

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA

EPISODE 11

**BORN
OF THE
ASHES**



Ryk Brown

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BORN OF THE ASHES

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #11: Born of the Ashes
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CHAPTER ONE

Lieutenant Telles sat on the edge of the floor of the Kalibri airship, his feet firmly planted on the foot rails outside and slightly below the bottom of the small Corinairan aircraft. He looked out at the city below. Sydney was an impressive city, with its bays and numerous rivers snaking their way inland. Although the landscape and vegetation were alien to him, there was still a familiarity about all. He had experienced the same feeling on numerous excursions to the surface. First, in Geneva. Then in Port-Gentil, Miami, and Winnipeg. It seemed that there were similarities in all places inhabited by humans. The environment and landscape might change, but the many ways that human beings created their pockets of civilization all shared common threads, even a thousand light years from his own homeworld.

“Winnipeg was greener,” Master Sergeant Jahal said over the lieutenant’s helmet comms.

“Indeed it was,” the lieutenant agreed. He shifted his position for the third time since departing the airfield.

Master Sergeant Jahal noticed the frequency with which his commanding officer adjusted his position. “Are you certain you’ve fully healed, sir?”

The lieutenant did not respond, instead only looking at him from the corner of his eye.

“How many of these security inspections are we going to do today?” the master sergeant asked.

“At least six.”

“Don’t you think that’s pushing it, sir?”

“Why? Afraid you’ll get tired?”

“Never happen, sir,” the master sergeant grumbled. “Still, four would make more sense, don’t you think? I mean, they’re just recruiting stations, after all.”

“Perhaps,” the lieutenant admitted, “but four out of twenty-eight of them have been attacked by Jung sympathizers in the last two days. How many people do you think will volunteer to help defend the planet if they’re getting killed just standing in line to sign up?”

“Not as many, I suspect. Then again, the ones that do will be the truly brave ones, will they not?”

“Or the truly stupid,” the lieutenant added, still without smiling. “Besides, I suspect that the demonstrations are being organized by Jung operatives.”

“Or Jung sympathizers,” the master sergeant said, “whose lives were better under Jung rule. You yourself stated that the governments of this world were, for the most part, divided, self-serving, and corrupt. Surely many of the Terrans recognized this as well, and favored Jung rule over the previous ruling factions?”

“A possibility,” the lieutenant agreed, “but until proven otherwise, it is better we assume that the Jung are still present on this world, and are well supported and organized. To assume otherwise would be unwise.”

“Of course,” the master sergeant agreed.

“*Lieutenant,*” the pilot called over the comms. “*Urgent traffic from the Sydney recruiting station.*”

They are under fire.”

“So much for the inspection,” the master sergeant said.

Lieutenant Telles lowered his helmet visor, covering the upper half of his face. “Take us in low and fast,” he ordered the pilot as the tactical displays came to life on the inside of his visor. “Approach with the fire zone on our starboard side. I want to size up the situation and decide where to put down.”

“Yes, sir,” the pilot responded over the helmet comms. *“I’ll put the fire zone on our starboard.”*

“Weapons hot, gentlemen,” the lieutenant added. “Maximum force. If it’s armed and doesn’t ID as a friendly on your visor, kill it.”

“And if it’s a local trying to fight back?” the master sergeant wondered.

“Then we’ll apologize later,” the lieutenant answered coldly. “I’ve already lost a quarter of my platoon, so I don’t mind wasting a few innocent Terrans to ensure I don’t lose any more.”

The Kalibri airship dropped down to just above the height of the tallest buildings in the city as it continued to advance toward the recruitment station at the city center. The lieutenant looked forward and slightly right of their flight path as a distant explosion sent a fireball expanding upward.

“Sydney station, Telles. Inbound with four, thirty seconds out. Say your sit.”

“Telles, Sydney station, Sergeant Mikovo,” the voice responded excitedly over the lieutenant’s helmet comms. *“We’re taking fire from the north and east rooftops. Also from the west at street level. Locals have scattered. They’re popping grenades every few seconds, as well as a few vehicles rigged to explode. Estimate force strength at ten to twelve! We’re outnumbered four to one!”*

“Mikovo, Telles. Is the incoming projectile or energy weapons?”

“I’m pretty sure all incoming fire is projectile, sir! Yes, that’s right! No energy weapons yet!”

“Very well. Where do you want us, Sergeant?”

“The rooftops to the west are clear! If you can get an angle on the rooftop shooters to our north and east, it would sure help!”

“Understood. Targets lighting up now,” the lieutenant answered as red icons representing hostile targets began appearing on the inside of his helmet visor.

“Those locals won’t last long at four to one,” the master sergeant declared.

“We’ll have to narrow the odds for them,” the lieutenant responded. “Pilot, drop down behind the gray building just west of the station, then pop ten meters straight up and we’ll take out the guys on the rooftop as we crest.”

“Copy that,” the Kalibri pilot answered as the airship began to descend between the buildings that rushed past them on either side. *“Ten seconds.”*

Lieutenant Telles braced himself for the maneuver. The small airship pitched back slightly as its overhead forward-ducted fans rotated forward and their blades changed their pitch to increase the thrust potential. The airship came to an abrupt stop only a few meters from the gray building, about two meters below its rooftop. The lieutenant raised his weapon, as did all of his men.

“Popping up,” the pilot reported over their helmet comms.

A second later, the airship began to ascend rapidly. Lieutenant Telles felt the hundreds of tiny tubules in the legs of his primary combat garment as their fluid pressure increased, stiffening his legs to support him against the sudden increase in gravity as the airship ascended. The same thing

happened in his arms to assist him in holding his weapon up and ready. As his finger slid over the trigger, the combat systems built into his gear sensed that he was about to fire and a small red targeting reticle appeared on the inside of his visor. "I've got the two to the left, on the north building," he announced, his voice straining against the additional gravity.

"I've got the two to the east of the station," the master sergeant chimed in as the building rooftop passed by and dropped below them.

The lieutenant felt his stomach change and his body become lighter as the airship abruptly slowed its ascent. He moved his weapon slightly, causing the targeting reticle on his visor to move onto the first target. He pressed his trigger, allowing three small bolts of energy to leave his weapon. Without hesitation, he immediately moved his weapon a bit more to the left, putting the targeting reticle on the inside of his visor onto the next shooter on the distant rooftop, and quickly ended his life as well.

