'Exile Sun'

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EXILE SUN

BY Eric A. Martin

14+

30 MIN/PLAYER

2-6

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CREDITS

PLATINUM KICKSTARTER SUPPORTERS!

A System In Tumult

"My Grandfather tells the story of a time before the world we know, when Earth, our home, first set her eyes on the stars… It was called the Outbound Fleet and it was to carry colonists out of that solar system for the first time. International committees had approved a plan that would construct the Terran Gateway. At the same time, the Outbound Fleet carried with it enough supplies to establish colonies around that distant star and to assemble their own hyperspace gateway when they reached Novus, their destination in the Andromeda constellation."

"Those who came with the Outbound Fleet left their world behind. Years passed as the Fleet hurled onward towards its new home. A generation lived and died on those ships. All the while making preparations to assemble the Outbound Gateway. The Gateway would be a lifeline to the colonists bringing new supplies and communications back from Earth. Hope burned bright as our forefathers reached this new sun, having spent nearly seventy years in the black. At long last they prepared to send their first message back through the gateway to Earth."

"But, Earth was never heard from again…"

"Ill equipped and desperate the colonists spread out in their new system scrounging for the resources to live. For a time many held out hope for a signal from Earth, but the harsh reality of isolation and the unrelenting nature of the new worlds soon forced them into a grueling existence. The Outbound Gateway fell into neglect, was disassembled and re-engineered to create a small network of intra-system gateways to connect the colonies. Still, through tough times some Colonies lost track of each other, many were lost. Resentment grew and details faded as life trudged on around the Exile Sun."

"Two hundred years have passed since we first arrived at Exile, and relations between the colonies are tense. Some have declared open war. A new initiative to reassemble the Outbound Gateway and ally with Earth is gaining popularity but this is an immense task. The original components have been long missing, passed among the colonies until records were lost. A few pieces have recently been discovered but I'm afraid many of the colonies will seek them out for any advantage they may offer. Still, challenges aside, I hope that one of the colonies can gain enough influence to rebuild the Outbound Gateway, contact Earth, and bring peace to the Exiled Worlds."

Overview - Players each represent one of the exiled colonies of Earth trying to unite the Exile System. The player with the most Victory Points at the end of the game has completed enough objectives to out maneuver their rivals and successfully contact Earth. Maintain Colony resources and complete card based objectives to gain Victory Points.

COMPONENTS

COLONY CARDS (6)

MAP TILES (7)
1 SUN TILE & 6 SYSTEM TILES

BONUS MISSION CARD (1)

2 BONUS MISSION

Gain one Bonus Mission Card worth two Victory Points each time you accomplish any one of the following objectives:

Destroy an enemy Flagship
Destroy an enemy Shipyard
Win a battle on any planet

TWO VICTORY POINTS EARNED

AGENDA CARDS (20)

DEFEND! ATTACK!
1 2 3 4 5 5 4 3 2 1

DESIGN BUILD DEPLOY RESEARCH

CONTROL CARDS (6)

TECHNOLOGY CARDS (30)

STRIKE CRAFT CARDS (10)

SHIP CARDS (108)
[18 PER PLAYER]

FLEET TOKENS (60)
[10 PER PLAYER]

PAWNS (7)
1 TIMER PAWN &
6 TURN ORDER PAWNS

COLONY MARKERS (60)
[10 PER PLAYER]
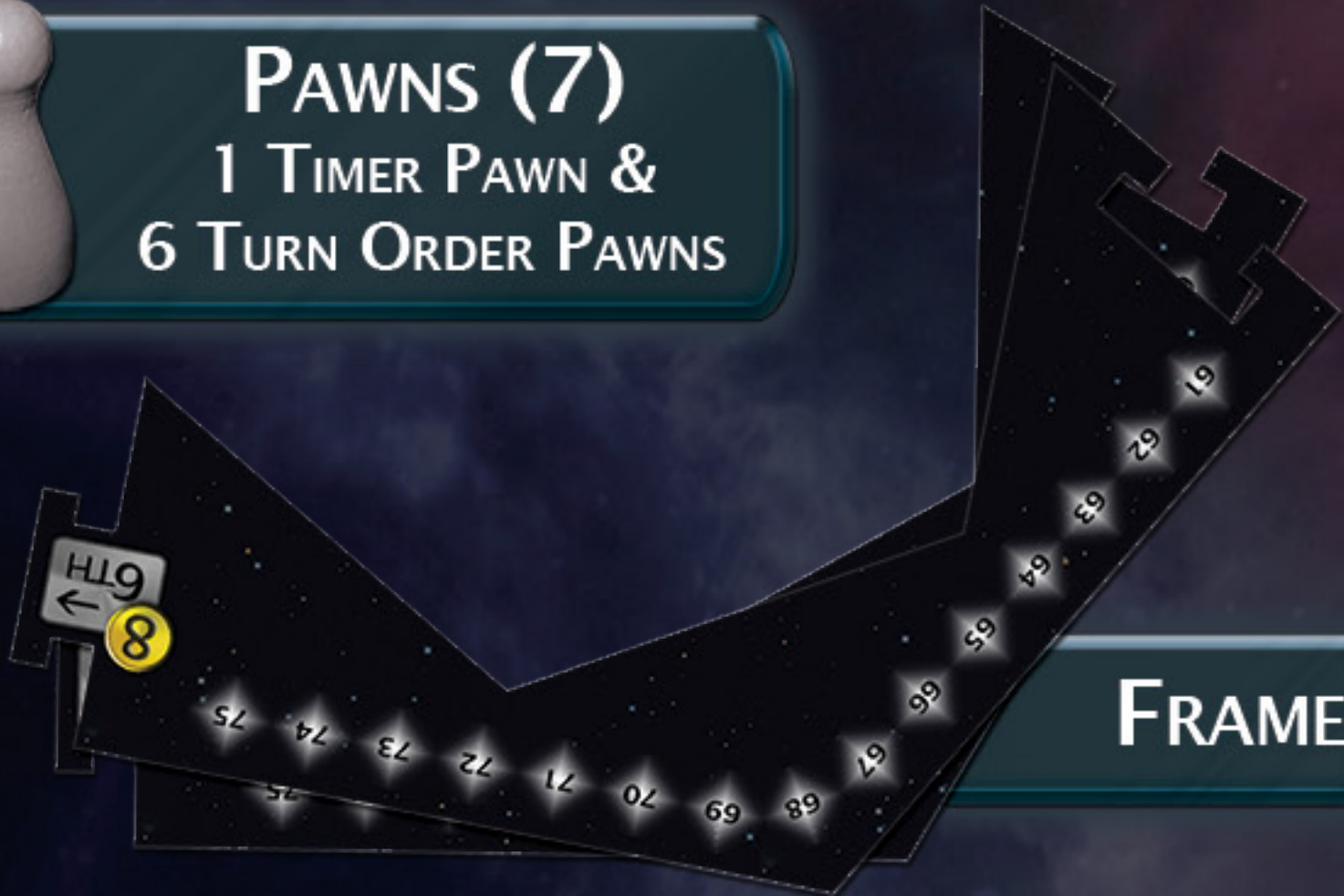
FRAME TILES (6)

THE TIMER TRACK

The Timer Track acts as the game's clock, measuring the length of each game 'Cycle'. As well as signaling the game's end after 3 Cycles. The arrows represent the general direction of a Cycle. The Timer Track is found on the Sun Map Tile.

