

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alyya

David yawned as he shuffled out of the bathroom and climbed back into bed with Lisa, who scooted closer to him and rested her head on his chest, her arms about him, their legs intertwined. The holo chimed. She moaned in protest as he extricated himself and rezzed it, almost sitting up when he saw it was High Commissioner Waz'hazij but freezing as he remembered his state of undress. "High Commissioner! Please forgive my lack of proper etiquette, Sir. You caught me... well... unaware. How may I be of service?"

Waz'hazij chuckled as he stroked his long gray beard. "I apologize for disturbing you this early, Admiral, but there is a situation demanding your unique experience. The Second Federation believes that Alyya Puquoo is alive, well, and responsible for the conspiracy against you as one element of a larger plan to destabilize us in preparation for kinetic hostile action."

"I beg your pardon, High Commissioner, but this isn't news." David again began rising only to lay back down. "Unfortunately, she's probably in Dimenoan space and untouchable."

"And if you learned she is on Nevnana?"

David groaned. "That knowledge would have been useful two Standard months ago."

"Agreed, Admiral, but we have solid information from reliable sources that Alyya is alive and on Nevnana and that the Nevnanans and Dimenoans are in league with each other."

David scratched his head. "How do I fit into this?"

"*Dawnstar*, *Brightstar*, and a task force of twelve heavy cruisers, twelve light cruisers, thirty destroyers, and six frigates are deploying to Nevnana as soon as possible. You, as the Sentient most familiar with Alyya's thinking, methods, and purpose are the ideal candidate to command this task force."

"Please tell me you wore condoms with her," Lisa grumbled.

I remember the first time I met Alyya at Tactical Fighter Operations School on Vegax seven Standard years ago. I remember laughing when we woke the entire village of Pax because we forgot to oil the bearings that let our house pivot in the breeze... my guilt at snatching the coveted Honor Graduate title... and drinking myself into a despondent stupor that nearly ended my Fleet career. Quardir saved me then but won't be anywhere nearby this time. "What's my mission, Sir?"

"Rear Admiral David C. Johnson, you are ordered to assume command of the task force designated *Dawnstar* Group Five Six Alpha. You will deploy this task force to the Independent planet Nevnana where you will take the renegade Fleet Officer Alyya Puquoo into punitive custody. You will then remand her to the High Commission of the Second Federation of Worlds for trial on charges of subversion, insurrection, espionage, treason, desertion, absence without leave, murder, attempted murder, and such other charges as the judicial body deems proper."

"And if she does not throw herself at our mercy? What then?"

"This is a law enforcement mission, Admiral, and you must use the minimum amount of force necessary to compel compliance with your mission. That said, if Alyya or the planet are under Dimenoan protection or if they commence hostilities, then you may at your discretion determine that a military situation exists and act in accordance with that determination."

"Aye, Sir." David fidgeted as he fought his urge to stand and pace. "If a military situation arises, then am I to commit an act of war against an Independent world and/or the Dimenoan Empire simply to remand a criminal for trial?"

"You may need to take that chance." High Commissioner Waz'hazij's expression was one of grim resolve. "If Alyya intends to cause a war, then we face that risk no matter what. Fleet Supreme Command and the High Commission assess that galactic war is vanishingly unlikely because even our most die-hard opponents can't deny our right to apprehend and try a fugitive."

“Aye, Sir.” David gently drummed his fingers on the mattress. “Please relay my order for the task force to be ready for departure at 1400 hours Xenon time. I’ll be aboard *Dawnstar* within six hours.”

“What’s going on?” Lisa asked dreamily as David got out of bed and started packing his Fleet duffel. She was all but hidden under the bedclothes, her beautiful smile peeking up at him, the faint odor of sex and her flowery perfume filling his nostrils. He emptied one drawer and then sat on the edge of the bed wanting nothing more than to hold her, kiss her, and make love with her as his hand caressed her through the linens. “They’ve found Alyya and I’m going to bring her back.”

She nodded. “How long?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. The Dimenoans are involved, and I’m more than a little worried. By the Creator, I’d never have been with Alyya if I’d had any idea what would follow!”

“David?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have time to make love with me one more time before you go?”

He swallowed the lump in his throat as he caressed her one last time and stood to continue packing. “There’s nothing I want more right now, Lisa, but the task force departs in nine hours. I’m sorry.”

