

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Carnage*

Lisa padded into the living room and rezzed the holo to the morning news. “Oh God!”

Two hundred and fifty eight planets with two hundred and sixty billion Sentients were under attack, all but six within the last week. Civilian and military casualties stood at six billion and climbing. The Fleet had over one million Fleet Vessels and six hundred million personnel were in action as the expeditionary forces of five hundred worlds rushed into battle. *The equivalent of Earth’s entire population... killed in less than three Standard months!*

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“Flag, from Communications, incoming report from Fleet Supreme Command.”

David yawned. Four days of hit and run raids were taking their toll. “Pass it to all battle group commanders. I’ll be in flag plot.”

David soon entered the compartment several decks beneath the bridge where techs compiled and passed information to and from him and the battle group commanders. *Two hundred and fifty eight worlds... less than two percent of the Second Federation and the scale of Sentient suffering is already beyond comprehension. Numerically, this war seems to favor the Second Federation, but what kind of Second Federation will remain once fighting stops? Will the fighting stop... or will it devolve into random violence as I fear? Defending each member world is futile... but who decides which planets to abandon and how does any government retain credibility after such an abandonment?*

“General quarters! General quarters! All hands, man battle stations!”

The illumination switched from white to red as *Dawnstar* arrayed herself for combat. The deck seemed to wobble under his feet as he dashed to the hatch. He ignored it but paused in the open hatch when he felt the colossal Fleet Vessel undulating again. *If we’re maneuvering hard enough to feel movement despite the artificial gravity... oh, shit!* He sprinted toward the Combat Control Center. The deck seemed to fall out from under him as he ran. He felt weightless for a

split second and just had time to glance at his feet leaving the deck when he heard a deep rumbling explosion and the screams of rending metal. The corridor quaked and lights flickered. Alarms wailed as David went sprawling across the deck.

Bewildered, he rose and gripped the bulkhead with his left hand for support. His ears rang. The right bulkhead seemed to jump at him as another explosion rocked *Dawnstar*. His right shoulder slammed into the bulkhead with such force that his head whipped sideways. He saw a bright electric light in his eyeballs as his skull crunched into the bulkhead. Then everything went blurry, and David stumbled and fell to the deck.

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Zyra relieved the previous rotation and took her seat, tapping her console as she accounted for her equipment and personnel and reviewed the latest scan data. “Traffic?”

“Military convoys in and out of the aerospaceport and other miscellany, Sergeant,” her Scan One tech replied. “Nothing to holo home about.”

Hours dragged by. Her tension gave way to boredom, then drowsiness.

“Contact!”

Zyra jerked awake and banged her knee under the console. “Fuck! Trajectory?”

“Sergeant, contact is not on a standard approach route and is altering course to pass directly over Xenon City in... Sergeant, the contact is entering our sector!”

Zyra, now fully alert, checked her console. “Liaison, confirm with uplink station.”

“Contact confirmed, Sergeant.”

“Sergeant, we must open fire,” a voice said in her headset. “Missiles standing by!”

“Stand fast, Corporal. Sensor, reconfirm trajectory. Liaison, is there a transponder code?”

“Sergeant, missiles locked on and standing by!”

“Stand by! Sensor, type of contact? Liaison, what’s the story?”

“Contact is an armed Independent runabout.”

“Sergeant, uplink says Xenon Approach Control has no information on this contact.”

Zyra felt her knee throbbing. “Contact the approach controllers. We need answers!”

“Contact is altering course, she’s heading right for us!”

Zyra reached for the frequency selector to apprise her command of the situation and request guidance. “Maintain weapons lock and stand by. Inform surrounding sectors.”

“Damn it, Sergeant, they can attack at any moment. We must fire now!”

Zyra’s fingers changed trajectory from the frequency selector to the commlink key. “Hold your fire!”

“Missiles away, Sergeant, six Tanuts running hot and normal!”

“Sergeant, Xenon Approach apologizes for the delay. Contact is legitimate civilian traffic on an approved special flight plan.”

“By the Creator, Corporal, I ordered you to hold fire. Recall those missiles!”

“Unable, Sergeant. Missiles are on local control and have acquired terminal lock.”

Zyra keyed the commlink. “All stations, all stations, this is Sector Green Two Actual. Target is a friendly. I repeat, target is a friendly. Engage those missiles!”

“Damn it, Sergeant, you ordered me to fire!”

“Creator damn you, I ordered you to hold your fire,” Zyra screamed into the commlink.

“Sergeant, from Colonel Myle, what in the vacuum of space is going on?”

Zyra pushed her chair away from the console as she struggled to keep herself together.

“Report, Sergeant!”

“Sir, I ordered Corporal Vuzsarq to hold fire while I verified the contact but he launched six missiles against a friendly civilian.”

A hand came down on Zyra’s shoulder. “You are relieved, Sergeant. Step outside.”

Zyra broke into tears as she relinquished her station and shuffled outside. Two Marines, both acquaintances of hers, stepped forward to prop her up and lean her against the side of an APC. Through her tears, she saw six serpentine contrails rising through the clear blue Xenon sky and converging on their helpless runabout. More contrails and pink flashes rose as missiles and quad turrets joined the frantic effort to destroy the errant warheads. Six missiles became five, then four, three, and two.