The outer ring of the Timer Track is used during a 6 player game. The middle ring of the track is used during a 5 player game and during the 4 player game. The inner-most ring of the track is used for a 3 and 2 player game.

THE TURN ORDER TRACK

The Turn Order Track is located on the inside edge of the Map Frame. Six Turn Order Spaces surround the game map in clockwise order.

The Turn Order Track determines the order of play among the players. Any time 'Turn Order' is referenced by the rules, this track and the pawns on it are being referred to. The order in which players may choose from among these Turn Order Spaces is usually determined by the Victory Point Track.

THE VICTORY POINT TRACK

The Victory Point Track is where players record their score during the game. It is located on the outside edge of the Map Frame. This track begins at 1 and goes up to 90. This track also determines the order in which players may choose their Turn Order Space. The player with the lowest score chooses Turn Order first, and the player with the highest score chooses last. When players are tied in score, choose Turn Order starting with the player at the top of the stack and go down.

To set up 'Exile Sun' do the following:

A. Place the Sun Tile on the table.

B. Place the black Timer Pawn on the 'Start' space of the Timer Track.

C. Place the Map Frame Tiles in order clockwise around the Sun Tile.

Place these decks near the board:

D. 'Strike Craft' Ship Cards

E. Technology Cards.
This deck has a discard pile.

F. Agenda Cards - This deck also has a discard pile. Immediately draw 4 of these and place them face up next to the board. These are public Agendas for all to try to complete.

G. The Bonus Mission Card

Randomly determine a first player. This player and each player after in clockwise order should:

H. Choose a Colony Card, and get the Pawn, Ship Cards, Fleet Tokens, and Colony Markers, of that color.

I. Choose a System Tile, orient it in any direction, and place it next to the Sun Tile. This is the player's 'Home System'. The following tiles should be placed on the next player position clockwise from the First player. Extra tiles are placed as upside down at the end. (As Shown, See box on Page 7)

J. Place a Colony Marker near the beginning of the Victory Point Track and on each Home Planet.

Each player must now set up their individual Player Area as follows:

Draw 1 Technology Card, and 1 private Agenda Card.

Locate from among the Fleet Tokens a 'Light', a 'Medium' and a 'Shipyard' and place them face down on the board inside the Home System. (Not Asteroid Fields nor split spaces on the border). Players may also place Decoy Tokens in their Home System if they wish.

Place the remaining Fleet Tokens and Colony Markers in their player area.

Separate the Ship Cards into these stacks beside the Colony Card.

1. Design Deck (Left), with 3 Battleship and 5 Cruiser Cards

2. Build Deck (Right), with 3 Destroyer and 5 Frigate Cards.

Shuffle the Design Deck, draw one card from it and place it in hand. Then shuffle the Build Deck, draw one card from it and place it in hand.

The Flagship and Shipyard Cards are also placed in hand.
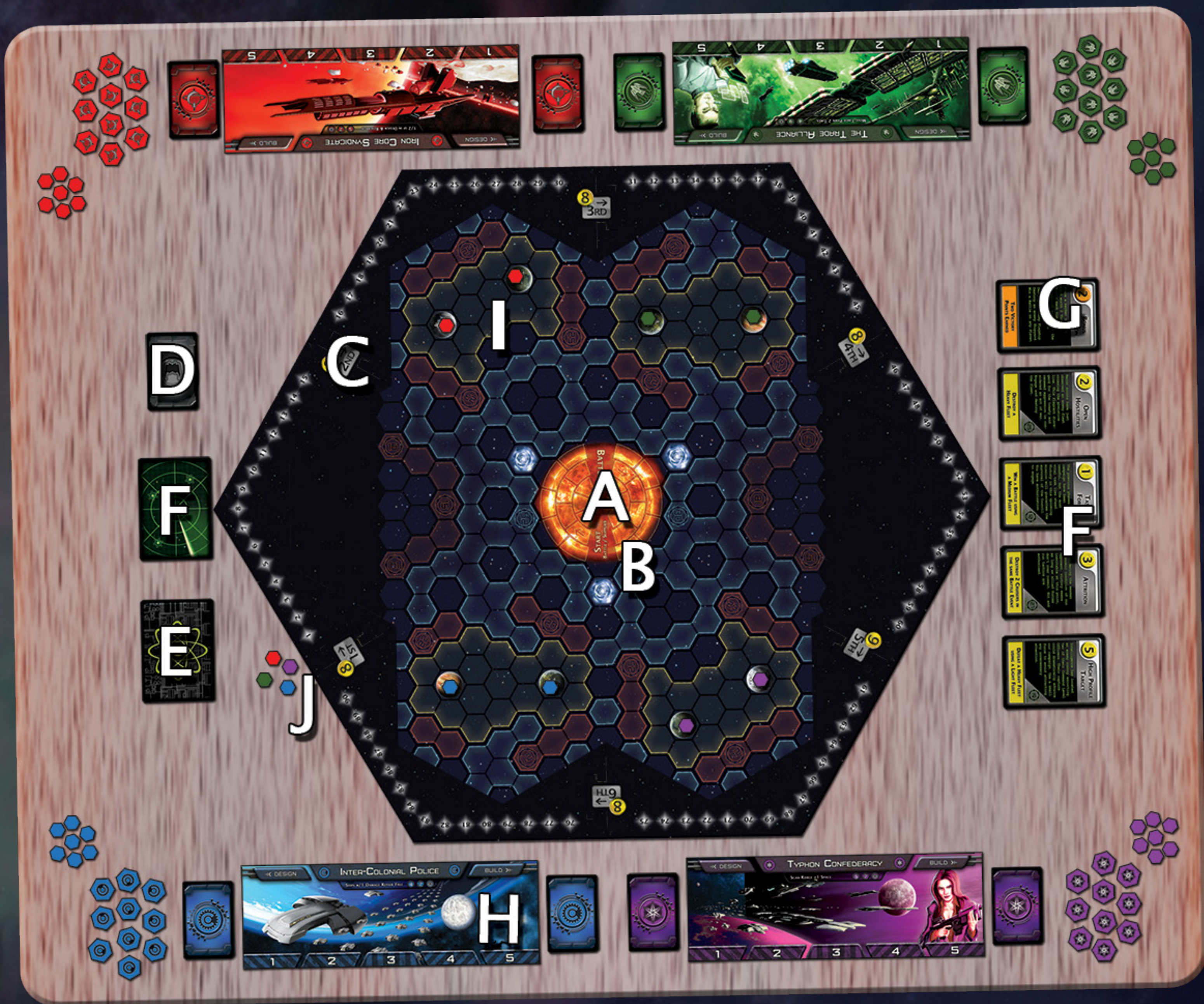
The game begins with a Supply Event.

During this first Supply Event players may choose their Turn Order in the reverse order of setup (counter-clockwise), starting with whoever set up last.

SET UP FOR LESS THAN SIX PLAYERS

A GAME TURN

In 'Exile Sun' player turns go in order based on the Turn Order Track. Each player's turn consists of 2 things:

1) Using their allotted Move Actions.
2) Moving the Timer Pawn

Sometimes when a player moves the Timer Pawn, events are triggered, like Supply or Battle. These will be considered later. First, consider Move Actions.