Lisa got out of bed and pressed her naked body against his as she kissed his neck briefly before moving to assist him. “David, I’ve known all along what I was getting into. I know the unpredictability of a military lifestyle and I know your love for space and the Fleet. I love you and I mean it when I say I’ll be your wife. That said, I sometimes wish you had a regular job with regular hours and no holos randomly stealing you from our bed, no plots with galactic implications, nothing.”

“Me too,” was David’s heartfelt reply. He pulled on his uniform, then hefted his duffel and strode to the front door with Lisa in tow. He stopped to look back at her one more time. “I’ll holo you as soon as I can, Lisa.”

She gripped his uniform. “You’d God-damned better come back to me in one piece, husband... physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually... because I’m all in with you.”

I will not let the Fleet drive Lisa away from me the way I let it drive Maradei away! “I’ll do my best, Lisa. Take care. I love you!”

“Admiral on the bridge!”

“Carry on.” David strode onto *Dawnstar*’s familiar bridge and paused at the magnificent spectacle of the docking bay through the viewports as he always did. Tamor stood at his station and saluted him.

“Sir, preparations underway for departure in two hours and forty minutes as ordered. The task force has clearance to initial jump point and our nav computers are loaded and ready. We’re loading supplies and ammunition now, and Fleet regulations require me to inform you that this task force is carrying planetfall antimatter warheads in quantities sufficient for any contingency.”

“Just what I always wanted,” David said. “Has my staff arrived?”

“Sir, we had no time to assemble a staff. None of us knows what to expect, and my guess is that you won’t notice the loss. Your cabin is ready and your belongings are aboard.”

Dawnstar slipped her moorings and backed out of the immense docking bay two hours and thirty nine minutes later. David saw the other Fleet Vessels in his task force departing their berths as she cleared the Orbital Base and wheeled about to her departure heading. *Brightstar* formed up on *Dawnstar*’s port side, and all sixty-two Fleet Vessels accelerated into the deep vacuum. Jumps were calculated to place the task force in Nevnanan space within eleven days instead of the seventeen normally required for that voyage. David smiled as he recalled the single

desperate Jump to Truvip IV that had almost cost him his career. *Seems I set a valid precedent, and I don't care what Maxqur has to say! Meanwhile, I need to figure out how to navigate an encounter involving Dimenoans without triggering galactic war... because my younger self just had to be a fighter pilot, didn't he? Next time, I'll build a scale model and stick it on a shelf!*

Halfway into the voyage, David called Tamor into his cabin. He appeared shortly, saluted, and remained at attention in the hatchway as David poured two glasses of Vegaxian liqueur. “At ease, Captain. Drink?”

Tamor stiffly accepted the proffered glass and held it in front of him. David took a deep swallow and refilled his glass before leaning back against his desk. “Tamor, I was out of line the day I transferred off this ship. I can promise you my reaction would have been different had I known the truth. Even so, I acted abominably, and I’m truly sorry.”

Tamor stared down at the deck, his whiskers twitching in thought before he looked back up at David. “Apology accepted, Sir. Your accusations were understandable if not justified; however, please understand that I harbor no ill will toward you but cannot be the friend I was. There is also your flag rank to consider.”

David nodded, his heart heavy. “Yes, Tamor, I understand.”

“Is that all, Sir?”

“Yes, Captain. Dismissed.”

Tamor saluted and departed, leaving David alone with his guilt and frustration. *I can be a selfish, boorish example of Sentient life sometimes—especially since my petty need to win a mock dogfight may have unleashed this whole mess!*

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The task force emerged from final jump five days later and approached Nevnana as David paced back and forth on *Dawnstar*'s bridge and the commlink came alive.

“Bridge, from Combat, detecting signatures from ninety-seven Dimenoan combat vessels, mostly light to medium battlewagons with a separate contingent of forty-four transport and supply vessels.”

“Flag, from *Brightstar* Communications, picking up extensive traffic between the Dimenoans and the Nevnanan surface.”

“Flag, from *Dawnstar* Tactical, Dimenoan vessels are in distant orbit with no apparent formation and appear to be laid over. They...”

“*Dawnstar*, from *Brightstar*, we are being actively scanned by both space- and ground-based sensors.

“Bridge, from Tactical, Dimenoan vessels powering up. We also see evidence of increased surface activity.”

“*Dawnstar*, from *Brightstar*, we concur.”