“Five seconds to impact.”

A lucky shot by an unknown gunner knocked out one of the remaining missiles just before a small patch of sky turned brilliant white as the last Tanut detonated leaving an angry black line arcing across the sky tracing the wounded runabout’s path. Zyra buried her face in her hands. *By the Creator, what have I done?*

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The emergency klaxon caught Eva in mid-stream as she relaxed in the latrine. She finished and opened the door, stumbling as she struggled to pull up her pants. “What now?”

“Friendly fire incident. There’s a crippled Independent runabout trying to make it to a runway. We doubt it’ll get this far but hope she flies long enough to make it over the prairie.”

Eva climbed aboard the APC as it powered up and rumbled off toward the runway end and two dropships lifted off to loiter nearby.

“Johnson, you and Poili are on point.”

*Again?* She strapped on her helmet, pulled on her backpack, and lifted her two duffels. “What exactly happened?”

“Some itchy air defense crew really fucked the winjux on this one is what happened.”

*Thank the Creator that Zyra is a liaison tech and could never give the order to fire. How could I even think such a thing?* Eva checked the scan data. “Bad news is they won’t make a runway. Good news is they made it over the mountains.”

The APC reached the end of the runway and paused for a moment before pressing on across the ocean of tall grass and wildflowers. This ride across open terrain was jarring. Fusion drives howled and suspension systems creaked in protest as the driver added yet more speed. Eva poked her head out the top hatchway. Six more APCs followed close behind. The two dropships loitered nearby.

“Backup is seconds behind you if needed, Johnson,” Lieutenant Molk said in her headset.

“Look!” someone shouted. “Over there!”

Eva turned her head and saw the runabout descending out of control. She watched in horrified fascination as a wing clipped a low hillside and disintegrated. The runabout rolled hard, gravitic forces tearing the other wing off. The bulbous fuselage continued on, wingless, like a spear for a second or two before pitching up. The fuselage broke apart as the tail hit the ground, an ugly cloud of dirt, smoke, and debris erupting around the downed craft and obscuring the view.

Eva secured her respirator and checked the seals as the APC swung around and approached the smoldering wreckage from upwind. The fuselage lay in two pieces like a discarded eggshell. Smoke billowed from the many gashes and tears in the metal, debris littering the entire area. Her APC approached to within fifty metrons. A second APC stopped some ten metrons behind them. Both vehicles began lofting fire retardant foam over the wreckage.

“Move, Private!” Eva opened the hatch wide and set off at a run, Poili hot on her heels. She glanced back at him and pointed toward the largest remaining hull section. “Over there!”

They darted through an increasingly dense field of metal shreds, wiring, tubing, plastics, and other materials. Eva slipped on something and glanced downward as she fought to retain her footing. A smashed head rolled in the dust, brain matter spattered in a pool around it, her long

skidding footprint through the center of this gruesome scene telling its own story. Eva retched but pressed on through the smoke and raining foam. She and Poili finally reached the fuselage and cleared debris before Eva could shine a light inside.

The devastation inside was fantastic in its thoroughness. Seats, luggage, drink glasses, and mortal remains littered the cabin. Eva focused on controlling her breathing as she panned the light around. She turned to move on but something caught her eye. “We have survivors, and the scene seems secure. Poili, help me clear a path!”

Dozens of soldiers converged on the wreckage to clear an opening. Eva and Poili finally managed to scramble into the shattered cabin. Eva quickly checked for other survivors before kneeling next to a wounded Mygarean and beginning to remove his clothing. “Combat Medic Eva Johnson, Sarcha Planetary Guard, can you hear me?”

The Mygarean groaned. His breathing was rapid and shallow. Blood drenched most of his clothing. Eva worked fast, cutting away the bloody fabric. Poili cleared some more debris and squeezed in beside her. “Poili, maintain C-spine. What is your name, Sir?”

“Lopiq,” the wounded Mygarean croaked.

“Lopiq, Private Poili and I will do all we can for you. For now, I need you to sit still. Do you know where you are?”

“No. What happened?”

“Your runabout experienced an accidental crash landing,” Eva replied as she applied a valve bandage to a sucking chest wound. “I need to stabilize you before we can extricate you.”

“Thank you,” Lopiq wheezed between coughs. “What happened?”

Eva secured the bandage and nodded as she saw Lopiq’s breathing improving as it released air trapped in his abdominal cavity. “Poili, secure his spine and check for battle signs or other head trauma. I suspect cerebral injury, concussion, or worse.”

Lopiq coughed with an agonized moan and a sound like rocks bumping against each other. Eva shook her head as she saw his uneven chest motions and his trachea beginning to appear pushed out of line. “Damn. Paradoxical breathing and developing hemothorax. I need to get him on high flow oxygen, splint his ribs, insert a chest tube, and begin fluid replacement.”

She keyed her commlink as she grabbed for her equipment. “This is Johnson. I need an extrication team to open a path for us and help get this Sentient out of here. Have a dropship standing by for immediate transport.”