Move Actions

During a turn, players can use Move Actions up to the number listed on their Control Card. Move Actions can be used with multiple fleets in any combination, using one fleet more times or more fleets less times. Move Actions can be used to:

- Move a Fleet Token
- Start a Battle
- Scan an enemy Fleet Token
- Launch a Decoy

Moving a Fleet - When moving a fleet, players must determine how far to move the fleet based on the kind of space moved into. Normal Space, Trade Routes, Military Zones, Asteroid Fields and Gateways have different effects on the distance a Fleet Token can move. Fleet Tokens cannot be moved through enemy fleets, but players may move through their own fleets, as long as they don't end on top of one another.

Starting a Battle - Moving on top of an opponent's fleet starts a Battle. Only two fleets may be in a Battle at a time.

Normal Space – It takes 1 Move Action to move each space in Normal Space.

Gateways – Fleets can travel instantaneously between Gateways. One Move Action is required to move onto a Gateway. Gateways follow these three rules: **(1)** Once a fleet lands on a gateway, the player may choose to go to any other Gateway without any movement cost, **(2)** and they may move off a Gateway space without any movement cost, however, **(3)** Players may never end a fleet's moves on a Gateway.
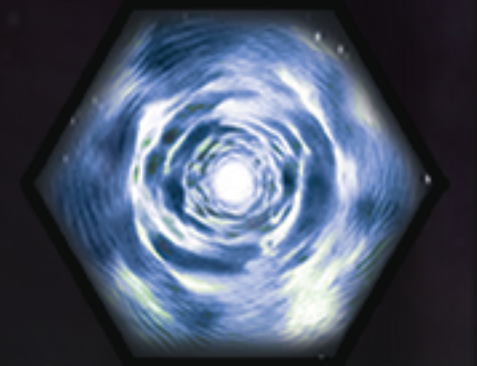
Trade Routes (Blue) – When traveling into a Trade Route space, a player may use 1 Move Action to move up to 2 spaces as long as both spaces are in the Trade Route. There are never 'half' moves to be carried over.

Military Zones (Yellow) – This zone is permanently a Trade Route for the Player that started in the System. For other players the Military Zone is Normal Space.

Asteroid Fields (Brown) – It takes 2 Move Actions to enter an Asteroid Field Space.

Move Actions cannot be used by Fleet Tokens stacked in a Battle. Stacked Fleets are released from Battle at the end of the next Battle Event, once one of the Tokens has been removed.

Scanning – Players may scan enemy Fleet Tokens to see their hidden value. A player must spend a Move Action to look at an enemy Token secretly and then return it to the board face down, or to its owner if it's a Decoy. A fleet may scan any adjacent fleet, and scan as often as the player has Move Actions available. *Note!* - Players may freely look at their own Fleet Tokens anytime.

Decoys – Decoys are a specific Fleet Token with a blank back, and so these fleets contain no ships. All rules regarding the Move Actions of regular Fleet Tokens apply to Decoys.

Players may launch a Decoy from any fleet. The Player must spend a Move Action to pick up a Fleet Token off the board, take a Decoy from their Player Area and then place them both back, one in the original space and one in an adjacent, potentially even onto an enemy fleet! Other players should be left guessing as to which fleet is which.

Players are limited only by their supply of Decoys and Move Actions. Players may launch neither a Decoy or its counterpart token into an asteroid field. A Decoy is always removed from the board and returned to its owner when it's revealed, but Players may not just remove their own Decoys at will.

Decoys may be deployed during set up, but afterward may only be launched using Move Actions. Decoys are never deployed during a Supply Event.

Timer Pawn and Cycles

After taking their Move Actions, players MUST move the Timer Pawn to end their turn. Players may move the Pawn one space forward or backward around the Timer Track.

A 'Cycle' is one lap around the Track. Events are triggered when the Timer Pawn is moved forward onto them. Events are only triggered the first time they are moved onto and only once per Cycle. Events occur even when passed.

The Pawn may not be moved backward off of the 'Start' Space. The 'Start' space triggers first a Battle Event for the previous Cycle and then a Supply Event, starting a new Cycle.

When events are triggered by the Timer, they involve all players at once. Once an event is resolved, the players resume their turns. After a Battle Event, the turns continue with the next player in order, after a Supply Event, Turn Order starts over, with a new 1st Player.

Draw a New Private Agenda

Each turn, players have the option to forfeit all their Move Actions in order to discard their current private Agenda Card and draw a new one.

Supply Event

The Supply Event is the means by which players gain new ships, fleets and technology. When the Supply Event is triggered players do the following:

1) *Repair Special Ships*
2) *Place a pawn on a Turn Order*
3) *Allocate/Reveal Supply Points*
4) *Resolve category Bonuses*

Repair - At the beginning of a Supply Event players repair and return any Flagship and/or Shipyard Ship Cards from their Player Area to their hand.

Turn Order Track – Each Turn Order Track space has a Turn Order number and quantity of Supply Points (yellow). Players must weigh the value of each combination and choose from among them. Players choose a space, in the order of their position on the Victory Point Track, starting with the lowest score. When there is a tie, start with the player on top of the stack and then down.

Supply Points – Immediately after choosing a Turn Order space, players allocate the number of Supply Points listed on their Turn Order space to the four center columns of the Control Card.

Once all players have allocated their Supply Points, the Control Cards are revealed. Based on how the points are spent players acquire a number of the items listed in the categories. Bonuses are then given, one category at a time.

COLONY ADVANTAGES

NEW SIDONIA   During the Supply Event, after all have revealed the placement of their Supply Points, this Player may relocate 1 pt.

APHELION TRADE ALLIANCE   This player may choose to move the Timer Pawn twice instead of only once each turn.

S.H.A.D.E. SYNDICATE   This Player has a permanent 1/2 Supply Point in 'Design' and 'Research' for the purpose of breaking ties.

CALIBURN CONFEDERACY   This Player may scan fleets up to a distance of two spaces.

"THOSE LEFT BEHIND"   This Player may launch Decoys with no Move Action cost

THE EXILE GUARD   At the end of Battle, any of this Player's ships that have only 1 point of damage, repair for free and return to hand.

Each colony also has icons listed on the Colony Card representing the following:

4 Move Actions   **7** Ship Card Hand Limit   ⊕ Armored* Ship Cards   ◉ Unarmored* Ship Cards

(*Armored ships have an advantage in power point distribution)

Bonuses - Bonuses provide extra cards and tokens. Players gain a bonus in any category where they have the 'Most' or '2nd Most' Supply Points spent. Two Players tied for Most split the bonus, with the player earning 2nd Most still getting a bonus. Ties between more than 2 players and ties for '2nd Most' get no bonus. Players never get a bonus in a category where they spent no Points.

Special Note! - In a two player game, there is no bonus for buying the '2nd Most' in any category. Also, the player with 'Most' in each category gets only 1 extra card/token. Ties get no bonus.

Supply Categories

Advanced Design – For every 2 Points (rounded down) in 'Design', players may move a card from the top of the Design Deck into the Build Deck and then shuffle it, increasing the value of future ships. After setup the Design Deck is not shuffled. Players don't preview the cards.

