications officer.

A few taps on the console and a loading icon appeared front-and-center. Several seconds later, an older woman took over the screen in a captain's uniform.

"CSAN Blackheart. Captain Anderton of Exeter Station," the woman said, standing to attention. "This is a most unexpected call."

"Captain Anderton, Commander Jameson. It's good to see you, ma'am. Requesting permission to dock and debrief." Jameson also stood at attention. Even though he had lived a few days on the other side of war, it was easy to slip back into the duplicitous character he'd lived previously.

"Granted, commander. I want to see you in the war room as soon as you arrive stationside. Please sync your logs with the station."

“Aye, ma’am.”

It was a terse conversation, but it was important for Jameson and the crew of the Blackheart to see they weren’t treated as hostiles. All they could do now was hope that the tampered logs and Jameson’s acting skills were good enough to convince Alliance intelligence they were still loyal, and to reintegrate them into the fleet.



Jameson hadn’t met Anderton directly before today. His former captain had spoken highly of her, but when they were stationside two weeks ago, the station’s civilian administrator—Gray—was their point of contact. Anderton was standing on the platform at the front of the war room by the main information table, conversing with another officer. The insignia on his left jacket breast indicated he held the same rank as Jameson.

“That’s all, commander,” Anderton said as she noticed Jameson walk up the steps.

“Aye, ma’am.” The man stood to attention, saluted, then moved to leave the war room, giving Jameson a quick nod on his way past.

He took the commander’s place opposite Anderton and saluted. “Commander Jameson of the Blackheart, reporting as requested.”

“Ah yes,” Anderton replied, tapping the desk in front of her. “Jameson, Blackheart,” she recited while typing. “Our database suffered some damage that our analysts are working hard to repair at the moment. I have little information about your ship I’m afraid, commander, and

the Blackheart's black box is still being analyzed. Care to give me a brief rundown of your report?" There was a hint of skepticism in her voice, and it was apparent that she'd recently been through some form of betrayal herself.

"Of course, ma'am. We departed from this station two weeks ago on a mission to the Wan-Nakhon system, BK-tack-fifteen-eighty-two. Reports of a small pirate force in the area we were to engage and eradicate. We arrived, made contact with the local inhabitants, and began patrolling the system, paying particular attention to the asteroid belts."

Anderton manipulated a regional space chart between them, plotting a course between Exeter and Wan-Nakhon, bringing up details of each system in smaller pop-ups. Wan-Nakhon was marked as hostile territory, having been recently claimed by the Union.

"After a few days, our fleet was ambushed by a hostile fleet," Jameson continued. "As we engaged them, nearly all our ships suffered a widespread mutiny. We fought internally while struggling to hold off an external foe."

"I see," Anderton nodded, trying to bring up details of Jameson's fleet on the table to no avail. She wanted to corroborate everything he said, but frustratingly could only take his word for now. She moved her attention from the table to the man opposite her. "What happened next?"

"Every ship in our fleet ended up either defecting or destroyed, ma'am." He spoke with professionalism, but gritted his teeth at the end of the sentence to let Anderton know the ordeal had personally affected him.

"And yet I see the Blackheart is neither destroyed nor absent. How did you escape?"

"I was on the bridge, ma'am. The Blackheart's XO. I

called a general surrender when our captain was incapacitated. We docked with a Union corvette carrier and offloaded many prisoners and injured persons. Then, as they were distracted, I had around fifty officers left aboard who were able to overpower the Union mutineers and regain control of the ship. We pulled away from the carrier, fought our way clear of the fleet, and entered warp to return to Exeter.”

Anderton nodded suspiciously. “Sounds easy when you put it like that.”

“It was no mean feat, Captain. We lost many good officers across the ship. We’re offloading the dead and injured to your station now.”

Jameson maintained a formal stature the whole time he spoke, while putting little emotion into his speech. His story was convincing enough, and Anderton was sure the Blackheart’s logs would validate everything he said in time.

“Alright commander, we’ll get you a room stationside for a couple days’ RNR. The Blackheart’s gonna be out of action for some time while she gets repairs, and like you said yourself she currently lacks a captain. We’ll see what duties the fleet would have you fill in the meantime.” Anderton stood to attention and saluted. “That’s all, commander.”