There was a series of thuds across the bottom of the airship that rocked it violently.

"We're taking fire!" the pilot announced.

The airship spun to its left and rolled forty-five degrees to the same side. The lieutenant held on to the side rail of the doorway tightly with his left hand as the airship rolled back level and then yawed sharply to the right.

"They're on the roof below us," one of the lieutenant's men sitting on the other side of the airship reported as he opened fire. *"No shot."*

"Put us on the roof," the lieutenant ordered calmly.

"I don't think I have any choice!" the pilot announced as smoke began to pour from the underside of the airship.

The lieutenant felt the ship begin to fall from the sky. He looked down at the rooftop below them. It was only ten meters below and it was coming up toward them at alarming speed. "Bail out and engage!" the lieutenant ordered as he jumped from the falling airship. He glanced at his visor's tactical display as he fell, identifying the hostile targets on the rooftop below. There were four of them all together, two on either side of the falling Corinairan airship.

The legs of the lieutenant's suit stiffened once again, along with its pelvis and torso sections. As his feet touched the rooftop, the tubules around his knees softened to allow them to bend. His primary combat garment was working perfectly. He landed and rolled to his right, away from the falling airship which came crashing down a moment later. The roof moaned and cracked open as he came to his feet, and the center of it where the airship had fallen dropped nearly a meter.

The lieutenant opened fire as he came to his feet, killing the enemy combatant to his left while Master Sergeant Jahal eliminated the one closest to him. "Sound off," the lieutenant ordered as he headed for the cockpit of the fallen airship.

"Jahal," his master sergeant led off.

The lieutenant stepped carefully into the rooftop depression that cradled the smoking airship wreckage.

"Alluti."

The lieutenant looked through the cockpit window. The Kalibri's pilot was unconscious, his face and chest covered with blood, and his right shoulder sitting unusually lower than his left.

"Sinnott."

The lieutenant paused, focusing his gaze on the unconscious pilot as his helmet's sensors scanned the man for signs of life. A moment later, the pilot's heart and respiratory rates appeared on the visor next to the pilot. "Jahal, call for a medevac," he ordered as he pulled at the door but found it stuck. "Alluti, Sinnott. Secure the rooftop. Make sure no more hostiles are coming up the stairs." The lieutenant stepped back a meter and raised his weapon as he adjusted its power setting. He took aim and fired, blasting a chunk out of the airship's fuselage just aft of the cockpit door's latch.

"Telles, Mikovo. You guys all right?"

"We're good," the lieutenant answered. "However, our airship is down, and the pilot is injured. They must have had guys on the way up when we came in. How are you and your men doing?"

"We're good for the moment. With those rooftop shooters gone, we're free to maneuver down here. We're going to sweep the north and east buildings for hostiles."

"We'll sweep this building on our way down," the lieutenant told him.

The roof groaned and dropped another meter, causing the lieutenant to nearly lose his footing. He could hear the sound of bending metal and feel rivets popping beneath his feet. He stepped up to the wreckage again and grabbed the door handle. He tensed his muscles and felt the tubules in his left hand and forearm tighten once more as he twisted the handle and pulled at the door, forcing the latch free and pulling the door open. He reached inside and released the pilot's flight harness and pulled him from the wreckage, dragging him away in a backwards walk up the side of the drooping ceiling.

"Hostiles coming up the stairwell," Sinnott called over the lieutenant's helmet comms. He could hear Sinnott and Alluti firing as he pulled the Kalibri's unconscious pilot away from the wreckage and onto the undamaged section of the roof.

"I've got him," the master sergeant said as he grabbed the unconscious pilot's jumpsuit and continued pulling him toward the side of the rooftop. "I'll stabilize him and wait for the medevac."

The lieutenant spun around as the roof under the wreckage behind him gave way and the fallen Kalibri airship fell along with it, sending a wave of dust into the air. His visor immediately showed him the width of the opening, and the lieutenant began to run toward the cloud of dust coming out of the collapsed rooftop. Four strides later, as he reached the edge of the hole, he leapt, sailing easily across the hole as he passed through the cloud of dust and landed on the roof on the far side. Letting his momentum continue to carry him, he continued running across the rooftop as energy weapons fire began to spray the rooftop at a shallow angle from his right. Several bolts of energy struck him, on his right thigh, abdomen, and chest, nearly knocking him over. He raised his weapon to his right and fired blindly, adjusting his aim as he turned his head and his visor identified the location of the shooters for him. They were on another rooftop, one that had not had hostile targets on it moments ago.

The lieutenant came to a halt, nearly falling against the stairwell entrance shack. He quickly rolled along the wall and ducked inside the doorway to escape the incoming energy weapons fire. "Jahal, Telles. Keep down. Hostiles on the rooftop to the north. They're using energy weapons, so they're probably Jung. Tell that medevac to stay clear until we deal with them."

"Copy that," Master Sergeant Jahal answered over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Alluti, Sinnott, situation."

"Blasting our way down, sir," the lieutenant heard Sinnott announce over the comms, the sound of his men's energy weapons blasting away in the background as it also echoed up through the stairwell.

“We’ve got energy weapons fire coming from a rooftop to the north,” the lieutenant reported. “Hold position while I sweep the top floor behind you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Telles, Mikovo. Which building is the fire coming from?*”

“North of us. The next building over. Tall and brown.”

“*Got it,*” the sergeant answered over the comms. “*We’ll try to clear it first so the medevac can get in.*”

“Watch yourselves, Sergeant. They’re probably Jung regulars.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant answered over the comms.

“Jahal, sit-rep.” the lieutenant inquired over his helmet comms.

“*I’ve got this.*” the master sergeant answered with all the usual confidence of a Ghatazhak.

“Sinnott, Alluti, I’m coming in behind you,” the lieutenant announced as he moved toward the stairs.

“*We’ll push them down a level and keep them from advancing while you sweep the top floor.*” Sinnott said as he and Alluti continued to fire.

“Copy that,” the lieutenant answered as he descended the stairwell, his weapon held high and ready. As he made his way quickly down the stairs, his peripheral vision watched the tactical display on the inside of his helmet visor. Even in the poorly lit stairwell, the enhanced vision system of his combat helmet made everything easy to see in great detail. “Thermals,” he instructed his combat systems. A moment later, faint thermal images appeared on his visor, showing the varying temperatures in the stairwell, most of which were relatively cold.