Most = +2 Ship Cards moved
2nd Most = +1 Ship Card moved

Ship Building – For every 1 Point in 'Build', players may draw a Ship Card from their Build Deck into their hand. *This deck may be shuffled at any time*. Players may hold only a limited number of Ship cards. While players may take all of their new cards, they must then discard enough cards back to the bottom of the Build Deck to meet their limit.

Most = +2 Ship cards drawn.
2nd Most = +1 Ship card drawn.

Deployment – For every 1 Point in 'Deploy', players may select any one Fleet Token from their Player Area and deploy it, face down, on or adjacent to any planet they control or adjacent to their Shipyard Fleet Token. A Shipyard Token must be revealed in order to deploy Fleet Tokens around it, and then is hidden again immediately. No Decoys are deployed during the Supply Event.

If a player has no spaces available on or directly adjacent to a Planet, then Fleet Tokens may be deployed next to a fleet adjacent to that Planet. This applies to Shipyard Tokens as well. Fleets cannot be directly deployed on to an Asteroid Field space, but they may be directly deployed onto an enemy Fleet Token, thus starting a battle.

If the Shipyard Fleet Token is removed from the board, it *must* be redeployed for free during the next Supply Event.

Special Note! - If a player controls no Planets and has no Shipyard Fleet Token on the board, they are to deploy their Shipyard Fleet Token adjacent to the Gateway nearest their Home System.

Most = +2 Fleet Tokens deployed.
2nd Most = +1 Token deployed.

Research and Development – For every 2 Supply Points (rounded down) in 'Research', players may draw 1 Technology Card.

Most = +2 Tech Cards drawn
2nd Most = +1 Tech Card drawn

BATTLE EVENT

Battle Event

When the Battle Event is triggered by the Timer Pawn, any stacked fleets must battle. Battles are resolved in turn order by the token on top. If a player has a token on top of more than one Battle then they may choose the order of the Battles. Players are encour- aged to resolve multiple Battles simultane- ously if at all possible. To resolve a Battle follow these steps:

1st) Determine the number of Ship Cards to be used in Battle. A player *must* use the number of Ship Cards shown by the dots on the token in the Battle.

Heavy = 5 Ship Cards
Medium = 4 Ship Cards
Light = 3 Ship Cards

HEAVY

Players choose Ship Cards from their hand and from the Strike Craft deck. Strike Craft may be used in any battle for free. Players *must* use at least 1 Ship Card from their hand if available.

Players are not allowed to see the size of an opposing fleet until after choosing the Ship Cards they plan to use in Battle. But, they may have previ- ously scanned it. If a Decoy is revealed no Battle occurs.

Do not get Strike Craft Cards from the deck until after both players have selected their Ship Cards. This way fleet strength is not revealed prematurely.

Once each player has chosen the cards they will use in Battle, the cards are placed below each player's Colony Card. Players should avoid rearranging the ship cards amid battle.

2nd) Next, each player counts the total Fleet Power from their ships. Fleet Power represents the offensive and defensive potential of each ship. Each ship may, in essence, choose to fire on an enemy ship or incoming torpedoes.

3rd) This total Fleet Power is then secretly allocated, on a Control Card, toward the defense of friendly ships and attacking enemy ships. During Battle, all ten columns can be used. Fleet Power may be distributed in any combination but only up to **8** in any single column. This is called '**Setting your Tactics**'.

COUNTING FLEET POWER

Each circle on a Ship Card represents 2 points of Power. Each '+' means add 1 and each '-' means subtract 1. So to count a Fleet's Power, count all the circles by 2s, then the symbols.

In this example, when the circles alone are counted (8) we get a Power of 16. Then we add 1 for each plus to get 18. Then subtract 1 for the minus to get 17 total Fleet Power. It's noteworthy that a plus and a minus together cancel each other out and so both may be ignored.

DEFEND! 1 2 3 4 5

ATTACK! 5 4 3 2 1

DESIGN · BUILD · DEPLOY · RESEARCH

MOVE SHIP CARD — 2 PTS = 1 CRD
DRAW SHIP CARD — 1 PT = 1 CRD · MOST = +2 CRDS · 2ND = +1 CRD
PLACE FLEET TOKEN — 2 PTS = 1 TOK
DRAW TECH CARD — 1 PT = 1 CRD · MOST = +2 CRDS · 2ND = +1 CRD

4 1 1 · 4 4 · 4 2 4

ATTACK! 1 2 3 4 5

DEFEND! 1 2 3 4 5

DESIGN · BUILD · DEPLOY · RESEARCH

DRAW TECH CARD — 1 PT = 1 CRD · MOST = +2 CRDS · 2ND = +1 CRD
PLACE FLEET TOKEN — 1 PT = 1 TOK
DRAW SHIP CARD — 1 PT = 1 CRD · MOST = +2 CRDS · 2ND = +1 CRD
MOVE SHIP CARD — 2 PTS = 1 CRD

4 2 · 3 2 6

NEW SIDONIA
DESIGN · BUILD
May Relocate 1 Supply Point
④ ⑨ ⑩
1 2 3 4 5

FRIGATE · FRIGATE · CRUISER · CRUISER

2-1=1 · 4-1=3 · 0 · 0

20 Power

TYPHON CONFEDERACY
DESIGN · BUILD
Scan Range +1 Space
$ 7 ⊙
1 2 3 4 5

DESTROYER · FRIGATE · FLAGSHIP

4-3=1 · 0 · 0

17 Power

BATTLE EVENT

Players are not permitted to delay the game by putting all points to defense more than once in a row.

14 Power Points Left →

4th) After Tactics are set, the Control Cards are revealed and players compare 'Attack' vs. 'Defend' to see how much damage each ship takes. For every point of attack that exceeds a ships defense, one circle is covered up with a Colony Marker. If a player accidentally uses too many points, their opponent may choose where to remove the excess.

Players should cover up minus signs first and leave plus signs until last for the most Power in the next round.

5th) A Ship Card is destroyed when all its circles are covered. After damage has been allocated, destroyed Cards are removed and a new round begins.

These rounds continue until one side is destroyed or surrenders.

'Terms of Surrender!' - Any player may choose to surrender a Battle with these following terms: Any Flagship or Shipyard Card involved is destroyed. All remaining ships go to the bottom of the Build Deck. The winner is granted any Agenda or Bonus Mission they would have otherwise qualified for in victory.

After Each Battle Do the Following:

1st) At the end of Battle, fleets that were completely destroyed or surrendered are removed from the board.

2nd) Any players that have won a battle on a Planet or that have destroyed a Flagship or Shipyard, may now place a Colony Marker(s) on the Bonus Mission Card. Players may also claim Agenda Cards by placing a Colony Marker on them (public) or placing them face up in their Player Area (private). Only one marker per player per public Agenda, but the Bonus Mission Card can have multiple markers per player.

3rd) Destroyed Ship Cards are returned to the **bottom** of their original deck. Battleships and Cruisers to the Design Deck, Destroyers and Frigates to the Build Deck, and Strike Craft to their deck. (See Special Ships p15)

MISSING

At times during Battle, players can 'Miss' by accidentally attacking or defending a ship that does not exist. Players must come to an agreement on how this will handled at the start of the game. Players may agree to either force the player who made the mistake to deal with the consequences. Or, when an *obvious* mistake has been made, allow players to redo that round of Battle.

