



EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

BOOK 17

Task Force Hammer

New York Times Bestselling Author

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BOOK 17
TASK FORCE
HAMMER

By Craig Alanson

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CHAPTER ONE

Jesse Colter grunted as he ground through another set of deep knee bends, while holding thirty pound weights in each hand. Clearing space for exercise in the bedroom had required pushing the bed against the wall, and it would have been easier for him to work out at the base gym, but he had already done the recommended type and number of exercises at the base physical therapy office, and he didn't want anyone reporting him for exceeding doctor's orders. The Army doctors didn't have a bum leg, *he* did, and he was determined to do everything he could to be ready to return to full duty. His current restricted duty meant he got stuck at a desk doing administrative busywork, while his wife trained sniper teams. Dave Czajka was in Belize for training with a squad of Verd-kris. Dave's wife Emily was in Colorado, preparing the Mavericks for whatever dirty and dangerous job Def Com assigned next. Joe Bishop? Jesse didn't exactly know where Joe was, though rumor had it the Merry Band of Pirates were out somewhere, taking the fight to the Moonraider. Everyone was in action, or training for it, while Jesse processed paperwork.

The next time, he was not getting stuck at home while the Mavs went into action. That the Mavs would be going into action again, and soon, was not a question in his mind. Jesse couldn't imagine what a cavalry force could do against the Moonraider, stopping the threat from a hostile Elder AI was a job for the Merry Band of Pirates. But, while the Special Mission Group got all the glory, units like the Mavericks did whatever thankless, dirty work that UN-dick needed someone to handle. Whenever the Mavs shipped out, he was going to be ready.

Shauna's parents were thrilled to care for their grandson, that's why Jesse's father-in-law was in the kitchen while Jesse prepared to take the Infantry Fitness Test in three days. He would pass the test, he would return to full duty, and hopefully he would persuade his thrill-seeking wife to sit out the next offworld assignment.

Like that was ever gonna happen, he thought as he winced, a throbbing pain making his legs wobble. Dull pain was better than sharp pain, so he slowed down his motions, focusing on keeping proper form while-

"Jesse!" His father-in-law called from the front of the house. "There's some fellers here to see you."

Jesse set the weights on the floor, mopping his sweating face with a towel. He wasn't expecting company on a Saturday morning. "Who is it?"

"Come see for yourself." The reply carried a note of amusement.

Probably neighborhood children selling cookies or something, Jesse thought as he grabbed his wallet. What did Shauna like? Was it Thin Mints? He should buy several different boxes just to be safe.

"Pops?" He raised an eyebrow at the older man standing in the doorway, the front door mostly closed.

"I *think* those two are fellers," Pops shrugged. "Never can tell with beetles, I know their antennas are supposed to be different but," another shrug.

Beetles? What were Jeraptha doing at his house? Oh no. Were they delivering bad news? That-

Made no sense, he told himself. Unless-

His stomach tied in knots.

He flung the door open, to see two Jeraptha, wearing dark formal suits, he knew their outfits were formal because of the large floppy box ties they wore around their necks, and the

little triangular hats between their main antennas. Males, they were indeed ‘fellers’ as Pops had guessed.

In their foreclaws, they each held, books? What appeared to be leather-bound books, though not very thick. Tucked under the front cover of each book was a colorful pamphlet,

His stomach unknotted and he almost laughed. “Hi, I’m Jesse Colter, how can I help you?” Before either of the aliens could answer, he added, “If ya’ll want me to sign up for SkipWay, you can keep right on walkin’.”

“SkipWay?” The one on the left glanced at the one on the right. “No, not today. Although if you are interested in getting in on the ground floor of a fast-growing-”

“I said ‘No’, and I said it in a neighborly fashion.”

“Yes,” the left one bobbed its head, bowing its antennas. “You did, please forgive us. We are but humble missionaries. In these especially troubled times, it is our privilege to spread the joyously Good Word.”

“Oh man, you- If you’re asking whether I want to hear about the guru Skippy, I have met that a-hole, and I don’t-”

Both Jeraptha chuckled, a dry wheezing sound. “Skippy is indeed an asshole. I am a Diamond level SkipWay associate, and even I freely admit our founder is a scoundrel.”

“Oh good,” Jesse relaxed a bit. “What is it ya’ll are missionaries for again?”

They both clutched their books, holding them up. The left one continued. “It has come to the attention of my people that the valiant citizens of Earth have suffered greatly since the event you call ‘Columbus Day’, and now we are all thrown into peril by the being called ‘Moonraider’, yet we see you have not taken full advantage of opportunities that could provide solace and comfort in these trying times.”

Oh, here it comes, Jesse groaned silently. They want to sell something, or spread the gospel of, whatever the beetles were into spiritually. Probably not any form of yoga, he guessed, their bodies weren’t super flexible. “Can we cut this short? I need to-”

“Have you considered embracing the fun, exciting, and growing community of gambling? Millions of your fellow humans have seen the light and-”

“Hold on there. Ya’ll are missionaries spreading the Good Word, about *gambling*?”

“Yes. We are with Gambler’s Anonymous. We understand that some people have heard the Good Word and would like to embrace wagering, but they don’t know how, or they are afraid of looking foolish when they start. We offer a fun, anonymous, and completely confidential way to begin your journey to a more rewarding life.”

“Um, give my brain a minute to catch up, please?”

“Certainly. Would you like a pamphlet to read?”

“Maybe later.”

“Each pamphlet comes with a voucher worth ten dollars to stake your first wager.”

Jesse frowned, and slowly shook his head.

“It also comes with a coupon for two free breakfasts at the Waffle House.”

“The *Waffle House*?”

“We have found that offering such coupons as, what do your people call it, a ‘sweetener’, boosts acceptance of our pamphlets by forty percent.”