The lieutenant passed through the doorway from the stairwell onto the top floor of the building. It was a large, open office area, with desks and cubicles scattered about. Much of the ceiling had collapsed, shaken loose by the collapse of the ceiling elsewhere on this same floor. Many of the overhead lights were out. What few that were still operating flickered on and off, casting pulsing shadows across the room. “Penetrating scans,” he whispered. Red outlines of people on their knees, hiding behind partitions and desks appeared. The lieutenant scanned the wall on the far side of the room. The penetrating scans indicated that the offices along the far side were empty. “I am Lieutenant Telles of the Earth-Pentaurus Alliance! Stand and reveal yourselves, hands held high above your heads, or you shall be considered hostile and subject to the use of deadly force!”

One by one, every image shown kneeling began to rise, none of them wanting to be the recipient of the lieutenant’s idea of deadly force. The lieutenant kept his weapon ready as he watched each of them rise, waiting until his scans showed there to be no one still hiding. A quick count showed eight persons. “You, young lady,” he called to the woman nearest him. “What is your name?”

“April,” the frightened woman stammered, her hands held high.

“Do not worry, April. Unless you show hostile intent, you shall not be harmed. Do you understand?”

April nodded.

“Is there a room without windows nearby, one large enough for all of you?”

“The break room,” she mumbled, pointing toward the back of the room.

The lieutenant moved to his right, giving himself a clear line of sight to the doorway to the

indicated room on the opposite wall. "Magnify penetrating scans, twenty percent," he said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" April asked, believing the lieutenant was addressing her.

Lieutenant Telles held his left hand up to quiet her as he watched the display on the inside of his visor zoom in on the door on the far wall. The scan penetrated the wall, but revealed no bodies on the other side.

"Everyone will go into that room and remain there."

"Is it safe?" a man further back asked. "Something came crashing through the ceiling over..."

"Maybe we should all leave the building..." another woman interrupted.

"There are Jung sympathizers still in the building," the lieutenant explained, "possibly even Jung regulars. It is better you remain here for the time being. I will send one of my men to escort you all out after the building has been swept for combatants."

"But..."

"It was not a request," the lieutenant interrupted, sternly. "Move!"

All eight of the men and women turned and headed toward the break room door, their hands still held high. The lieutenant followed them across the room. "I will secure the door so that no one can enter."

"You're going to lock us in..."

"It is for your own protection," the lieutenant explained, knowing full well that he cared little for their safety. It was for his own safety, and the safety of his men, that he would confine these Terrans. Any one of them could be a Jung sympathizer as well, or even a Jung agent, and he had no time to determine the truth at the moment.

He followed April as she followed the rest of her coworkers into the break room. Once she was inside the door, she turned to face him, her eyes wide with fear. "Do not worry, my men are driving the combatants downward as I speak. You will not be in here for long."

"But the ceiling," she said, her lower lip quivering as she spoke.

"The damage is on the other side of the building. You will be safe here." Without further words he pulled the door closed, wondering what guilt felt like. He had deceived them, for none of them were safe at the moment.

The lieutenant pulled a small device from the utility compartment on his left thigh armor. He hurried the device on the door handle and attached a small wire to the device. He then attached a small sensor to the other end of the wire stuck it to the door frame. He pulled a pin from the device, arming it. If any of the Terran captives tried to open the door, the result would be unpleasant at best. "Do not attempt to open this door," he called through the door.

"Why?" April's voice called from the other side.

"Trust me," he told her, the irony of his statement striking him as odd. "You will not enjoy the result."

"How long do we have to wait in here?" the woman called from behind the door.

"Until someone comes to release you."

Lieutenant Telles turned and headed back toward the stairwell on the far side of the room. "To floor secure," he reported over his helmet comms. "Eight noncombatants are secure in the back room."

of this floor. I'm descending to your level now."

"All known combatants have been eliminated, sir," Sinnott reported over the comms. *"We'll sweep the rest of the floors on our way down."*

"Very good," the lieutenant responded as he entered the stairwell. "I'm heading back up to the roof." The lieutenant hit the stairs running, ascending the four flights and finding himself once again at the doorway to the roof less than a minute later. He peeked out the door and saw the energy weapons fire on the next rooftop as it rained down on the street below. He ducked down low and ran out onto the rooftop, heading for the edge of the roof closest to the enemy position. Within a few strides, the energy weapons fire had been redirected toward him, causing him to dive for cover and crawl the remaining few meters to the roof's edge. "I take it you're not having much luck up here, Jahal?"

"No, sir," the master sergeant answered over the comms from the far side of the rooftop.

"How's the pilot?"

"Thready pulse, labored breathing, tracheal shift. Pretty sure he's developing a pneumo."

"Decompress him," the lieutenant ordered as he activated his weapon camera. The image from his gun camera appeared on the inside of his visor as he swung his weapon up over the ledge and took aim, spraying the edge of the rooftop from where the enemy was firing.

"I was going to, but my med-kit got smashed when I landed," the master sergeant answered. *"Don't suppose you can run yours over."*

"Not unless you want to be treating me as well," the lieutenant answered as he fired another volley at the enemy position. "They've got at least a floor on us. There's no way I'm going to take them out from here. What's the ETA on the medevac?"

"Eight minutes."

"Mikovo, Telles. Situation?"

"These are definitely Jung regulars, sir!" the sergeant answered over the comms, the sound of both incoming and outgoing energy weapons fire in the background. *"They're barricaded in there pretty well! There's at least ten of them on the ground floor. No way we're getting to the rooftop. Even if we get past the guys on the ground floor, there's bound to be more of them on the way up!"*

"Stay calm, and try to keep them occupied for a few more minutes, sergeant," the lieutenant ordered. "Then fall back to a safe distance. I'm dropping that building."

"Sir, I can't guarantee you that there aren't any noncombatants in there," the Australian sergeant warned, concern evident in his voice.

"I didn't ask," the lieutenant said as he switched channels. "Aurora, Telles. Requesting immediate air strike on enemy position. Coordinates to follow."

"What's going on, Major?" Captain Scott asked as he entered the Aurora's flight operations center.

"Lieutenant Telles is requesting an air strike, sir," the major answered.

"Do we have assets in range?"

"Nearest patrol is about ten minutes away, *if* they go sub-orbital to get there, but that's not the

problem. The target is a building full of suspected Jung regulars, and it's right next to the Sydney recruitment post."