4th) Damaged Ship Cards go to the **bottom** of the Build Deck and undamaged ships return to hand.

The Scoring Round

At the end of the Battle Event, once all Battles are over, a scoring round occurs. Players gain points for various accomplishments. Players record these points by advancing their marker on the Victory Point Track. Always apply each player's score in Turn Order, stacking any tied player's markers accordingly. Players gain points for having:

A claimed public Agenda	Face Value
A claimed private Agenda	Face Value
A marker on the BM Card	2 pts (ea)
Control of a Home Planet	2 pts (ea)
A Flagship Card in Hand	2 pts
A Shipyard Card in Hand	2 pts

After scoring, claimed private Agendas are discarded, the Bonus Mission Card is cleared of Colony Markers and any public Agendas that were claimed at least once, are discarded and then dealt back up to 4.

SPECIAL SHIPS

Special Ships are worth Victory Points to their owner each time they survive a Battle Event, however, they also score points for opposing players when they're destroyed. At the end of Battle, damaged Special Ships *always* return to hand, but destroyed Special Ships are placed face up in their owner's Play Area and may not be used again nor scored until after the next Supply Event. Note the differences in these 2 ships:

The Flagship Card is the most powerful Ship Card in the game.

The Shipyard Card is **only** and **always** used in conjunction with the Shipyard Fleet Token. If attacked, this fleet has 5 ships, however, the Shipyard Card must be included in the battle. If the Shipyard card is **ever** destroyed, the Fleet Token must be removed at the end of battle, even if other ships survive. The Shipyard Fleet token must be redeployed during the next Supply Event, for free.

HOME PLANETS

Each player starts the game with two 'Home Planets' in their starting System Tile. Only these two Planets are regularly scored as 'Home Planets'. However, When a Battle is fought on any Planet the winner may place a Colony Marker on the Bonus Mission Card, there by gaining Victory Points. If both Fleets are destroyed, the defender maintains control of the Planet, but no player scores the Bonus Mission Card. Unoccupied Planets remain under the control of the last player present there, shown by a Colony Marker. *Note!* - When no larger fleet is on a Planet, it is *always* defended by three ships. If under attack, Players may reinforce an unoccupied planet they control if they have a Turn, a Move Action and a fleet available to move onto their attacker.

THE END GAME

Game Over

The game ends when the designated number of Cycles elapses. At the end of the game the player with the most Victory Points wins. If players tie in Victory Points, they share victory.

Learning Game	1 Cycle
Short Game	2 Cycles
Standard Game	3 Cycles
Long Game	4 Cycles

Team Variant

One optional way to reduce play time when playing with 4 or 6 players is to play teams. Players determine teams at the beginning of the game and then cooperate and conspire together throughout the game.

Teammates can move through each other's fleets. Additionally if a player is in possession of one of their teammates Home Planets, then the teammate would still be able score the planet as if they had possesion of it.

Teammates record their score separately throughout the game. Each team's final score will be the combined total score among its two players. The team with the highest final score wins.

AGENDA CARDS AND BONUS MISSION CARDS

In the quest for Victory Points players may attempt to accomplish the four public Agendas, their private Agenda, and complete the Bonus Mission Card.

Public Agenda - Anytime a player completes the objective on a public Agenda, he may place one of his Colony Markers on it. Each public Agenda may only be claimed once per player.

Private Agenda - When a private Agenda is completed, the card may be 'claimed' by placing it face up in the owner's Player Area to be scored at the end of the Battle Event. A private Agenda may only be scored by its owner. Once a card is claimed, the player draws a new private Agenda.

An Agenda Card may be claimed once the statement is true, or once the statement is accomplished by the player. Private Agendas that are accomplished during a Battle Event may only be claimed at the *end of the Battle Event*. If an Agenda Card calls for the destruction of a fleet or specific ships, then mutual destruction during Battle will still accomplish it. However, to claim a card that requires a player to 'Win' a Battle, the player must have surviving ships.

Bonus Mission Cards - Every time a player fulfills one of the objectives on the Bonus Mission Card a corresponding Colony Marker is placed on the card. The Bonus Mission Card can be claimed by anyone, multiple times.