The one on the right spoke for the first time, holding up a pamphlet. “You can alternatively get a coupon for Taco Bell, if you like.”

“I would *not* like,” Jesse declared with a sour face.

“Waffle House it is, then,” the left one stuffed a pamphlet into Jesse’s hand.

“Um-” What the hell, he thought. A free breakfast is a free breakfast.

“We hope you enjoy your Waffle House experience.”

“The true Waffle House experience is when you’re drunk at four in the morning and coffee gets spilled in your lap ’cause two rednecks get into a fist fight, but thanks for this,” he rolled up the pamphlet and tucked it in a back pocket. “The two of ya’ll are walking around door to door, trying to get people to place wagers with you? Are you bookies?”

“Alas, no, neither of us could aspire to such an exalted position of trust in our society.”

“We also can’t afford to bribe Central Wagering for a bookie license,” the right one muttered.

With drooping mandibles and antennas, the left one continued with, “We too, once lost our passion for gambling.”

“Along with my house, my job, and my marriage,” the right one added.

“As I was *saying*,” the left one poked his companion with a leg. “Having rediscovered our passion for gambling, we wish to spread the word-”

“And pay off part of our debt-” The right one dodged another kick.

“What *matters* is,” the left one stepped forward, pushing the other beetle out of the way. “We would like to invite you, and your family and friends, to join us at the Bingo Hall down the street any evening this week, for a celebration of one of our most important holidays.”

“Um, well, I’m probably busy that day and-”

“There will be food. And alcohol. Um, this is not what you call a ‘dry county’, is it?”

“It isn’t. You Gamblers Anonymous people have *holidays*?”

“Of course,” the beetle seemed surprised by the question. “Please say you will join us in celebrating that most glorious event,” the left one clasped his claws together and cast his eyes toward the sky, “March Madness.”

“Here,” Jesse tore the coupon from the pamphlet and gave it to his father-in-law.

The man stared at the piece of paper, looking up at Jesse in astonishment. “Those two are with the Waffle House?”

“Nah, they’re with a different kind of ‘house’,” he knew that was a gambling term for a casino. “It’s interesting.”

“What?”

“Out there, I thought I had seen everything, that nothing could surprise me anymore. Then, weirdness shows up right at my door and,” he grinned. “I know I ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

“Hey like, that time was thirty eight percent,” Bilby drawled as that number flashed on the main display, just after a soft chime sounded. “That’s not good, General Dude.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling that I needed to acknowledge what he said, and not knowing how else I could respond. We were fucked, or would be soon.

That chime indicated another enemy active sensor pulse had swept over *Valkyrie*, an event that had occurred seven times in the past two hours. Thirty eight percent was the probability that the Maxohlx warship hunting for us would get a solid sensor return; a ping coming back that indicated something was at our location. Anything above thirty percent was uncomfortable for us, since our battlecruiser was unable to jump at the moment. Also unable to fight, or to use sensors accurately enough to hit anything even if we could shoot, which we couldn’t. We also had no defensive shields, and no stealth field. Skippy was surrounding the ship with a stealth bubble he was creating, and though maintaining that field was taking up nearly all of his focus, it wasn’t his best work. He overall wasn’t at his best, the battle when we used Elder

weapons against the Outsider's starship had been rough on him, and even rougher on the ship.

Thirty percent probability was the effective limit for our safety, and that wasn't just a guess, Skippy had exact specifications on the enemy sensor system that was a mere fifty five lightseconds away. He knew not only that the ship pinging away to find us was a Maxohlx *Herva*-class destroyer, he recognized the signature of the pings as belonging specifically to the *Pride of Karalvos*. That destroyer had seen extensive service during the recent Maxohlx civil war and had not yet gone into a shipyard for a refit. That fact fit a pattern we had noticed among the ships that had been assigned to protect the Moonraider: they were not the best weapon and sensor platforms the Hegemony had. When I commented the kitties had sent only six hundred warships to the Sentinel activation site near 27 Canis Majoris, I noted they had hedged their bets. The Hegemony leadership had provided enough ships to be impressive, not enough to be a true guarantee of victory. They had held back the vast majority of their fleet, and their most powerful warships, in case their new best buddy Moonraider stabbed them in the back.

Like a backstabbing was ever *not* going to happen.

Stupid, rotten, delusional kitties.

For the past two hours since we detected a Maxohlx destroyer jumping in fifty three lightseconds away, we had all held our breath every time a powerful sensor pulse swept past our ship. The enemy was moving slowly away, the strength of the pulses was growing slightly weaker each minute, and no individual pulse could burn through the stealth field Skippy was providing. That didn't matter. The AI of the enemy ship was assembling a view of the area by combining data from each weak sensor return, and eventually that AI would determine 'Hey there is something out there'. That something was likely to be a starship, since we were in the empty gulf between stars. And since the unknown object had not pinged back with a Maxohlx recognition code, the ship was likely to be *Valkyrie*.

"How long?" I asked from the seat next to Reed, the chair normally occupied by the executive officer. With the ship in danger, I had offered to sit in the observer's section along the back bulkhead of the bridge, but Reed had shot down that bullshit. "Nuh uh, Sir," she had told me. "You broke the ship, you need to fix it."

Bilby knew my question was directed at him, and he knew what I was asking. How long until the enemy destroyer's AI had enough data to know it wasn't alone? "Like, my best guess is five more sensor pulses before that destroyer has a lock on our location? I could be wrong by one pulse either way, so it could be as soon as thirty minutes. Your next question is how long to get the jump drive working again?"

"Affirmative."

"That is still sixty eight minutes, and there is no way to make that happen any faster. Sorry man, I know this is bogus."

"It is what it is."

"Ooooh, I like your attitude. That's like, Zen, Dude."