"That's right in the middle of the city's business district, isn't it?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir, it is."

"What do the overheads look like?"

"Crawling with innocent civilians," the major answered, "but it gets worse. They're using energy weapons, so our Talons can't get close enough to strafe the rooftop with low-power plasma shotguns. They'd be taking fire before they got close enough. If we take a missile shot, like the lieutenant suggested..."

"We destroy the entire building," Nathan finished for the major.

"And probably damage at least one or two of the neighboring buildings, depending on which way the target falls."

"Any options?" Nathan asked.

Major Prechitt turned to look at the captain. "Yes, sir. One. But it puts a valuable asset at risk. That's why I called you in."

"*Telles, Aurora combat,*" Mister Willard's voice called over Lieutenant Telles's helmet comm. "*Fall back to safe distance. Strike inbound. Time on target: one minute.*"

The lieutenant changed channels on his comms. "Mikovo, Telles. Fall back. Aurora combat reports air strike in fifty seconds."

"*From where?*" the sergeant wondered. "*I've got no inbounds on my aerals.*"

"Just fall back, now!" the lieutenant ordered. He tried never to raise his voice during combat, but just added to the already high adrenaline levels that clouded the thinking of most men. However, over the past five days, he had learned that lesser trained men sometimes required such vocal emphasis to get them to respond more quickly.

"*Yes, sir!*"

"Keep your head down as well, Jahal," the lieutenant said to his master sergeant on the other side of the rooftop.

"*Telles, Aurora combat. Twenty seconds. If possible, distract the target until strike.*"

"Aurora combat, Telles. Understood." The lieutenant checked his aerial scans once more, but still there was no indication of incoming aircraft. "What the hell?" he said to himself as he held his weapon up over the short rooftop wall and sprayed the top edge of the target building to get the enemies to duck down. "One med-kit, coming up!" he yelled as he rose to his feet and ran toward the master sergeant. Energy weapons fire from the target building returned a moment later as the enemy combatants tried to target the lieutenant as he leapt across the gaping hole in the roof.

As he sailed over the Kalibri wreckage at the bottom of the hole one floor below him, a bright blue-white flash caused his visor displays to disappear. They returned a moment later, just as he landed and rolled on the other side of the hole. He came to his feet, his weapon high and aimed in the direction of the target building across the street, but he did not fire. There was no need.

Fifteen meters above the target building and slightly to one side of its center was the Falco

hovering over the enemy, her four lift turbines screaming, as she pounded the rooftop below with the twin plasma cannons in her nose turret. As the enemy combatants on the rooftop attempted to return fire, the roof beneath began to collapse under the incessant pounding of plasma shots raining down from above. The Falcon continued to fire, shaking the target building just short of collapse.

The lieutenant turned toward his master sergeant a few meters away, kneeling next to the critically wounded Corinairan pilot. He smiled as he pulled his med-kit out of his right thigh compartment and tossed it to Master Sergeant Jahal. "Better decompress that guy before he dies on you, Master Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," the master sergeant answered as he opened the med-kit and got to work.

Lieutenant Telles walked over to the edge of the roof and looked at the street below as combatants ran from the building as its floors collapsed downward, one floor at a time. He took aim and began easily picking off the fleeing enemy, one man at a time. Within seconds, Sergeant Mikovo and his men had advanced once again and were dealing with the rest of the enemy combatants as they poured out into the street. The lieutenant ceased fire, turned around, and walked back to the master sergeant. "How's he doing?"

"He's breathing better now," the master sergeant answered. "I think he'll survive until the medevac gets here."

"*Telles, Falcon,*" Loki's voice called over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Falcon, go for Telles," the lieutenant answered.

"*Target destroyed,*" Loki reported over the comms. "*Anything else we can help you with, sir?*"

The lieutenant turned back toward the Falcon, still hovering over the collapsing building. "That should do it, gentlemen. Thank you," he said as he raised his helmet visor.

"*Telles, Falcon. Glad to be of help, Lieutenant. Talons will be on station in two, medevac in three. Falcon departing.*"

The lieutenant watched as the antique Takaran interceptor's back end dipped slightly to starboard and began to accelerate upward with surprising quickness. Two seconds later, just as it was becoming too small to see against the blue Australian sky, it disappeared in another flash of blue-white light.

Lieutenant Telles turned back toward the master sergeant, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "I'm starting to like those guys."

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Doc?" Nathan asked as he stepped into Doctor Chen's office.

"Yes, sir," the young doctor answered from behind her desk.

Nathan could see the frustration on her face. "Jessica?"

"Of course. She's got to be the worst patient I've ever had," the doctor complained. "Considering the seriousness of her injuries, you would think that she would be more cooperative."

"What is she doing?"

"Well, for one, she is constantly asking my staff to get her status reports on everything from the surface campaigns to the surveys of the Jar-Keurog."

Nathan smiled. "She doesn't like being out of touch." Nathan sat down across the desk from his medical chief. "You want me to talk to her? Tell her to stop pestering your staff?"

“I’m not worried about the staff,” Doctor Chen assured him. “They know to ignore her requests. They’ve got enough work to do.”

“Yeah, I noticed things are still hopping around here,” Nathan noted, his tone turning more somber.

“We’ve been lucky so far,” Doctor Chen told him. “However, if Jessica doesn’t relax and allow her nanites to do their work, she may not be as lucky.”

“I thought she was doing better?”

“She is, but there was a lot of tissue damage throughout her body. The decompression sickness should have killed her. Had it not been for the nanites, it likely would have, even with the hyperbaric treatments.”

“But the nanites will repair the damage, won’t they?” Nathan couldn’t imagine the Aurora without his security chief and close friend.

“Yes, despite her best efforts to impede their progress, they should be able to repair everything. But the more active she is, the longer it takes. As you know, we have not yet figured out why the nanites cause so much discomfort to Terrans. Lieutenant Commander Nash is carrying a heavier than average load of nanites, requiring considerable levels of analgesics to control the pain.”

“So, she’s being doped up,” Nathan commented.

“There’s a war on, Captain. A lot of people are in pain. I cannot continue to waste analgesics on patients who are in large part responsible for much of their own pain.”