David keyed a commlink. “All Fleet Vessels, sound general quarters. Battle stations! Form three heavy cruisers on the flagship and follow us in. Deploy the remainder of the task force around *Brightstar* and prepare to engage the Dimenoan vessels. Per my authority, I am declaring this a military situation. You may use force in self-defense but do not commence offensive action unless I order otherwise. We’re going to pass through the Dimenoan pickets and enter a close orbit around the planet.”

Klaxons blared. Heavy blast shields lowered over the bridge viewports, obscuring the view beyond. David turned to the main holo that displayed Nevnana as a bright green sphere surrounded by specks of light in differing colors denoting satellites, Dimenoans, and other ships.

“Bridge, Communications, receiving a holo from the planet. Keying to bridge auxiliary.”

“Ambassador Yusag,” David said as a familiar figure rezzed before him. “We meet again. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Johnson,” raved Yusag, the bells on his rainbow colored chapeau jangling as if to emphasize his outburst, “you are committing an act of war against a quiet Independent world.”

David laughed. “War, Ambassador? I am on a law enforcement mission to apprehend a Sentient wanted on capital criminal charges per galactic law granting all governments the explicit right to apprehend their fugitive citizens. Please turn Alyya Puquoo over to us, and I will be on my way immediately with no harm done.”

Yusag looked flabbergasted, color rising on his pale flabby cheeks as he virtually hopped with anger. “Are you mad? You killed our general yourself from the very vessel you stand on—and now you confront us with sixty-two warships to demand that we hand over a dead Sentient? Be off before you force us to protect ourselves.”

David folded his arms behind his back as he smiled. “Yusag, my task force is more than capable of destroying your Dimenoan protectors in a manner that will pepper your skies with enough scrap metal to render local space unsafe for ships of any description for years to come, but that won’t be necessary because you and I have no quarrel. Again, surrender Alyya to me, and I’ll be on my way hopefully never to return.”

“Bridge, from Tactical, we are entering a low parking orbit around Nevnana. Dimenoan ships are now fully online and moving into attack formations.”

David rocked back and forth on his feet and concentrated on keeping his breathing slow and even. *Dear Creator, please don’t let me fuck this up!* He keyed a commlink. “Away all fighters. Obtain active weapons locks on your selected targets. Communications, assure the Dimenoans that we don’t wish to attack them; however, I will interpret any further preparations for combat as an attack and retaliate forcefully with no further warning.”

He turned to Tamor. “Captain, have all ships prepare planetfall antimatter warheads and stand ready to bombard the planet on my orders.”

Tamor's whiskers fell. "Are you mad?"

"No, just rolling the galactic dice." David glanced at Yusag still raving in the holo.
 "Please follow your orders, Captain."

He refocused on the holo with a slight nod as a tech announced that the Dimenoan vessels were complying for the time being. "Ambassador Yusag, we have information that Alyya Puquoo is alive and being harbored by your government. Your failure to remand her to my custody is both an affront and violation of common interstellar law. The vessels challenging our authority to retrieve our suspect pose a deliberate threat to the safety of my task force, rendering this a military situation. Your ongoing failure to immediately comply with my lawful demand is therefore an act of war, and I will respond in kind. I ask you again to hand over Alyya Puquoo."

"I'll see you executed for this, you warmongering nincompoop! Alyya is dead. If you want her body so badly, I suggest gathering her atoms from somewhere near Dyrwuv II."

David took a deep breath. *Today is not a good day to start a galactic war.* "Captain Tamor!"

"Sir?"

"Fire all antimatter warheads towards the planet."

"Sir?!"

David spun on a heel, officers and techs shrinking away from his blistering scowl. "Did I stutter, Captain? Fire!"

Tamor's brown skin looked almost ashen as he hesitated before pressing a contact on his armrest. "Warheads away, Admiral. May the Creator protect us all."

"Very well." David turned back to the holo. "Ambassador, my patience has expired. Your scanners should show enough antimatter warheads falling towards your planet to completely obliterate all life. You have time to recant your story, but not much. I suggest you get on with it."

He derezzed the auxiliary holo and faced the main holo. Bright red specks of light drifted towards the Nevnanan surface as he walked behind Tamor's chair and leaned on it, clutching the leather backrest.

"By the Creator, I may be killing millions of Sentients on a hunch followed by trillions more," he muttered. "I'd better be right about this!"

Seconds passed, then minutes.

"Bridge, from Tactical, thirty seconds to close of abort window. Twenty-five. Twenty. Fifteen. Twelve, eleven, ten..."

"Abort the attack! I give up."