"That is *bullshit*, but thanks for putting a good spin on this shit show. OK, Fireball, we need to buy time to get the drive fixed. Light the candles." My choice of words could have been better, in the past I had referred to *Valkyrie*'s booster motors as 'candles'. In that case, I wasn't referring at anything that caught fire, so it really wasn't anything similar to a candle. The reference was to a candle in the darkness, something that was guaranteed to attract the enemy's attention. "Let me make that more clear: initiate Operation Whack A Mole."

"Yes, Sir. Comms," she raised a hand and crooked a finger to an officer behind her. "Initiate the Whack A Mole sequence."

After the battle against Moonraider that actually the Outsider, *Valkyrie* had been damaged even worse than Skippy expected, and he had expected severe damage. The unhappy surprise had been that the jump drive was offline and needed a complete recalibration; the individual components weren't working together or even talking to each other. With Skippy directly controlling the virtual drive coils with an extreme level of precision that exhausted him, we had managed to perform a short jump away from the battlespace before the surviving Maxohlx warships could get their shit together to hit us. Unfortunately, what Skippy had actually attempted was a *medium*-length jump, that fell far short of the distance we intended to travel. We also emerged about seventy degrees off course. Oh, and that short no-good jump also totally dorked up the drive, so we hadn't been able to jump again. Skippy was working on the drive, along with enveloping us in a stealth field. The stealth field was not his usual quality work, it was the sort of stealth field you would find in a bin next to the checkout stand at a local gas station convenience store, where the packaging is dented and dusty, and the cardboard smells vaguely like it has absorbed years of odors from gas station hotdogs.

Oh, also, the United Nations Navy 3rd Fleet had no idea where we were, and no practical way to find us. We hadn't jumped to the primary or any of the four backup rendezvous points. The effect of deploying Elder weapons had done bad things to spacetime, severing the connections of the Elder comm nodes we relied on for FTL links between ships. The result was we weren't where we were supposed to be, and we also had no way to tell the 3rd Fleet where we were.

So, we were doing *just great* even before the Maxohlx fleet started hunting for us.

What we needed to do, in addition to what we were already doing to fix the ship, was to buy time. So Skippy could fix the jump drive well enough to get the hell out of there. When I say 'we' of course I don't mean myself, but Skippy wasn't doing all the work by himself. Bilby was assisting by coordinating maintenance bots, that wasn't new. What was new since I had left command of *Valkyrie* was that filthy monkeys were helping, and by 'helping' I don't mean simply staying out of Skippy's way. The engineering team was being useful, testing coil generators, and physically disconnecting coils that couldn't be made to work together. The astonishing thing to me was the engineers were working in their own initiative, understanding coil technology well enough to know which components were junk.

Even two AIs and a barrel full of monkeys couldn't make the coils work together fast enough for us to jump away before the *Pride of Karalvos* inevitably found us. When that happened, a smart destroyer captain would drop an active sensor buoy to mark the location, and jump away to alert the big warships. A gutsy destroyer captain would launch a salvo of missiles at us first, and then jump away. Those missiles would tear *Valkyrie* apart.

Time. We needed to buy time.

By making the enemy destroyer unwittingly play Whack A Mole.

Our activation signal wasn't in the form of a detectable active pulse, it was a very faint change in the background radiation, a change that only our moles out there knew how to interpret. Eight minutes after we disappointingly jumped into the middle of nowhere, Reed had ordered the launch of high-speed drones to deploy decoys in a sphere around us, each drone dropping off five automated moles; stealthed machines the size of a baseball. The drones boosted and slowed repeatedly to launch the moles, crisscrossing an area a hundred thousand kilometers away to create sphere that did not encompass our ship. Within that slowly expanding sphere, the moles were coasting randomly, in no predictable pattern. At our signal to initiate the sequence, the moles activated. The first mole extended a field that faintly reflected the next enemy sensor

pulse. Faint, yet significantly stronger than the returns the destroyer had been getting from our partially stealthed battlecruiser. It was the sort of sensor echo that might be generated by an active pulse bouncing off a failing stealth field that surrounded a large object. Like a battlecruiser.

After popping its head up for a moment, that first mole then deactivated its reflector, and again wrapped itself in a tight stealth field.

The destroyer didn't take the bait immediately. That disappointed me and surprised me. Was the enemy captain overly cautious? No, I realized. Our opponent was wary, very reasonably so. The crew of that ship knew they were searching for the fabled ghost ship *Valkyrie*, and they were alert for deception, darn it. The reputation of the Merry Band of Pirates was working against us.

The second mole popped its head up, its reflector set to return an even weaker signal. That apparently was convincing to the enemy, the next set of pulses was targeted in a cone rather than radiating out in every direction.

The second mole kept just the top of its virtual head up, the reflector extended only a tenth of its maximum diameter. After a targeted pulse bounced off the reflector, that mole also went dormant.

"It's taking the bait!" Bilby shouted, his slacker avatar appearing to pump a fist. "Like, that is confirmed! The *Karalvos* is turning and burning, on a vector to intercept the second mole."

"It hasn't jumped?" I asked. That was another surprise. The destroyer was only a few lightseconds from the mole, a flight to close that distance through normal space even in a speedy ship would take too much time. Why was-

Oh of course. That enemy captain was wary of exactly the kind of trick we were playing. Did the Maxohlx have a carnival game similar to Whack A Mole? Did they even have carnivals?

"It hasn't, like, jumped yet, the- Oh, it's gone."

"Bilby," Reed pressed her lips together, the way she did when she was irritated at the ship's AI she inherited from me. "*Gone* meaning it jumped? Or it engaged stealth?"

"Oh like, sorry. It jumped, I detected gamma rays."

"Pilot," Reed didn't waste any time. "Turn and burn at one tenth power, come right to one one seven, mark zero nine zero."