The light went on. “Ah, yes. I see your point.” Nathan stood again. “I’ll make sure Jessica sees as well, Doctor. I assure you.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

Nathan smiled as he turned to exit. “Of course, I may need a bed myself, after I threaten to turn off her pain meds, that is.”

“I’ll make sure the medics are standing by, Captain,” the doctor quipped.

Nathan left the doctor’s office and stepped through the corridor separating the main treatment area from the recovery unit. He made his way through the overcrowded recovery room, where as many as twelve beds had been squeezed into a space designed to hold half that number. In the far back corner lay his security chief. Nathan noticed the empty bed in the curtained cubicle to her right. “What do they do with Synnda?” he asked as he stepped into Jessica’s cubicle.

“Daily nanite reprogramming,” Jessica mumbled as she tried unsuccessfully to find a comfortable position in which to lie.

Nathan noticed the pained expression on her face as she continued to shift in her bed. “Little suckers hurt, don’t they?”

“Unbelievably.”

“I seem to remember you telling Cameron she wasn’t tough enough when she complained about the nanite pain.”

“Yeah? Well, she didn’t have half the number I have in me.” Jessica arched her back slightly and moved her right arm toward her left side, tugging at the IV lines in the process. She looked at the IV tubing as she felt it tug at her skin from the tension. “If it weren’t for all the meds they’re pumping into me...”

“Yeah, about that,” Nathan began.

Jessica looked at him with one eyebrow raised.

“You know, there are a lot of people in pain, both on this ship and on the surface.”

“Well, tell them to get in line,” Jessica said, closing her eyes. “I was here first.”

Now Nathan’s eyebrow went up. “Doc says you need to rest more, fidget less. She says you’re making it take longer for the nanites to do their job.”

Jessica opened one eye at her captain’s sudden change in tone. “Relax, Skipper. I was kidding.”

“They can’t keep dumping three times the normal ration of pain meds into you, Jess...”

“Don’t you dare take away my pain meds,” she said, both eyes open.

“If you don’t lie still and rest, that is exactly what will happen, Lieutenant Commander.”

“All right, all right,” she acquiesced, laying her head back down against her pillow and closing her eyes again.

Nathan looked his friend over. Rather than standard patient wear, she was dressed in gym shorts and tank top. IV tubing was connected to her right arm, and a drain tube was coming out from under her tank top, a yellowish fluid visible through the tubing. An oxygen mask dangled under her chin, blowing the supplemental gas up to her mouth and nose. He suspected that she was supposed to be wearing the mask, but that the loose dangling position was the best that the staff was able to convince her to do. He glanced up at the display screen attached to the head of her bed that displayed her vitals. All were in the green ranges, which he knew to be a good sign. As they talked, he couldn’t help but notice some of the levels as they dipped down toward the red range of their respective meter tapes.

“So, you gonna fill me in, or what?” Jessica asked.

Nathan’s eyes left the display screen and angled back toward Jessica’s face below the screen. Both her eyes were open again. They were bloodshot, and slightly puffy, with some mottled discoloration on the skin below and around her orbits. Despite the green meter tapes on the display screen, his friend didn’t look well at all.

“Sit-rep?” Jessica asked, trying to snap her captain’s attention back to the topic. “How are things on Earth?”

“Uh, still pretty wild, I guess,” Nathan answered, his mind finally returning to the moment. “Prechitt has finally been able to stand down from the air strikes. They’ve pretty much forced whatever Jung are left to go underground for now.”

“I didn’t know we had enough Talons left to conduct air strikes,” Jessica said.

“We brought the Celestia’s Talons back to Earth as soon as she turned around. Took them most of the day to get here. As soon as they did, between them and our rail guns, we were able to achieve air superiority in a couple days.”

“How is Telles handling things?”

“A bit on the aggressive side, as you might imagine.”

Jessica smiled. “I’ll bet. EDF spec-ops are gonna love him.”

“He’s already met some of them. So far, the spec-ops units have been operating independently, seeking out underground Jung units on their own. Telles has been keeping clear of them, only stepping in to help when requested.”

“Why not just let the Ghatazhak kill them all?”

“I prefer to keep the Ghatazhak actions on Earth to a minimum for now. Things are chaotic enough down there without some super-soldiers storming in and blowing the hell out of everything.”

Jessica nodded agreement. “What about the Jung battleship? Find any goodies?”

“They shot the hell out of that, as well,” Nathan said. “Most of her compartments were vented to space during the Ghatazhak’s boarding raid. They swept the ship, found twenty or so survivors, most technical personnel. We’ve got them all locked up in the brig, waiting for things to die down a bit so that we can interrogate them. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Montgomery and his team are sifting through the Jar-Keurog’s control core, trying to determine if it’s safe to bring it back online. Problem is, it’s all in Jung, which no one speaks, let alone reads.”

“I thought Montgomery was on the Celestia?”

“I had the Falcon ferry Vlad, Montgomery, and a few of his team back, one by one. They’ve been here a couple days now. They only got the key decks re-pressurized this morning.”

“Maybe someone from Tanna?” Jessica said, her eyes closed again.

“Huh?”

“Maybe they can translate.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Nathan admitted sheepishly.

“They were occupied by the Jung for a few decades, weren’t they?”

“That they were.”

“Surely somebody there must read Jung,” Jessica commented.

“It’s worth trying,” Nathan agreed.

“Captain, tactical,” the tactical officer called over Nathan’s comm-set.

Nathan tapped the side of his earpiece to activate the comm-set. “Go ahead.”

“Four targets just launched from the surface, climbing fast. Tactical database shows them as ED fighters, sir. Suggest intercept until verified friendly.”

“Very well, launch intercepts,” Nathan ordered as he stood. “I’m on my way.” He turned and looked at Jessica. “Rest.”

“Just keep me in the loop,” she said, her eyes pleading.

Nathan smiled. “As long as you rest, we’ve got a deal.”

* * *

“Captain on the bridge!” the guard announced as Nathan emerged from the port bridge airlock corridor and moved toward the center of the bridge.

“Report,” Nathan called as he passed the tactical station, headed for his command chair at the center of the bridge.

“Four Talons have launched. Time to intercept is three minutes, sir,” the tactical officer reported.

“Any communication from the inbounds?” Nathan asked as he turned aft to face Naralena at the comm station.

“Just started hailing them, sir,” Naralena reported.

“Lead Talon?”

“On the comms, Captain. Talon Eight is lead.”