Eva looked at the pile of medical equipment in front of her and hesitated. *Where the fuck do I begin?* Then she remembered her training. Lopiq’s airway was clearly working. She attached an oxygen mask and opened the flow wide. Next, she splinted his ribs to give his diaphragm something to push against and let him move air. She then inserted a chest tube and connected a half-empty bag of sterile fluid and a suction pump to the other end. Blood and clumps of tissue immediately began draining. Lopiq’s breathing slowed and deepened almost instantly. Eva then administered a pain killer and started intravenous synthglobin to maintain his blood volume. Somewhere in the background, she heard Sentients fighting to open a passage large enough to facilitate the rescue.

“So far, so good, Lopiq. I am going to insert an endotracheal airway into your windpipe to breathe. It will hurt and gag you going in, but you’ll feel much better very quickly.”

She had the tube inserted within fifteen seconds. Poili finished securing Lopiq’s head and connected an automatic resuscitator to the protruding airway tube as Eva checked lung sounds.

“Tube patent and vitals stabilizing. Poili, get me an extrication splint and a long backboard while I complete my secondary assessment.”

Lopiq was aboard a dropship en route to Xenon Central Hospital a few minutes later. Eva watched as the dropship lifted off before tuning to look back at the wreckage. Her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground.

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Colonel Myle walked around his desk to stand in front of Zyra, teeth flashing beneath his snout. “Sergeant Johnson, please explain why a missile battery under your command shot down an authorized civilian runabout with twenty-seven Sentients aboard of whom one survived?”

Zyra stood at attention as she recounted the entire incident. Myle listened closely and cleared his throat when she had finished. “Sergeant, the Corporal and crew of that missile battery state that you ordered them to fire. Corporal Vuzsarq warned you of the imminent danger and says you uttered the single word ‘fire’ and changed your mind when it was too late.”

Zyra shook her head. “Sir, my exact words were ‘hold your fire.’”

Colonel Myle sighed. His hackles lowered somewhat. “Johnson, your crew validates your story and the Corporal’s crew validates his story, which means either conspiracy or a colossal fuck-up. Maybe your commlink wasn’t fully keyed when you began speaking?”

“Sir, to the best of my knowledge, I keyed that commlink.”

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Eva sat huddled in a corner of the rumbling APC returning to Xenon Aerospaceport. A shadow fell over her, and she looked up to see Lieutenant Molk. “The hospital trauma surgeon wants you to know they expect LopiQ to make a long but full recovery. They also said your excellent initial treatment is the only reason he’s alive. You saved an innocent life back there, Johnson.”

Eva looked at the flecks of brain matter on her boots as she took a large swig of water from her canteen. “Thank you, Sir, but I’m no hero.”

“Tell that to LopiQ. He wants to see the Sentient who saved his life. You’ve got a three-day pass to visit him and take some time at home with your son and daughter while you’re at it.”

Eva’s heart leapt. “Thank you, Sir!”

“Space, it’s the least I can do. I just hope they bust whatever Creator damned fool ordered a missile strike on a friendly vessel.”

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Lisa and Markash finished the song they were playing and set their instruments down.  
“That was great.”

“You were great, my dear.”

“I need to get out more,” Lisa said, ignoring Markash’s compliment. “I’m going to put on some shows to help boost morale. I can’t fight, but I can keep Sentients’ spirits up.”

Markash nodded. “Fabulous! You are a wellspring of creativity. Allow me to contact the Conservatory to make arrangements. I’ll take care of everything.”

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Eva eased the back door open and slipped into the darkened living room. “Zyra!”

Zyra sat hunched under a single glowglobe, tears streaming down her face. Eva dropped her gear and ran to embrace her mate. “Zyra, I’m so glad you’re here. I have wonderful news.”

“Oh, Eva,” Zyra sobbed as she returned Eva’s embrace, “I’ve got terrible news.”

Eva drew back a little as a terrible thought occurred to her, only then noticing Zyra’s Sergeant chevrons. “Zyra, you got promoted. Congratulations!”

Zyra shook her head. “You first.”

Eva smiled warmly. “I just came from visiting a Sentient named Lopi in Xenon Central Hospital. He was the sole survivor of a runabout hit by missile fire that crashed outside the aerospaceport. Private Poili and I were able to save him—my first real trauma patient. He couldn’t stop thanking me, and I couldn’t stop crying.”

Zyra’s voice wavered. “Then I only killed twenty-six Sentients today. Hooray.”

Eva cupped her hand over her mouth. *My worst fear... realized!* “What happened?”

She cradled Zyra in her arms as the story poured out of her. “Zyra, my love, he disobeyed your direct order to not fire. You can’t blame yourself for this.”

“Can’t I? We reviewed the logs. Someone keyed their commlink at the same moment as me and garbled my first words. Corporal Vuzsarq heard and obeyed my order to fire.”

“Oh, my dearest Zyra,” Eva breathed as she kissed her and held her close, “you erred on the side of caution and did all you could to preserve those Sentients. I love you, Zyra, and I’d love to sleep in your arms tonight if you’ll let me.”