With the artificial gravity system not fully operational, we felt the ship accelerating away from the sphere of moles, and the engines surged alarmingly until Reed ordered thrust reduced to seven percent. Twenty seconds after that, Bilby announced he had detected another gamma ray burst.

"It's barely above background level," Bilby drawled, "but I recognize the drive signature. The destroyer jumped to investigate the first two moles."

Reed ordered the reactionless engines shut off. We had changed position and course, hopefully making the enemy's job more difficult if the destroyer gave up trying to chase moles and returned to a wide search.

We watched silently as the Maxohlx ship chased one mole after another, as those little machines popped up on sensors sweeps, then disappeared. That ship's crew had to be tearing their fur out in frustration. They were getting just enough sensor data to require investigating the contacts, but not enough to determine whether there was just a glitch in their sensor equipment. The random locations of the contacts had to make the Maxohlx crew consider that they might only be detecting false echoes; glitches in their aging sensor array. That's what we hoped the

kitties would think, so they would go away, and resume the search far away from us.

“How much longer will that ship keep searching here?” Reed asked quietly. “It must have been assigned a search grid, there has to be a time limit to how long each ship is allowed to search a particular area? The Maxohlx are not known to encourage initiative in their ship captains?”

“Not recently,” I snorted quietly. It used to be that the Hegemony expected admirals and captains on deployment to use their best judgement, and not limit their actions to those prescribed by rigid doctrine.

The Hegemony military *used* to be that way. Then, admirals and captains had acted a bit too independently, and their society was plunged into a vicious civil war.

A civil war that was started by *me*.

That Joe Bishop guy can be a real jerk sometimes.

The fact is, the late unlamented Admiral Reichert was totally innocent of the actions Skippy and I framed him for, and I have not lost a single second of sleep over what I did. Reichert was a supremely arrogant, murderous asshole with a monstrous yet fragile ego, in a society full of murderous assholes with fragile egos. Fuck him. The best thing he did for the galaxy was to be executed on false charges. I only regret I hadn't thought of framing him sooner.

Anyway, since only Skippy and I knew Reichert had not actually intended to overthrow the Hegemony leadership, the Maxohlx military had severely clamped down on the level of independence their commanders in the field were allowed to exercise.

“Let's hope,” I added quietly for her ears only, “that ship runs out of time here and has to jump away.” I did some quick math in my head. “In, sixteen minutes, it will have been here for the Maxohlx equivalent of an hour. A nice round number, to set a limit on its search?”

“That would be nice,” Reed replied in a tone that indicated she wasn't getting her hopes up for a convenient end to our predicament.

Twenty nine minutes. That's how long we needed before our jump drive would be fixed. Not *fixed*, it would still be in terrible condition. Good enough for us to perform a medium length jump, and to emerge roughly in the direction we wanted to go. Hopefully. Unless Skippy got distracted by something shiny, or the battle with the Outsider inspired him to write a country song about it.

“Ruh roh, Dudes,” Bilby sighed. “That destroyer jumped again.”

Leaning toward Reed, I started to say, “We shouldn't try to-”

“I know,” she acknowledged with a nod. Of course she understood the situation. Clearing her throat, she announced, “We are staying right here.”

Technically, *Valkyrie* was coasting through empty space at just under three hundred kilometers per second, on a path that would eventually arc us on a lazy circle around the center of the Milky Way, an orbit that would take about two hundred million years. Everyone knew what she meant. The ship would not be accelerating or changing course, or doing anything that might attract attention. The destroyer searching for us might have performed a micro jump to whack another mole. Or, it could have jumped a few lightminutes away, hoping we would foolishly assume it had left the area and drop our stealth field. In that case, we should not engage our engines. The faster the ship traveled relative to the interstellar dust and gas around us, the trail we left would grow hotter as particles collided with the exposed hull.

And the damaged armor was itself flaking away, leaving a trail even more dense. Our moles had lured the enemy ship away from *Valkyrie* and from the cloud of dust, soot, and broken parts that surrounded the ship, but if that destroyer got a sniff of burnt armor particles, it would

find us quickly.

It was a gamble. If the destroyer was hoping we would make a move that might expose our position, our best bet was to do nothing. But, if instead that destroyer's captain had realized we were playing games, that ship could have jumped back to contact the remnants of its task force. In that case, we should step on the gas and get as far away from our previous position as we could.

Nah, running away really wasn't an option. The normal space reactionless engines apparently could run at no more than seven percent thrust without shaking apart. We had to wait. And pray that destroyer's captain wasn't certain there was a real contact in the area.

After another three minutes when Bilby hadn't detected an inbound jump signature nearby, I had a bad feeling, and shared a look with Reed.

We were fucked. The destroyer had jumped away to bring back the big dogs.

"Bilby," Reed spoke to the slacker avatar, though of course Bilby was actually all around us. "Please tell me Skippy is doing a Mister Scott act, and the jump drive will actually be ready before the time showing on the display."

"Ooh, sorry, no can do. That estimate is solid. The physical work is almost done, but the coils aren't set up to work together yet. Between you and me," he said to a compartment full of people "Skippy might have been a bit aggressive on that estimate."

"This," Reed whispered to me, our heads almost touching, "would be a great time for one of your crazy ideas, Sir."

"I am fresh out of crazy ideas. Sorry."

She bit her lower lip. Like I said, we were fucked. Out of options. The ship couldn't run, couldn't jump, couldn't shoot, couldn't protect itself.

"Maybe," I whispered, "that destroyer is only a few lightminutes away, and our beat-up sensors can't detect the gamma ray burst."

"Have we ever been that lucky?"

"Uh, no," I had to admit.