“Talon Eight, Aurora Actual,” Nathan called over his comm-set. “I need visual confirmation of

the targets.”

“Aurora Actual, Talon Eight. Understood. Two minutes out. We’ll intercept just before they clear the atmosphere.”

“Put the database readouts on the main view screen,” Nathan instructed his tactical officer. He watched as the specifications for the EDF fighters flashed onto the screen. “Eagle two twenty-fives,” he said more to himself than anyone else. He turned back toward the tactical station behind him. “I did my basic combat flight training in the two-seat variant.”

“They’re fast, that’s for sure,” the tactical officer said.

“Even faster once they clear the atmosphere. They use the same electrical propellant acceleration propulsion system that the Aurora uses. Gets them to max thrust really fast. Not much for onboard inertial dampening, though. When you punch an Eagle, you feel it.”

“One minute to intercept.”

“Picking up EDF identifier codes from all four targets,” the tactical officer reported. “They’re squawking as friendlies.”

“Codes confirmed?” Nathan asked.

“Outdated, but time cycled properly. According to the EDF database, they’re from the Intrepid.”

“She went down over Australia during the invasion,” Nathan said, “but that was more than two months ago.” He turned back to the main view screen, watching the target tracks as they converged with the tracks representing the Talons that were intercepting them.

“Aurora Actual, Talon Eight. We have visual on the targets. They’re EDF fighters all right. All four are Eagle two two fives. No weapons pods on the wings, and their weapons bays are open and empty. We’re moving in behind them now.”

“Comms coming in from the targets,” Naralena announced.

“Put them up,” Nathan ordered.

The overhead speakers crackled to life. *“UES Aurora, Slider Two Seven, leading a flight of four EDF Eagles. We are unarmed friendlies. Requesting permission to land and come aboard.”*

Nathan looked at Mister Navashee to his left.

“I’m not picking up any ordnance, Captain. In fact, they’re nearly out of propellant and they’re running their power plants at barely enough energy to fly. Our cargo shuttles have a more threatening sensor profile than these guys.”

“Set the deck green and hand them over to flight ops to be cycled aboard,” Nathan ordered. “Have security take them to medical arrival quarantine. As soon as they are cleared by medical, I want to speak to them.” Nathan turned and headed toward the exit. “I’ll be in the command briefing room with Montgomery and the cheng.”

The port and starboard spacecraft transfer airlocks opened simultaneously, their massive doors rising up into the overheads. Deck crew stopped what they were doing and watched as four unfamiliar fighters, two from each side of the aft end of the Aurora’s main hangar bay, rolled forward. The fighters rolled two thirds of the way across the hangar bay before they all pulled toward the center, coming to a stop in an overlapping parking pattern along the center of the hangar.

Eight armed Corinari security officers moved into position at the head of the newly arrived

fighters as the transfer airlocks slammed shut again in preparation to recover the intercepting Talon. Apprehensive deck crewmen rolled debarkation ladders up to the EDF fighters as their cockpits slid backward to reveal their pilots.

The EDF pilots looked just as apprehensive as the Corinairan deck crews, as they too stared at the unfamiliar spacecraft and equipment strategically placed about the Aurora's cavernous hangar bay.

Lieutenant Ketang removed his standard EDF issue flight helmet as the young deckhand climbed up the ladder to assist him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," the deckhand said in his typical Corinairan brogue.

The lieutenant looked at him funny. "Thanks..."

"McKenna, sir," the deckhand answered. "We'll take care of your spacecraft, sir."

"Very well," the lieutenant said, handing his helmet to the young man.

Mister McKenna placed the lieutenant's helmet on the platform beside him. "I'm not terribly familiar with this spacecraft, sir," he admitted. "Mind showing me how to safe your ejection seat?"

The lieutenant smiled as he rose up out of his seat and turned to face aft. "Red lever, just under that cowling, there," he explained, pointing. "Twist and pull up until it clicks and the red light under the cowling goes out."

"Ah, of course," Mister McKenna said as he followed the lieutenant's instructions and disabled the fighter's ejection systems.

"Where are you from, Mister McKenna?" the lieutenant asked as he climbed out of his spacecraft and set foot on the top of the boarding ladder.

"Aitkenna, sir."

"Aitkenna? Never heard of it."

"I wouldn't think so, sir," the deckhand said, a grin on his face. "It's a bit far from these parts, is."

Lieutenant Ketang nodded, unsure of what the young man meant.

"Those men will take you to medical, sir," Mister McKenna advised.

"Of course," the lieutenant said, noticing the men with the guns. "Of course."

* * *

"Gentlemen," Nathan greeted as he entered the command briefing room. Vladimir was staring intently at the schematics of the Jung battleship being displayed on one of the view screens by Lieutenant Montgomery and one of his scientists. "Interesting stuff, I take it?" he said as he took his seat at the head of the conference table.

"That ship is enormous," Vladimir exclaimed. "It has so many redundant systems," he added, shaking his head in disbelief, "I am amazed you were able to take her down."

"Luck, and a few good Ghatazhak," Nathan said. "What have you learned about the Jar-Keuro Lieutenant?"

"Not much, I am afraid," the lieutenant began. "At least we are confident that none of her basic life-support and power systems are rigged with fail-safes."

"Makes sense that they would not be," Vladimir said. "I mean, who would want their ship to explode if someone were trying to rescue them?"

“You might be surprised,” Lieutenant Montgomery commented. “For now, it appears safe to move about the ship freely. I would like to concentrate our efforts, for the moment, on closing up and pressurizing all her compartments once again. It will make our work considerably easier, to say the least.”

“Of course,” Nathan agreed. “Any chance her weapons or her data core will be accessible?”

“Anything is possible,” the lieutenant said. “However, the ship’s control codes will first need to be overridden. For this, I will require additional manpower, as well as someone to translate the Jar-Keurog language.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any manpower to spare, at the moment,” Nathan said.

“That’s an understatement,” Vladimir agreed. “I haven’t seen this ship so badly damaged since you first rammed her into the Campaglia.” Vladimir looked at the lieutenant, who looked somewhat annoyed by the lieutenant commander’s reference. “Sorry, Lieutenant. I forgot.”

Lieutenant Montgomery nodded, then turned back to the captain. “When I asked for additional manpower, I was referring to my people still aboard the Celestia.”

“She’s still five days out,” Nathan reminded him.