Jameson returned the salute. “Thank you, captain,” then left the war room.



Just under a week later, Jameson found himself sitting in the captain’s chair of the Potrebu, an edics-class destroyer,

surrounded by the remnants of his allies from the Blackheart plus another hundred or so officers. The ship was much smaller than his previous cruiser and boasted a fraction of its firepower, but it was his first full command.

The repercussions of the mass insurgency throughout the galaxy left the Alliance navy severely understaffed. Hundreds of thousands of officers died in the initial conflict, with even more switching sides to the Union and taking assets with them. Hundreds of ships had to be brought out of mothballs, and a mass recruitment drive began. Tens of thousands of cadets were pushed to the end of academy training into active duty, and an equal number of previously discharged persons were recalled. It wasn't far from conscription.

This was a perfect situation for Jameson and his crew. The Blackheart's logs were analyzed, but weren't given the scrutiny their situation warranted. All but one of the survivors were placed on the Potrebu, with the last one being absorbed into Anderton's crew stationside.

Their ruse worked.

Jameson was also now aware from Oyekan that there were still other high-ranking officers throughout the Alliance navy that supported the Union movement, and while he didn't know who they were, he knew he had to align himself with them as soon as possible for whatever the next maneuver was. Until then, he needed to keep his head down, follow orders, and play the part of an Alliance commander in charge of a destroyer. It shouldn't be hard.

"Commander Jameson," Anderton's voice echoed through the bridge of the Potrebu. Her image looked over the bridge crew from the main viewscreen. *"I'm transmitting your orders now. You're to escort a pair of freighters from here to the*

Doven system, wait with them to transfer cargo, then escort them back here. The freighters are ready to leave when you are.”

“Acknowledged, captain,” Jameson responded with a nod.

Anderton paused momentarily, examining his face once more for any sign of disingenuity. She didn’t trust him, so she was quite content to send him on a mission far away from her system. *“Fly safe, Potrebu.”*

“Thank you, ma’am.”

The viewscreen flicked back to its standard arrangement, a forward-facing camera, a situation display of the local grid, and various other intelligence.

“Helm, pull us away from the station, bring us into formation with our freighters, and align us towards the Doven system.”

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman responded.

The Potrebu gracefully detached from Exeter Station, spun around and lifted above the myriad of other ships docking and undocking from the superstructure. Above the station, two enormous freighters hung in space, already pre-aligned towards some distant star. These freighters dwarfed the destroyer, and were each easily as big as—if not bigger than—a corvette carrier like the Hermes.

“We’re aligned, sir,” the helmsman announced once they were in position. “The freighters have a max-speed of three AUPS. We’re calibrated to fleet-warp at your mark.”

“Let’s go to Doven, ensign.”

The three ships emitted a brief but brilliant flash of blue light, and were gone from local space.



Headaches come in many different forms, some more painful than others. The headache that Felysta woke up with was blinding and debilitating, like she'd been stabbed in the head with an icepick. A severe migraine felt like it was drawing all the blood from her body to one throbbing spot just above her ear. It was the worst pain she'd ever felt in her life.

The muscles in her arms tensed and she crept a hand slowly up to her head, holding it a centimeter from the excruciating pain for a few moments, then gently dabbing the bald spot, finding a scar and several stitches in her scalp near her ear. It didn't hurt to touch. Her skin felt smooth and the stitches spiky, but the wound slowly reminded her of what happened.

The Blackheart.

The last thing she remembered was leaving the Wan-Nakhon system with lieutenant Vasquez.

She slowly opened her eyes to survey her surroundings. A bleak, dilapidated set of quarters that looked like it hadn't been used in a century. Bare walls, empty shelves, broken furnishings, thread-bare carpet. The bed she laid on was hard as a rock, with no sheets. She swung her legs round to sit on the edge of the bed, still reeling from the agony in her skull. One—thankfully dim—light had been left on by whomever put her here, so at least the room had power.

For several minutes, she stared at the floor, carefully tracing her fingers around the bald patch on her scalp, while focusing on some of the carpet fibers. It took some

time for her to get accustomed to the migraine to the point she could think about anything at all.