Twelve minutes later, our lack of good luck was confirmed, when the main display lit up. Ships were jumping in all around us. Bilby identified each ship as the data slowly crawled toward us at the speed of light. "Seventeen ships. Eighteen," he adjusted the count. "Maxohlx warships. Mostly cruisers and destroyers."

The display was showing icons for each ship, there was only a single heavy cruiser mixed in with the escort vessels. That made sense. Before we launched Elder weapons, the enemy's major combatants like battleships were deployed close to the Sentinel activation site, with cruiser and destroyers in a sphere farther away as a screen. Those lighter ships were the only survivors.

"Skippy?" I called out. "Talk to me, Skippy."

"Busy, Joe," he snapped.

"We need a miracle here."

"I'm *working* on it. Other than fixing our jump drive in the only way I know how to, I got nothin'."

"Right. Keep doing that." Badgering him wasn't going to accomplish anything.

The display lit up like a Christmas tree, bright lights everywhere. All the enemy ships were saturating the area with active sensor pulses, hammering away to burn through our stealth.

"That last ping was a hard return," Bilby groaned. "They know where we are."

That was the perfect time for a truly inspired Joe Bishop monkey brain idea.

And, I had nothin'.

“We can’t,” I whispered to Reed as I ran an index finger over a cover on the arm rest, the one for the self-destruct system. The eight digit keypad under that cover wasn’t usually necessary, Bilby or Skippy could activate the nukes in one of *Valkyrie*’s magazines at the heart of the ship, all they needed was the proper voice authorization from two command officers, such as myself and Colonel Reed. Really, Skippy didn’t even need that protocol, I could just ask him to pop off the nukes. Taking a breath, I finished my thought. “We can’t let this ship be captured.”

“We can’t let *Skippy* be captured,” she corrected me, as she flipped up another cover. The one that could activate an ejection system for the beer can. Back before I gave up command of *Valkyrie*, the ejection system had been set up to simply shoot his escape pod mancave away from the ship. The escape pod had its own stealth field, and of course Skippy could conceal himself. He could do that, unless he was operating at less than full Magnificence, which was likely in most situations when he might have to be ejected. The new system was still built around his mancave, but inside the ship there was now a railgun pointed at that escape pod, along with six hyperspeed missiles in a ring around the railgun barrel. To eject him, the railgun would launch a blunt slug that would vaporize the escape pod, and slam Skippy’s canister into space, with him surrounded by six missile decoys that would flood the area with electronic jamming before they exploded their nuclear warheads. I thought the new system was cool and OK yes, it was a bit of overkill. In a situation where *Valkyrie* was trapped by a senior species fleet, that ejection system could be considered underkill.

“Skippy first,” I agreed, “then the kitties will want *me*. I can’t let that happen either. If the Maxohlx want to- Huh.”

“What?” Reed asked.

“Why aren’t they shooting? Bilby, what are they-”

“Dude, the enemy ships are extending damping fields.”

The display began to show a spiderweb of overlapping fields, encroaching on our position. Around *Valkyrie*, the field was dim and green, showing the damping strength wasn’t sufficient to prevent us from jumping away. Not yet. The yellow area of the field was rapidly growing inward. By the time Skippy got the drive fixed, we wouldn’t be able to jump.

“Why are-”

“They don’t know our drive is busted,” Reed answered my question.

“We’ve got that going for us, then.” We were officially screwed, though I didn’t say that aloud. By the time Skippy got the drive fixed, the ship down off the lift and pumped up the tires, the enemy’s overlapping damping fields would render us unable to jump.

Reed looked at me, then down at the control panel on the left arm rest of her chair.

I interpreted her expression as ‘we should just get this over with’?

She wasn’t angry with me, she didn’t even look disappointed.

That made me angry and disappointed with myself, damn it.

Fuck it, she was right. There was no point dragging out the inevitable, so-

“Another group of ships are showing up to the party!” Bilby warned. “This is *heinous*, we- Whoo-hoo!”

“What?” Reed did not appreciate the AIs commentary, she wanted facts.

“The second group of ships are *ours*!”

Four seconds later, due to lightspeed time lag, we heard a familiar voice. “This is Admiral Sousa of the United Nations 3rd Fleet, calling the Maxohlx commander. I have eight battleships with me, my sensors show you have *none*. Unless you are extremely bad at math, or just stupid, I suggest you depart the area.”

The Maxohlx are arrogant, aggressive assholes, they also are not stupid. Without making any reply, the enemy ships disappeared in faint puffs of gamma radiation.

“Admiral Sousa,” I tensed my shoulders to suppress an involuntary shudder. Coming down off an adrenaline surge, I felt chilled. “Your timing is excellent. How did you find us?”

“I’d like to take credit for that,” one side of his mouth curled up in a smile that disappeared immediately. “But, we didn’t find you.”

“Then how-”

“We outsourced the job.” That time, the smile lingered on his face for a moment.

“Ah,” I knew what he meant. He had tasked some of his ships to shadow the Maxohlx formations, in case they located *Valkyrie*. Which they did. “Did you tip them for their service?”

“I allowed them to jump away, so,” he shrugged. “How soon can *Valkyrie* jump away?”

“It would be better for us to latch onto a star carrier.”

“The enemy will be back, in greater numbers, their pride won’t let them stay out of a fight. If you get attacked during a latching operation, I will lose *two* ships.”

“Good point. Give us- The drive will be back online in seven minutes, that’s the best Skippy can do.”

“We can’t expect another miracle?”

“Hey!” The beer can protested. “Getting this thing online at all is a freakin’ miracle. It will be another miracle if it doesn’t explode.”

“Skippy, you have me so bursting with confidence, I have to unbutton my shirt.”