“Can you not ferry them over using the Falcon,” the lieutenant inquired, “just as you did with us?”

“I could, but I was planning on sending the Falcon to find you a translator on Tanna,” Nathan explained, “and that will take a couple days.”

“I see.”

“Which is more important to you right now, Lieutenant? A few more scientists or a Jar-Keurog translator?”

“As the scientists can do little without the translator, the decision is obvious.”

“The Aurora’s jump drive will be back online some time tomorrow,” Vladimir said. “We can jump out to the Celestia and pick up your people then.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Nathan said. “I feel awfully nervous without that jump drive online.”

“It will still require a few test jumps to calibrate the new emitters,” Vladimir warned, “but that should not take long.”

“As long as we can jump,” Nathan said. “That will be enough for me.” He turned back to Lieutenant Montgomery. “Once you have your translator and your team, how long will it take to override the Jar-Keurog’s control codes?”

“There is no way to tell at this point,” the lieutenant told him. “I cannot even promise that I can override the codes.”

“Can you give me a ballpark?” Nathan asked.

“A ballpark?” the lieutenant wondered, unfamiliar with the expression.

“A very rough estimate,” Nathan explained.

“Assuming that we can find a translator, and assuming that the computer systems of the Jar-Keurog are not considerably more sophisticated than any of the other Jung systems we have seen. Perhaps a week, maybe two.”

“Good enough,” Nathan said. “Make it your top priority,” he urged. “I want everything that she has to offer available to us as soon as possible. Like I said, it was one huge lucky break for us to capture that ship, and I want to take full advantage of her.”

“Of course.”

* * *

Josh’s visor became clear again as the Falcon’s jump flash subsided. He scanned his instruments and checked his position. After an auto-jump series of forty-six single light year jumps, he was exactly where he was supposed to be; deep in the heart of the 72 Herculis system, five minutes from Tanna.

“That wasn’t so hard,” Josh mumbled as he called up the Tanna control frequencies on his comms. “Tanna Control, this is the Falcon. I’m five minutes from orbit. Requesting clearance to land.”

“Falcon, Falcon, Tanna Control. What is the nature of your visit?”

“Tanna Control, Falcon. I have been sent by Captain Scott of the UES Aurora to speak on his behalf with Garrett Munras.”

Josh waited for a response, but got none. He checked his instruments again. He was now three minutes from his de-orbit burn point. For a moment, he wondered if they were going to deny him permission to land, and if so, how they might try to deny him access to the surface. His preflight briefing from Major Prechitt indicated that the Tannans did not yet possess any interceptors, and all of the surface defenses around the original Jung bases had been destroyed by the Ghatazhak.

He looked at his instruments again. Two minutes until burn. It was not terribly critical for him to hit his burn mark, however, at his current velocity it would take considerable propellant to make an open turn. It was now standard operating procedure to use the least amount of propellant possible, and the Aurora had no idea what resource challenges lay ahead of her. A small deceleration burn at the precise moment would allow Tanna’s gravity well to catch him and pull the Falcon into orbit.

One minute. “Tanna Control, Falcon. I’m still waiting for clearance, and I’m less than a minute from de-orbit burn.”

“Falcon, Tanna Control. You are cleared to land. Stand by to receive landing coordinates. Representatives of Mister Munras will meet you there. Tanna Control, out.”

Josh glanced at his comm-systems as the coordinates appeared on his message screen. He accepted the coordinates and adjusted his de-orbit burn rate so that he would be ready to break atmosphere as he came around the far side of the planet. “Landing coordinates received. Falcon out.”

Less than a minute later, Josh began his de-orbit burn, settling the Falcon into a shallow orbit around Tanna, his altitude above the planet decreasing as his orbital velocity decreased. Minutes later his ship pierced the upper layers of the atmosphere and his thermal shields began to heat up. As usual, he came in too hot and too fast, diving toward the surface at the very edge of the Falcon’s safe performance envelope. As he neared the surface, with his engines at zero thrust, he pulled his nose up gradually to level off a few kilometers from his touchdown point. The city slid under him at blinding speed as he throttled up his lift turbines to replace his diminishing lift as his ship’s forward velocity fell below its stall speed. He was no longer flying in the aerodynamic sense. Instead, he was hovering atop four powerful tails of thrust coming from under the Falcon’s lifting body. He pivoted the ship to the right, sliding sideways as he kept his nose facing the greeting party standing off to the side of the landing platform on the edge of the city. Moments later, the Falcon bounced gently onto her four

robust landing-gear wheels, and her lift turbines began to wind down.

Josh waited for the dust to settle before opening his canopy, a trick he learned years ago on the dust-swept surfaces of Haven. Tanna was far more lush and green than Haven could ever hope to be, even in its wettest seasons. He removed his flight helmet as his canopy rose. He took in a deep breath of fresh Tannan air. It was pleasant and moist, with the aroma of vast forests in the distance. Josh looked at the approaching group of men, four of them, their faces partially obscured by the large hooded cloaks worn by the men of Tanna. He stood tall as the access ladder deployed from the side of the Falcon, waving at the approaching men. He wondered if any of them were the same ones who had held guns to him and Loki during their first visit weeks ago.

Josh turned and climbed down the side of his ship, then pressed a button on the side access panel. The access ladder retracted, and the canopy of the ship closed and locked. He then punched in a code and placed the palm of his hand against the reader, arming the Falcon's security system. Captain Scott considered the Tannans allies, but allies or not, Josh was under strict orders not to allow anyone access to the Falcon's systems. With the ship properly locked down, any attempt to access the ship would result in the simultaneous destruction of the ship and its intruders. Josh paused for a moment, contemplating the fact that he had just booby-trapped his only means of return. Unfortunately, he had little choice, as he was under orders. There had been no contact with the people of Tanna since they had been liberated only a week earlier, and they could not risk the jump drive technology falling into the hands of the Jung, either directly or indirectly.

Josh turned and walked toward the approaching group of Tannans. "Gentlemen," he called out in as pleasant a tone as possible. "Any of you know Garrett Munras?"

"Young Joshua," a deep voice called from under the hood of the lead Tannan. The man removed his head to reveal his face as a broad smile fell upon it.

"Garrett!"

"It is good to see you well, young Joshua," Garrett replied. "From Loki's reports, I was worried for your health."

"All patched up and back in the thick of things," Josh declared.

"That is wonderful news, my young friend. And how are things on the Aurora?"