Achilles Amor, Adam "Pyrowolf" Clark, Adam Aldridge, Adam Easterday, Adam Hegemier, Adam K, Adam Korman, Adam Walding, Robert Usher, Adam Ward, Adrian Valverde, Alexander Krizhanovsky, Alexander Shvarts, Alexander Winaimed, Alexandra Glick-Kutscha, Alexei Kozlenok, Allan Clements, Allen W, Alywin Fruge, Anders Alling Pedersen, Andrea Dukeshire, Andrea Garello, Andrea Sargon Cupido, Andres Odio Vivi, Andreas Monitzer, Andrew @ Pepsi Harcourt, Andrew Brenner, Stephen Brenner, J Tannenbaum, Andrew Freitag, Andrew J. Dimond, Andrew Podojil, Andrew Stingel, Anastasia Schild, Cairns Boardgamers, Andrew Tullsen & Print & Play Productions, Lance Peterson, Andy Rogstad, Andy Williams, Anthony Mikulaschek, April M. Bremner, Ari Ades, Arnie Horta, Arthur Eckert, Attempted Murder Games, Austin Norris, B. Schofield, Barry Bradley, Bartosz Popow, Dirk Ackermann, Ben Baker, Ben Boeckel, Ben Thomas, Benjamin Asher, Bill Garlick, Bob Mazanec, Brad D. Kane, Brad Lee, Bradford Cone, Brandon Barlow, Brandon Ferrer, Brandon Miller, Breanna & Caiden, Brent R. Johnson, Brett "Rabbi" Rabatin, Brett Tomlin, Brian Couch, Brian Frazee, Brian Lucier, Brian Miller, Brian W. Knowles, Brian W. Lenz, Brian Winkleblech, Bruce Spears, Bryan Graham, Bryan Hunt, Bryan Johnson, Bryce Moulton, Byron Collins, C Dodson, Café MEISIA, Ksempac, Olivier Grima, Romain RAY, Yann Bartelheimer, Caitlin Woodward & Scout Anglin, CapnYB, Carl Moon, Carter Cliff, Casey Hoch, Casey Lent, Casidhe Nebulosa, Catarina Dalpiaz Lopes, Chad Hantak, Chantel Mijo, Mike Mijo, Charles Dubé, Charles Meyer, Charles Pearson, Charles Timtim, Charles W. Phillips & CHUCK-a-CON Game Sales, Chris Campos, Chris 'Codo' Congdon, Chris Gunning, Chris Hartman, Chris Henry, Chris Holm, Chris Houck, Chris Joul, Chris Oldgeorge, Chris Stadler, Christian A. Nord, Christian Brunner, Christine Trupiano-Rodriguez, Christopher Parker, Christopher Wallace, Chuck Lacourte, Chuck Norris, Clever Mojo Games, Cody Maggard, Corwin Dodd, Craig "Teutonic" allak, Craig Brooks, Craig K Hallstrom, Crosley, Curtis Jirsa, Dan Baehr, Dan Foster, Dan Hentschel, Dan Masterson, Dan Schaeffer, Danella Durante, Alex Chang, Matthew Goddard, Steve Hamelin, Claude Galarneau, Daniel M. Jordan, Daniel Winterhalter, Dave "jOk3rCPG" Slater, Dave Noyle, Dave Rambo, Dave Wolfe, David "Davido" Orange, David A. McGregor, David Breen, David Call, David Cook, David Edelmann, David Hopson, David Knepper, David McCartney (Tribalsoul), David Nielson, David Shackelford, David Siskin, David Sowa, David Vuong, Demian Moreno, Dennis, Dennis Holliday, Deon Beswick, David Beswick, Derek Clark, Devin Goddard, dlm, Don Christianson, Don Clevenger, Don Clevengern, Don Thompson, Douglas Glisson, Dr. John V Dano, Drew (Andrew) South, Drew Allen, Dwayne Sherrard, Ed Kowalczewski, Ed Sagritalo, Ocean Druen, Charles Richtfort, Edwin Nealley, Elena Haliczer, Emil Ali, Ahmad Farhan, Shanizan Herman, Wong Jun Yet, Allen Sam, Eric Buetikofer, Eric Clinton, Eric Domeier, James Folkerth, Allen Tipper, Eric Knouff, Eric Rasmussen, Erick Slazinski, Ernest Phillips, Joshua & Lauren Jones , Reinagel, Evan Dorn, Evan Nordgren, Exato Game Studios, Fabien Lozach, Feng Kevin Gu, Flavio Jandorno, Giovanna Jandorno, Maria Clara Jandorno, Carlos Couto, Antonio Marcelo, Flaviu Diudea Sinea, Eugen Demeterca, Cristian Dirtu, Foo Gwen Heong, Frank Branham, Frank Haude, Frank Solnitzky, FYS, Gabriel Booth, Gabriel Guerrero, Gamers' Vault, Gareth L Stonebraker, Gary Bennett, Gary Fortenberry, Garyp, Geoff Skinner, Geoffrey Green, George A. Ramos, Gibbs Moore, Glen A. McCoy, Gouveia Boys, Grant Smith, Greenbrier Games, Greg D'Alesandre, Greg Lewis, Greg Price, Gunther & Kristel DHoogh, Guy Mullarkey, Harlock Lo, Helen & Jan Bormann Lars Hüttenberger, Raphael Reitzig, HP Lustcraft, Ian McKechnie, Ian Sawlor, Ian Toltz, Irwin Dolobowsky, Isa, J. L. Mullins & Morgan Mullins, J. Pass, J. Petrusek, J.A.Baluci, J.S. Hodge, Jakub "Panchy" Panchartek , Zdenek Misak , Radek Bohunsky , Polda , e^(iπ)+1=0, Jam Ku, James "The Pope" Hastings, James Boyd, James Quill, James Ramey, James Sinnett, James W Muench Jr, Jameus Hutchens, Janning Cunis, Jason Burns, Jason Gifford, Brian McLean, Sherry McLean, Jason Saldana, jaybee3, Jean-Luc Simard, Jed Wegner, Jeff "Darkwind" King, Jeff "Nuke" Wessel, Jeff Boucher-Zamzo, Jeff Hall, Jeff Lane, Jeff Murl, Jeffery Bass, Jeffrey Cowley, Jeffrey Humber, Jeffrey Yang, Jens Wortmann, Jeremy Fridy, Jeremy Scott, Jerry Collins, Jess B, JIM JUST, Jim Otto, Jim Wuerch, Jo Hobbs, João Martins, Gabriel Weisz, Gerry Salinas (and the CMU Grad CS boardgame club!), João Limpo, Joe "Pone" Norris, Joe Watkins, Joel B Green, Joel Kinzie, Joel Oakes, Joel Smith, Joel Thompson, Johan Nordberg, John Coates, John Kimes, John McCann, John Palomba, John Ruf, John Smith, Jon Greisz and Dave Perkovich, Jon The Philosopher, jonathan brown, Jonathan 'Cato' Dibblee, Jonathan Lacson, Jonathan Pui, Jonathan Scott, Jonathan Yu, Jonathon Dalesandry, Jordan Booth, Jorge Rodríguez, Joseph "UserClone" Le May, Joseph Anderson, Joseph D. Orlando IV, Joseph Sharkey, Joshua Nickle, Joshua So, Joshua Tompkins, JP Lee, JT Rodier, JT Traub, Justin "KakarisMaelstrom" Fitzgerald, Justin Butterfield, Justin Dougherty, Justin Labak, Justin VanSlyke, Justin Wick, Karim Moussally, Jessica Plemons, Keith Koleno, Ken Arthur, Ken Burt, Ken Woo, Kenneth Mallory, Kepa Eizaguirre-Borreson, Kevin Bertram, Kevin Driggs, Kevin McKenzie, Kevin Moreno, Kevin P. Gilmore, Kevin Reilly, Kevin Rodkey, Kevin Tibbs, Kirt Dankmyer, Krista Donnelly, Kristi Lawless, Kurt Zdanio, Kyle Olds, Kyle R. Woods, Kyle Wittwer, Larry F. Neal Jr., Laura Burns & John Omar, Leigh Cody Appel, Lex Luter, Living Worlds Games, Liz Burton, Loren Cadelinia, Louis Perrochon, Louis Sylvester, Luca sete-Czinege, Dunda, Janos Lacza (rokarege), Imre Hauszknecht, Gyorgy Liptak, Lukas Daniel Klausner, Lukas Mathis, Lyle Williams, M Scott Walters, M. Sean Molley, Madelyn Chappell, Magno, Marc Kerkhofs, Marcio Chammas, Marcos Augusto Bellezi, Maria O'Loughnan, Marius Tofan, Mark A Augustyniak, Mark Branscum, Mark Brenner, Mark DiBlasi, Mark Jimenez, Mark La Brayere, Mark Shocklee, Mark Sivak, Mark Taraba, Chris Aniballi, Markus Bayer, Mathew Schelsky, Robert Juenger, Matt Bredenberg, Matt Foster, Matt Fullenwider, Matt Gordon '93, Matt Olmstead, Matthew A. Schlinkert, Matthew Jensen, Matthew Marshall, Matthew McMahon, Matthew Wasiak, Matthew Whynot, Maxfield Stewart, Maxim Kalenkov, Alexander Grigoryev, Iliya Grigorkevich, George Grosman, Alexandr Akolzin, Melody, Mia Eng-Kohn, Michael "Svenn" Lattanzia Jr, Michael D. Tucknott, Michael Heising, Michael Hopkins, Michael Potter, Michael Satre, Mikael Holmstrand, Gillar Bajs, mike mcgannon, mikeboon, Mile Gray, Miles Matton, Mona Bodemeijer, Joost Carpaij, Paul Mulders, Todd Quinn, Pedro Tallieu, Mrraow, Natalia and Jeremy Caliden, Nate Lawrence, Nate Ranly, Nick Clune, Stephen Huelsman, David Langenkamp, Trevor Rindler, Nate Rutz, Nathan Guest, Nathan Paquette, John Lopez, Neal Haggard, Nick & Melonie Lavely, Nick Patron, Nikolaidis Family, Noah Selzer, Pat Nelson, Paul Boos, paul engle, Paul Scadden, Paulo Roberto Vasques Jr, Peter Sbirakos, Phil Hughes, Philip Ramge, Philip Stein, R. Scott Daniels, Radu Craioveanu, Rajiv Nayak, Ray Wisneski, Retnuhytnuob, Richard D. Ward, Rick Beetham, Rick Collins, Rick Vinyard, Robert Bogdon, Robert Danforth, Robert Hien, Robert J. inamore, Robert M Everson, Robert, Rohit Ramesh, Rollin Bishop, Roy Quek, Alexis Wong, Wong Lap Yin, Izack Chee, Han Weiding, RPardoe, Rune Finstad Halvorsen, Ryan Joseph Boyce, Ryan Soots, Caleb Edwards, John Heath, Ryan Templeton, Sam Bishop, Sam Ouimette, Samuel DeMers, Sascha Kutzmann, Schild, Scott "Aldie" Alden, Scott Douglass, Scott Fort, Brent Bryan, Gil Anderson, Scott Halvorson, Sean Byington, Sean Peacock, Sean Roberson, Sebastian Birthelmer, Seth Forster, Seth Uricheck, Shane Roland, Shaun Loati, Shawn Craig, Shawn Purtell, Shawn Simas, Sheldon Chin, Shinners, Smash Richardson, Smoox, Allenlin1110, 羅紹微, Solidhavok, Spencer D. Williams, Stefan "Storm King" Kaleta, Stefan Frey, Stephan Kamenik, Stephan Szabo, Stephanie Bryant, Stephen Elliott, Stephen M. Carroll, Steve Benton, Steve Donovan, Steve Malczak, Steve Slaggy, Steve Walker, Phil Standen, John McKendrick, Edmond Hyland, Ola Mikael Hansson, Steven Sartain, Suzi R, Ta'Ding, Tana dei Goblin Bologna, Teddy Weiland, Tegre Layne, Teik Chooi Oh, Craig Johnson, Andrew Parton, Tera Huppi, The Sawyer Family, Thomas E. Logan, Thomas Thompson, Thomas Woltman, Tim Buckley, Tim Collett, Timo Stepper, Timothée Licitri, Philipe Nendza, Frederic Cervenansky, Benjamin Norest, Frakaya, Timothy Hing, Todd Berman, Todd Carlson, Todd Lang, Tom and Amanda Bowersox, Tom Flanagan, Tomas Eriksson, Tomas Oeschlaeger, Sven Emmert, Torolf, Trevor Gooding, Trevor 'subVert' George, Tristan Smith, Tumblemonster, Victor Roberts, Vincent Arebalo, Wade Nelson, Walt MacEachern, Wazzadeeno, Wesley Austin Kinslow, Will Sullivan, William Crane, William G. Dunn, William R. Otte, William Springer, Wylde Karde, Xavier Wielebski, Zach Hoekstra, Zach Zahos, Zachary Rebyrun.