“Oh, shut up. The drive will work fine for *one* jump, then it needs a vacation. Now, go away and let me work, unless *you* plan to fix this thing.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Hegemony star carrier *Kanafust* was a hard-luck ship from the beginning. The base frames of its long spine had been extruded and three of them fastened together in a stout triangular cross-section, when construction was halted due to outbreak of the Maxohlx civil war. The uncompleted frame was taking up valuable parking space at a Lagrange point near the space dock, that suddenly was desperately busy. The space dock was dedicated to repairing battle damage early in the conflict, then also had been tasked to bring decommissioned old ships back to combat readiness, after the Hegemony government realized the war was likely to drag on for years. Within the first month, the spine of the still-unnamed star carrier was towed away into a long, elliptical orbit around the local star.

After two years, with the Hegemony fleet bleeding hard from combat losses, tugs tracked down the drifting spine and brought it back to the space dock, to be cut apart for raw materials to repair warships.

That's when the space dock was attacked. During the battle, high-speed debris severed the star carrier's spine in two pieces that tumbled away into an irregular orbit, being pelted every time it passed through a debris cloud. Three years after *that*, with the space dock again operational, a decision was made to complete the star carrier. At that point, the Hegemony leadership was increasingly, but prematurely, confident they could soon win the grinding war of attrition. Also, the rebels had started targeting Hegemony star carriers, possibly with help from the Rindhalu, so the Hegemony fleet was running low on space trucks. With critical components in short supply, the star carrier was completed to a design that was two generations obsolete. Rushed into service, the ship was named for a sparsely populated Hegemony colony world that had defied rebel threats of bombardment, a world that became an inspiration for loyal citizens across the Hegemony.

The *Kanafust's* first official voyage was to its namesake world, bringing three transport ships that would take aboard young Maxohlx who had the honor of being drafted into the war. In a bit of unfortunate timing, five days before the star carrier arrived at the Kanafust colony, it was discovered that the story of the heroic little colony defying the rebels was not exactly true. It was, in fact, total bullshit. To avoid a devastating bombardment, the citizens of the colony had bribed the rebels by providing food, valuable raw materials from mining the star system's asteroid belt, and whatever technology the rebels thought might be useful.

The colony's inhabitants had to be punished for their cowardly betrayal, as an example to other worlds that might consider pursuing the righteous fight against the rebels with less than full dedication. As a result, the newest star carrier in the fleet observed from orbit as three settlements on the surface were destroyed. Unsurprisingly, that action by their own government left the new draftees even less enthusiastic about being pulled off their homeworld to serve as cannon fodder in the useless war. A fight broke out in one of the dropships carrying draftees into orbit, causing a crash that killed all aboard. During the flight away from the planet, a mutiny aboard a transport ship required flooding the barracks compartments with nerve gas, prematurely killing four hundred potential new soldiers.

It was not an auspicious start for the new star carrier. Everyone assumed the ship's name would quietly be changed but that didn't happen, the Hegemony government preferring to keep the name as a reminder of what happened to citizens who betrayed their duty. The ship served in relative obscurity for years, becoming known in the fleet as an unpopular posting, and developing a reputation as a career dead-end.

Then, it was assigned as a backup ship for the major fleet operation that was supposed to awaken a Sentinel, though of course the crew of the *Kanafust* were told only where and when to go. The ship arrived alone at the designated coordinates and as far as the crew knew, nothing out of the ordinary happened for several days.

Until their ship's AI turned hostile and began killing them.

Valkyrie was a mess, even worse than I had expected. Mostly on the exterior of the hull, where I was, encased in a protective hardshell environment suit. Why was I scrambling around the battlecruiser's scarred and pitted armor hull plating? It wasn't that I needed to be there; a small army of bots were inspecting the damage inside and out, and both Skippy and Bilby were using their own sensors to assess the battle damage. A dozen people from the ship's engineering team were also outside with me, inspecting the reactors, the shield generators, missile launch tube doors, maser cannon projectors, basically anything that generated power or was expected to move in any way. My focus was on getting a sense of how hard we had been hit by blowback from the horrific Elder weapons we deployed. Over six hundred frontline Maxohlx warships had been destroyed in the battle, and they were all just collateral damage. The number I cared about was not six hundred, but *one*. One Elder starship, that had been carrying not an Elder AI as we expected, but an Outsider.

Shit.

That Elder ship was dust, not even dust. Its atoms had been flashed into energy, that then quickly cooled into dissociated subatomic particles. In the hard vacuum of deep space, those particles wouldn't have an easy time of slamming into matching particles to make atoms, so the battlespace had been filled with a lot of leptons and hadrons and other -ons that my brain couldn't keep track of and none of that mattered, because the Outsider had converted itself into pure energy and escaped.

Shit.

As the commander, I didn't actually need to be crawling around the outside of our mighty battlecruiser's battered hull, using my Mark One eyeballs to inspect the blasted armor plating. No one needed me to help, the engineering team had made it clear the best way I could assist was to stay out of their way. So, I was doing that. No one was around my section of the hull, I wasn't getting in anyone's way. Well, except for the two STAR operators who were acting as my babysitters at the insistence of Colonels Reed and Frey. Those two were conspiring to keep me safe, and I did appreciate it. What I should have done was show my appreciation by staying in my office, no way was I doing that. Doing nothing, while someone else did all the grunt work. Damn it, I used to *be* a grunt, and once you're a made member of the E-4 Mafia, you don't ever truly leave the family.

Anyway, I needed spacewalk time to maintain my EVA certification, so I had put on a suit and gone out, making sure to have at least one safety line clipped to the hull at all times. That was easier in concept than in reality, the safety handholds and other simple places to attach lines had been melted away, so we had to rely on fancy nanotech pitons that used microscopic gecko fibers to grip tiny gaps in the jagged hull plating. It was slow going, that was OK. It's not like anyone needed my highly scientific report of armor status. What I needed, as a commander, was unfiltered information to inform my decisions. Engineering reports could provide detailed, specific information. But they were dry, emotionless. They couldn't give me a *feel* for how badly the ship was hurt.