"A lot has happened in the last week, Garrett. Is there someplace nearby where we may talk?"

* * *

Nathan sat at the conference table in the command briefing room, examining the data pad just handed to him.

"Their ships have been scanned and inspected," Vladimir reported. "We did not find any Jung devices, hidden explosives, or any other devices that did not belong. They are standard issue Eagle two twenty-five fighters, all assigned to the Intrepid. Even their onboard service logs check out, right up to the day of the invasion."

"Their flight data recorders show no activity since the day of the invasion," Major Prechitt added. "other than today's flight that is."

"How the hell did they stay out of Jung hands for more than two months," Nathan wondered.

Lieutenant Telles entered the room, followed by two Corinari security guards. The lieutenant and

the two guards went to the right, making room for the four Eagle pilots and the two guards following them. The pilots lined up abreast and stood at attention as the trailing guards moved to the left and took up position.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Telles began as he moved to his position at the conference table, “may I present four of the Intrepid’s fighter pilots. Lieutenants Ketang, Doragor, Opwalla, and Sha. Lieutenants, this is Captain Scott.”

Nathan rose from his seat. “Gentlemen, it’s a pleasure to meet you all,” he said as he shook each pilot’s hand. As he finished, he turned slightly and pointed to his officers who had also risen to greet the pilots. “This is our CAG, Major Prechitt, and our cheng, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy. I assume that you’ve already met Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Ketang said as he shook the other officers’ hands. He looked at Nathan, his look of surprise on his face. “I thought William Roberts was the captain of the Aurora?”

“He was killed in action just after our departure from Earth,” Nathan explained, “as were most of our crew. I was the ranking officer at the time and thus assumed command.”

“Scott... aren’t you the president’s...”

“Yes, President Scott is my father.”

“Did the president survive?” the lieutenant wondered.

“Yes, Lieutenant, the President of the NAU is alive and well.”

“Sorry, sir,” Lieutenant Ketang apologized. “It’s just a lot to take in all at once.”

Nathan smiled as he stepped back to his seat. “Trust me, Lieutenant, I know the feeling well. You and your fellow pilots would please take a seat, we’d all like to hear how you managed to survive the invasion, as well as keep your birds hidden from the Jung for more than two months.”

“Of course, sir,” Lieutenant Ketang answered. The four pilots took their seats at the opposite end of the conference table. Lieutenant Telles also took a seat closer to the captain.

“Your transponders indicate you were all attached to the Intrepid,” Nathan, opening the conversation.

“That’s correct, sir. We were all on our second tour with the Intrepid. We had been in port for more than a month while the Intrepid was getting some refits. Most of our time had been spent plane side, flying surface training sorties and such. We’d only been back aboard a few days when the Jung showed up.”

“So, how’d you all end up hiding out on the surface?” Major Prechitt wondered.

“The Intrepid was put on alert as soon as the Jung showed up, and as best we can tell, she was tasked with protecting the OAP and the Celestia. Four frigates came in over the moon and launched on the OAP. The captain managed to take out most of the missiles, but at least one of them got through and the OAP and the Celestia were destroyed.”

Nathan noticed the lieutenant’s dour expression. “You’ll be happy to know that the Celestia escaped unharmed.”

Lieutenant Ketang’s eyes widened. He looked at his fellow pilots, all of whose expressions showed similar surprise. “Seriously? But how? Where did she...”

“Long story,” Nathan said, cutting him off. “Suffice to say that she is alive and well. She’ll be arriving in five days.”

Lieutenant Ketang smiled from ear to ear. "That's unbelievable."

"That's an understatement," Vladimir mumbled.

"Continue your story, Lieutenant," Nathan urged.

"Yes, sir. Well, after the Intrepid destroyed the frigates, she returned to low orbit to engage the Jung ships in orbit. We were launched to fly a ruse. We ran for the surface, as if we were going after Jung air assets supporting the ground attack. Instead, we came up behind one of the battle groups and finished off the already damaged elements."

"What happened to the Intrepid?" Vladimir asked.

"She went head-to-head with a few Jung ships, got pounded pretty bad. She was dead stick and on a collision course with a Jung cruiser. She tried to break the target up in the hope of surviving the collision, but it didn't work. Our last orders were to fight to bingo fuel, then ditch and go into hiding."

"Apparently, you did not ditch your spacecraft," Major Prechitt observed.

"I'm sorry, sir, we know we disobeyed orders, but we just couldn't. Not after all that happened. See, we were coming down in a loose flight of twelve. There were a couple more flights as well. When we got down to the deck, we broke up into four element units. Not everyone made it. There were Jung fighters all over the place. If it hadn't been for the Intrepid's debris falling everywhere, we'd have been detected and taken down as well. Our flight leader sacrificed himself and his wingman trying to lead the Jung away from the rest of us."

"What were you hoping to achieve, Lieutenant?" Nathan asked. "Were you planning on launching a four-man aerial assault against entrenched forces?"

"We didn't really have a plan, sir. We just got low and shut down all emissions, flying as cold as possible. We put down in a canyon in the mountains just west of Manza Bay. Spent a few days pulling vegetation over our ships. We rigged them to self-destruct if anyone messed with them, then we walked to the nearest town and tried to blend in. Once word of the liberation got out, we figured it was time to come out of hiding. We heard the Aurora was back, we just weren't quite sure if it was true or not. So we decided to find out for ourselves."

"So you were living in East Africa all this time?" Nathan wondered.

"I don't know that you'd call it living," the lieutenant said. "More like surviving. The people there were nice enough, but it's kind of a different world there."

"Why didn't you make your way to the coast?" Nathan asked. "Surely the conditions there would be better."

"Felt like we needed to stay close to our ships, I guess. To be honest, we didn't really know what to do. We were pretty well cut off from world events."

"How did you even know about the liberation?"

"I guess the bigger the news, the faster it travels," the lieutenant responded. "As soon as we were aware of what was happening, we headed back into the mountains to get to our ships. Took us two days to get back to our ships and another two days to get them uncovered and ready to launch."

Nathan leaned back in his chair, looking at Vlad and the others. "Hell of a story, Lieutenant. Don't suppose there are any more Eagles hiding out down there?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, sir," the lieutenant answered. "The Intrepid carried eighty fighters. At least sixty of them launched that day. I'm pretty sure at least half of them survived to get down to the

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