Novus

July 20, 2369

Centercore Station glittered in the morning sun. In its high orbit, the installation buzzed with activity. Hundreds of ships swarmed across its surface in the sky above Arcadia, Mars' largest city. From merchant ships to transport frigates, two-person fighters to bristling battleships, every size of ship and variety of crew bustled in final preparations, sharing a single purpose. They had each answered the call, and today was the day.

Farther into space, seven ships hovered over the ordered chaos, waiting in a crescent formation. Their newly designed hulls gleamed in the golden light, identical except for the names and distinctive nose art painted on the sides. Each measured nearly a mile long. Even at a distance, their massive forms drew every eye.

James Anders gazed through the window of his office on the Outbound Fleet's flagship, the TSL *Civilization*. As the time approached, waves of ships lifted away from Centercore and floated out toward them. Each would be assigned a colony ship to travel with and directed to a designated spot in the caravan.

Anders tugged absently at the neck of his uniform. The new rank insignias glinted conspicuously on the high collar.

"Getting close," a weathered voice said from behind.

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Think they're ready?"

He nodded again, standing straighter with pride as he examined the gathering fleet. His fleet. "Yes, sir." He started to speak, then hesitated.

"What's on your mind?"

Anders turned from the window and eyed the graying Chancellor of the Terran Star League. "Why me, sir?" He glanced down at the uniform. "Six months ago, I was commanding a transport. A small one."

The Chancellor gave an exasperated smile. "They told me you keep asking that."

He returned the smile. "Because no one's given me the real answer. Promotion to Fleet Admiral and command of this mission? I'm only thirty years old, and I've only seen combat twice."

"True." The Chancellor's head cocked to the side. "Let's put aside the fact that you've refused multiple promotions. This mission is different – you're not going into combat. We need young people with new ideas to lead it, not tired military men already set in their ways. After all, you're quite literally the future."

Anders sat at his desk and leaned forward to fix the Chancellor with a steel gray stare. The old politician met his eyes for a moment, then broke away to look at the wall. He cleared his throat. "That's what the political ad copy says, anyway. Want to hear the real reason?"

"Since we'll never see each other again, this seems like a good time."

The Chancellor pointed to Anders' arm. "That's why."

Anders instinctively flexed his left arm – or, what used to be his left arm. He looked down at himself. Although designed to look and function like flesh and blood, his left arm, leg, and half of his left torso were now highly advanced prosthetic implants. After six years, he had started to forget that the bionics weren't real. "What do you mean?"

"Don't be modest. Enemy raiders board your ship, and you get shot to pieces before driving them off. Then you capture one that was left behind, treat his wounds, and insist on returning him to his people?"

"He was just a boy, and misguided," Anders dismissed. "Anyone would've done the same."

"No, they wouldn't. But that's exactly what I'm talking about." The Chancellor shrugged. "Top brass admired your guts, the other side treated you like some folk hero, and everyone else was amazed you lived." He pointed at Anders' chest. "Somehow, your storybook hero routine made them all love you. Trust you. It even ended a war."

He nodded, finally understanding. "And you need that."

"The fleet needs it. Sixty-eight years, James." The Chancellor gestured out the window. "If they're going to survive the trip, it'll take more than a soldier to lead them. They need to be inspired. That's why you." He flashed a devilish grin. "And at your age, who knows? You may even live long enough to see Novus."

Anders returned to the window. The last few ships were taking their place behind the colony ships. His attention turned to the immense ring-shaped structure hanging in the distance. When completed, it would form the first half of the Kline-Rolston Hyperspace Construct – what was being affectionately referred to as the Catapult.

"Well then, I guess there's no time to waste."

*** *** ***

"Admiral on deck!"

Anders stepped from the lift onto the bridge. He returned a salute to Commander Irina Gagarin and her crew. "Carry on," he said, and a flurry of activity resumed across the two-hundred-foot command center. A wide oval shape, it perched on the top most level of the colony ship. The holographic wallscreens were set to exterior display, offering a real-time panoramic view of the entire fleet. Gagarin fell in beside him, and they aimed toward the center where their consoles neighbored each other.

"How do we look?" he asked.

"The ship and crew are ready for your order," the young, dark-haired woman replied with pride. While the fleet was his to command, *Civilization* was hers.

Gagarin took her chair and gripped the armrests, as if forcing herself not to fidget. He could tell she was nervous, but determined not to show it to her crew or superior officer.