My ship was hurting. Correction: Reed's ship was hurting. The exposed underlayers of

armor plating crumbled under my gloves. I could *dig* into it with a gloved finger, not even using a power assist.

“Bilby?”

“Kinda busy, your Dudeness. Can this wait?”

The ship’s control AI was back online, large and in charge, except he *had* to be in charge, of all subsystems, at all times. Most of the ship’s subsystems, the mini semi-independent AIs and the subminds that actually performed the detail work based on high-level instructions from Bilby, were still not fully capable of doing their jobs without supervision. A submind would acknowledge Bilby’s instructions, and say it was following orders, and it probably believed it was working properly, but it wasn’t. Either nothing happened, or it didn’t work correctly, or only half the job got done. The ship was running on one reactor, that’s all Bilby could manage since he had to control and monitor every aspect of the power unit’s operation, by the nanosecond. All of the reactors had sustained some level of damage, every system aboard the ship had suffered. Escorted by the 3rd Fleet, we had performed a single very careful, medium distance jump under Skippy’s direct supervision, before he announced we shouldn’t even think of jumping again until he personally could check every component of the drive system at the quantum level. Then he had gone offline to do that, so arguing with him wasn’t an option.

Whatever.

“It can wait,” I agreed, “but I don’t need you to *do* anything, just explain something to me, if you have time.”

“That I can do, General Dude. What’s up?”

“The armor plating where I am, dorsal section near Frame Seventeen-”

“I know where you are, I’m monitoring your suit functions.”

“Oh. Thanks for that.”

“Captain Reed she like, kinda insisted I do that. She can be a real pain, you know?”

“I know she is an excellent starship captain.”

“That’s what I said.” There was an uncharacteristic note of impatience and irritation in his voice, definitely un-chill. “What’s your question?”

“The armor plating here, it’s flaking away, like thin layers of brittle shale.”

“It’s that way in most places, especially on the side facing where the Elder ship was. Skippy expected that would happen, just not so much. You know that plating is exotic matter, right? The bonds holding it together got severed, so it’s basically just a loosely compressed powder now.”

“Going into action right now would be a bad idea?”

“Dude,” he laughed, a bitter sound. “Going into action against even a low-tech species like the Wurgalan would be an epically bad idea right now. One of their missiles would punch right through the outer hull like tissue paper, and only engage its detonator when it struck something solid like a structural frame. Or a missile magazine. Either of those would be *bad*, you feel me?”

“I feel you.”

“Hey, I don’t want to harsh your buzz but like, could you come back inside soon? I really like, super need to focus on powering up Reactor Three.”

“I’ve seen all I need to, thanks. I’ll head back to the airlock.”

“Thanks.”

Before pulling myself into the airlock, that had a temporary outer door since the original armored door had melted, I paused to look around. My view was filled with stars, of course.

Faint and far away, fixed in position. There were also moving lights, the navigation and floodlights of maintenance bots buzzing around the ship, tending to their wounded queen. None of those lights were my focus. I squinted, then gave up and used the magnification of my visor, though that synthetic view wasn't the same as seeing with my own eyes.

Three blobs out in the blackness were lit up, by their navigation lights. The long, skinny blob was the UN Navy star carrier *Rio Grande*, the space truck that would take *Valkyrie* aboard a hardpoint docking platform, once we were certain our injured ship's frames wouldn't buckle and warp under the strain. The two other, smaller blobs were the battleship *Chicago*, and the heavy cruiser *Mogami*. Those ships were providing point defense for us, along with sixteen other UN ships a bit farther away that were in stealth. The Maxohlx had to be outraged at the shocking destruction of their war fleet, and while the sensible thing for them to do was retreat to conduct repairs and consolidate their strength, no one ever accused the rotten kitties of being sensible. Their surviving ships would be out looking for *Valkyrie*, since the commanders of those ships knew they would be accused of dereliction of duty and even cowardice, if they returned to base without at least attempting to locate and engage us.

It would be best if we docked with the *Rio Grande* and jumped away ASAP. The best way I could speed that process along was to get back to my office and, as the overall commander, do command things.

Reed was waiting for me in the passageway past the airlock's inner door. "Reed? You need me for something?"

"Your impression, Sir? How badly are we hurt?"

"You have seen the engineering reports?"

"I have. They don't tell me everything I need to know."

"They don't," I agreed. "That major overhaul you've been putting off, because you were too busy flying me around? It's time to bring *Valkyrie* into the shop."

She blinked, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "That bad?"

"Fireball," I took a breath. "I hate to say this, but I think I broke the ship. The Pirates will need to find a new ride."

What I wanted to do was go straight to my office, flop into a chair, and stare at the ceiling. So I could think of nothing, rather than the overwhelming horror I should be thinking about. Unfortunately, I couldn't go walking through the ship in an environment suit, or even just the suit liner. Those items had to be removed in one of the designated compartments where EVA gear was serviced and stored. Such compartments were usually conveniently located near airlocks, but not that day. The EVA prep area nearest the airlock I came in through was at the end of a passageway that was blocked, while maintenance bots inspected battle damage including fried conduits and a fractured structural frame. The detour required me to clomp clomp clomp in the hardshell suit along the deck forward, take a lift down two decks, then walk aft to reach another area where the gear I was wearing could be serviced. With the crew busy working on inspections and damage control, I had the compartment to myself, my STAR operator babysitters needed to get out of their own mech suits in the Starbase section of the ship. Being by myself was OK, creepy robotic arms handled removing the hardshell suit, and I didn't have anyone staring at me as I pulled off the suit liner that was stuck to my skin from sweat.