Then there was just a single thought in her mind: “*Water,*” she mumbled. Slowly standing up from the bed and walking to the bathroom in a haze, tapping the lights on the way in and finally catching sight of herself in the mirror. Dried blood and grime caked her uniform. It was creased and torn up as if she’d been dragged through garbage. Dried blood and grease matted her hair, and her face was bruised and swollen. Not to mention the bald patch and fresh scar above her ear.

She approached the sink and turned on the tap. It gurgled and echoed as the pipes came back to life after a long time of inactivity, then finally rewarded her patience with water. She washed her face slowly, being mindful of her agonizing headache, taking a fingerful of water at a time to the detriment. Showering would’ve been preferable, but there was no way she could manage a shower in her current state. She managed a few sips of water from the tap before returning to the bed.

“*Strike wing epsilon,*” Felysta whispered to herself, trying to jog her memory. “*Unidentified squadron... requesting intentions...*” Pieces of the puzzle slowly revealed themselves to her, though a lot was still unclear.

For the next hour, she tried to recall her last memories, reciting anything she could remember hearing or saying before the blackout. Her head exploded in pain with every heartbeat, but she slowly explored the room. None of the electronic equipment was usable, the door was locked, nothing turned on other than the tap. All she had was light and water.

“*The Blackheart,*” she whispered. “*Take command of the*

Blackheart.” The throbbing around her temple suddenly amplified, as echoes of Jameson’s mutiny found their way back to her. “*Oh, fuck you, Nicholas Jameson.*”

Another hour passed before she heard rustling outside the quarters’ entrance. Felysta’s head still pounded and she was exhausted. There was no fight in her. She sat on the edge of the bed, staring towards the door as it opened.

Two guards entered with their weapons trained on Felysta, followed by a civilian. The guards wore a uniform she didn’t recognize.

“Captain Felysta Sandorn,” the civilian announced. “I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m glad to see you’re awake at last. We were pretty worried about you there for the last eight days.”

“Eight...” she repeated. No wonder she felt so unwell.

“Yes, captain. Eight days,” the man gaped his eyes and exaggerated a nod condescendingly. “Now, there are a lot of people stationside who’d love to meet you, but we need to make sure you’ve got your strength before they all come in and thank you for your little maneuver back in Wan-Nakhon.” The sarcasm in his voice alluded more to hatred than any actual gratitude. “As soon as that head of yours is all better, I’ll sort out some visiting hours for you.”

“Stationside?” Felysta asked, ignoring the threats.

“Yes. You’re aboard Hanford station, a prison colony. Quite nice accommodation, don’t you think?” The administrator gestured broadly with his palms up, looking at the walls and ceiling. “Anyway, I’m sure you’re very busy, so we’ll leave you to it. Make sure to get well-rested.”

The administrator and his retinue left the room, locking

the door on their exit.

Felysta slumped back down and resumed her examination of the carpet fibers, once again consumed by pain.

She was going to be here for a long time.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *THE BLACKHEART*.

If you have a moment, please share a review online where you purchased the book or on Goodreads. I'd be thrilled to read your reaction, no matter how short. Not only does your rating and review really help to get this in front of more people who enjoy space operas, but it also encourages me to create more stories.

Please visit www.thumbedford.com to find the latest information about new releases, artwork, and more. Thank you again to all new and returning readers.

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Thom Bedford

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thom grew up in suburban Cheshire, England with his parents and brother. Since childhood he has had a propensity for creativity, whether it be writing, building models, painting, designing graphics and technology, or programming.

After studying Computer Science at The University of Manchester, he started working as a Software Developer.

Following in his father's footsteps, he worked as a Technical Consultant in London for several years, then in Data Warehousing back in Manchester.

In his spare time, Thom still writes, builds models, paints, and programs, but nowadays he also listens to a lot of music, watches a lot of films, reads, and enjoys playing video games.

His love for science fiction comes from blockbuster films like *Starship Troopers*, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. B-movies like *Wing Commander*, *Pitch Black*, and *Iron Sky*. TV shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Expanse*, and *Stargate*. Video games like *Homeworld*, *EVE-Online*, and *Stellaris*. Books like Jack Campbell's *Lost Fleet* series, Jasper T. Scott's *Dead Space* series, and David Weber's *Honor Harrington* series. In other words, sci-fi—particularly space opera—in any media.

Thom currently lives in Cheshire, England, with his wife Helen and their two cats.