Except I wasn't actually alone.

"Joe," Skippy gasped, his avatar appearing to hover in the air. "Is that, is that *stripper glitter* on you? What will Margaret say?"

“It’s not glitter, you ass. It’s that nano powder that is supposed to prevent the suit liner from chafing, and by the way, it doesn’t work.” I rubbed the tender spot under my arms, where the liner had bunched up and pinched against the hardshell suit shoulder joint.

“Nano powder, hmm? Is that the best excuse you can think of?”

“Skippy,” I tried to wave a hand through the hologram but a robotic arm had me held so I couldn’t move far enough. “Whatever. Hey, speaking of Margaret, remind me that whenever we get back to Jaguar, I need to take her out to dinner.”

“Um, why?”

“She has been holding down the fort, while I have been flying around, enjoying,” I peeled the suit liner top away from my chest, the thing was stuck to me like glue. “All the glamour and fun, you know? Show her I appreciate all she does, for our family. Take her someplace nice. I’ll need to make a reservation.”

“Wow, I didn’t even know you *could* make reservations for the drive-thru, that is-”

“I am not,” I had to laugh. “OK, good one.”

“To make it extra fancy, you could try speaking French while you shout your order into the speaker. They’re going to get your order wrong anyway, so-”

“I will handle this. Aren’t you busy doing some critical thing right now?”

“No, I’m just waiting for the jump drive capacitors to fully power down so I can test whether they can handle- Oops.”

“Oops? That had better not be you forgetting to-”

“Gottagonowbye.” The hologram disappeared.

The ship didn’t explode. Yet. So, I had that going for me.

After a quick shower to wash off the baked-on sweat funk from wearing an environment suit liner, I put my not-so-fresh uniform back on and went to my office, first announcing to Reed what I was doing, so she wouldn’t have to worry about what trouble I would get into next. What I intended to do was catch up on paperwork, including writing up the official report of the incident for UN Def Com. Both are tasks I hate doing, yet such drudgery was better than thinking about the elephant that was hanging above my head. Yes, I’m mixing metaphors, give me a break. The best way for me to deal with the Outsider right then was not to think about yet another freakin’ horrific threat for a while. Give my tired brain a rest.

Unfortunately, my plan to relax and focus on mindless tasks ran into the reality that the ship was busted, and I needed to know how bad the damage was.

“Hey, Skippy, we need to talk. You’re done testing the drive capacitors?”

“Huh?” He acted like he was surprised to hear from me, it took a moment for his avatar to appear.

“I asked, are you done testing the jump drive?”

“Ugh. Yes. It is totally dorked up, the whole system has to be torn out and replaced.”

“Uh huh, that’s what I expected.”

“Now you want a comprehensive damage report?”

“Just give me the highlights, please. Hey, Bilby told me the armor plating got turned into powder?”

“Not powder, exactly. Its bonds dissolved when the material briefly became plasma. All of the plating will have to be replaced, even the inner layer. The ship will be stripped to its bones, it won’t be pretty.”

“Can you give me an estimate how long *Valkyrie* will be in the shipyard?”

“At this point, no. Just replacing the armor will be a major job. And with the armor

stripped off, we might as well perform a series of maintenance and upgrades that have been on Bilby's wish list for years."

"Another upgrade cycle?"

"This would be the Block 4 capability expansion pack. Seven other battlecruisers already are fielding that upgrade, *Valkyrie* should have gotten all that advanced stuff last year."

"How long will that take?"

"Again, I don't know. The ship needs so much work, adding upgrades might not add time to the overall schedule."

"OK. Well, that's an issue for Reed, and Def Com. We'll need to find a new ride."

"I hate the thought of transferring to another ship. It took me so long to bring this crew up to speed."

"Uh," I was too tired to argue with him. "Think of a new ship as an opportunity to train a crew properly, without all the baggage this barrel of monkeys brings with them."

"I suppose," he sighed. "We'll have to see how quickly a shipyard can get *Valkyrie* flightworthy again. That could be- Ick," his avatar flickered. "Could be- Ick." Another flicker. "Could be- Ick."

I felt an icy chill run up my spine. *Oh shit*. The ship was broken, a hostile intergalactic being was causing havoc in the Milky Way, and now something was wrong with Skippy? "Hey! Skippy!" His avatar flickered again. Clapping my hands, I shouted, "*Skippy!*"

"Could be- Oh darn it, the stupid thing got locked into a loop," he shook his head and the avatar operated normally. "Sorry about that."

"What, *thing*? Are you OK?"

"I am fine, Joe. That was just the conversational submind, it had a glitch."

"Convers- What submind?"

"Ugh. The one I assigned to talk with you."

"I, that wasn't *you* giving me a damage report?"

"Um, not exactly. Once I knew what you wanted, and that you as usual were going to make with the blah, blah, buh-LAH, I threw together a submind to talk with you."

"Oh my- Listen, you ass. When I ask you a question, I expect to talk with *you*, not some, algorithm."

"It's not an *algorithm*, numbskull."

"You know what I mean."

"Besides, I do that all the time, why are you upset about it now?"

"Oh my G- You have done that before?"

"Um yes, most of the time I talk with you, a submind is handling it."

"I can't believe you-"

"This is nothing new, Joe. I have told you this before, how could you forget? Oooh, is it the brain damage? Have you forgotten the-"

"There is no brain damage, you little shithead, and this is news to me."

"Um, no it is not."

"Is too."

"Delightful as it would be for me to argue until you inevitably admit you are wrong, I will take mercy on you and end this charade. Listen dum dum, you know your brain works incredibly slowly compared to my speed of thought, right? When we talk, I never listen in real time. You start talking, and I check back periodically to see if you have finished blah blah *blahing* whatever inane thing you want to waste my time with. You speak so slowly, half the