Anders didn't feel like sitting – too many overlapping emotions raced through him. Standing over his console, he called up the current fleet statistics. They were fifteen minutes from the launch window, and everything was on schedule. The past month's repeated drills appeared to be paying off. Only one task remained before launch. The task he dreaded most.

"Talk to them before you go," the Chancellor had said as they parted ways. "Remind them who you are. Rouse them, inspire them, and they'll follow you."

Inspire them. Okay….

The com was in his hand. He raised it to his lips, thumb hovering over the Transmit button. With a long, deep breath, he willed his nerves to calm. Calmness meant survival – just like when his ship had been attacked. Just like when the blast had ripped through him. Be calm. He pressed the button.

"Good morning."

Activity ceased on the bridge, every crew member stopping to hear the first official words of their leader. He knew the same would happen on every ship in the fleet. Thousands were listening.

"This is Fleet Admiral James Anders, on the TSL *Civilization*. Exactly four hundred years ago, Neil Armstrong took his first steps on Earth's moon. On that day, for the first time, we showed the galaxy that we were here. In the centuries since, we've spread across the solar system, growing and learning and challenging our own potential. And today, we take our first steps into the great beyond." Anders keyed a command on his console, sending a visual to all ships. On the wallscreen, the Andromeda constellation magnified and spun to face them. Zooming in closer, the image resolved around one star system and its planets. "Novus – that's what we call it. In Latin, it means "new". A new star, a new frontier." He pressed another button, and the image changed to a full view of their fleet. "New ships – designed to lead us there, to terraform, to help us create a new home, and most of all…." The image changed to the colossal mechanical ring floating beyond them. "….to build a new way to travel. Each colony ship carries a piece of our companion ring, and irreplaceable technology that will bring it to life. On arrival, we will complete the first interstellar hyperspace bridge in human history. After that, the possibilities…."

Anders trailed off, suddenly disappointed in himself. His gaze had settled on Gagarin's hand, still clinging white-knuckled to her seat. Ad copy – that's all this is. You sound like a politician. He shook his head. What am I supposed to say? I don't do this for a living. All I can say is what I know. What's true. Turning, he glanced around the bridge at his crew. Dozens of expectant eyes rested on him, likely wondering what he was doing. Commander Gagarin rose halfway out of her chair.

More of the Chancellor's words came to him. "They trust you." With that, he steeled himself and put the com to his lips again. Okay. The truth will have to do.

"Who of you is afraid? Raise your hand." Anders put one hand in the air and used the other to press a key on his console. The broadcast display changed to a collage of live camera feeds, coming from the bridge of every ship in the fleet. He locked eyes with Gagarin and lifted his eyebrows in expectation. Her hand rose hesitantly, followed by the rest of the crew. In the next tense moments, sheepish and embarrassed hands on every ship slowly lifted into the air.

"Look at that," Anders said into the com. "Every race, background, and profession from two dozen worlds, the best and brightest from every walk of life, and yet at this moment we all share the same feeling – no one knows what's out there or what's going to happen, and we're afraid." Determination swelled in his chest. He let it wash through him, permeating his words. "Our feelings unite us. What we are inside unites us. For the next sixty-eight years, we'll share our lives together. We'll fear, love, struggle, celebrate, and grow old together. We'll support each other and reach out for the stars together. That is what it means to be human – to face our fears and fly right through them. To take chances and break barriers and achieve the impossible." He examined the images on screen, etching the faces into his memory. "I'm already proud of you. All of you."

The countdown clock chimed, signaling five minutes until launch window. Anders switched the nearest wallscreen panel to exterior view, allowing the sparkling field of stars to fill his vision. "In five minutes, we begin. Our future is out there waiting for us. Let's go get it. Anders out."

He released the com button.

A cheer exploded from the crew of his bridge, and every bridge displayed on their screens. Anders allowed himself to drink in the elation, the sense of possibility that permeated the air. He stored it away in his heart. Whatever happened tomorrow or the next day or thirty years from now, he wanted to remember this moment.

"Commander," he said, turning to Gagarin. "Take us home."

Freedom, Part One
October 17, 2436

"The fleet is back in formation, Colonel." Lieutenant Grayson announced from the pilot's chair. "All ships have reported in; *Civilization* has begun the countdown."

Colonel Liana Ganti, first officer of the colony ship *Freedom*, watched the wallscreens' real time display of their companion ships. Beyond their tight formation, the other colony ships' fleets were repeating the same ritual. "And the Slingshot?"

The lieutenant consulted his display. "The Lambent Field drive is fully recharged, sir. We're ready."

Despite having been born and raised in the Outbound Fleet, she had always battled her nerves during this part of their monthly routine. Still, she couldn't let the crew see her sweat. Not when she was so new to the rank.

Far to the right, a door hissed open. "Commander on deck!" called a fresh-eyed ensign. Sharp salutes snapped across the bridge as a tall, broad-chested man breezed through the hatch.

Without breaking his stride, Commander Vincent Des Charognards managed to touch a salute to his graying temple, flash an easy smile, and give the eager ensign a pat on the shoulder. "Carry on," he said in a deep, husky voice. "Today's a big day." He made his way swiftly across the bridge, eyeing every display with smooth efficiency.

Liana left the wallscreen and met Des Charognards at their adjacent command consoles. That roguish smile turned on her as he settled into his chair and leaned back. "How do we look, Colonel?"

"As expected, sir." She tapped a few keys and sent the relevant reports to his display. Inside, she couldn't help but marvel at him. They were about to blast themselves to three-quarters the speed of light, and he seemed as if they were taking a stroll around the corner. "Battery upgrades worked like we hoped. Colony ships recharged in two days instead of three."

He chuckled. "It used to take over a week, from what I'm told. Two days isn't long. How'd the trading go?"

"We got what we needed," she replied. The fleets' cargo holds were organized so that no single ship carried everything it's occupants needed for the journey. As a result, each monthly stop served a dual purpose. The main purpose was to collect energy and recharge the batteries. The secondary purpose was to trade with other ships for any needed supplies and personnel. Apparently, the fleets' forefathers had wanted to encourage the growth of an inter-fleet economy while they journeyed. "Everyone seems to be moving faster this time."

Des Charognards nodded. His eyes twinkled. "Of course! Some of them must realize what day it is. Those that don't will remember soon."

Liana nodded and tried to smile. Tried to seem at ease.

"One year from today, Ganti," he continued. "One year. Twelve recharges, that's it. Then we're home."

"Yes, sir," she managed to say.

"And how was your leave?"

Her smile faltered. "....um..."

The Commander raised an eyebrow. "The leave we discussed you taking while we recharged? The leave you haven't taken in the six months you've been my XO?" "Liana," he lowered his voice and leaned close to her. "The new rank weighs on you. I can see it. You're only twenty-eight, and you want to make a good impression, so I expect that. But, believe me when I tell you this - if you don't learn to relax, this job will eat you alive."

He fixed her with a no-nonsense stare. "I also expect you to follow my orders, even when the orders are take a vacation." She moved to speak, but he held up a hand. "And if it helps, I'm already impressed. Understood?"

Liana hesitated, considering his words. You know he's right. Stop ACTING like an officer, BE one. She nodded.

Des Charognards' grin returned. "Good." He gave her arm a familial pat and leaned back in his chair again, turning toward the wallscreens. "Now, Colonel, let's enjoy the launch."

Sitting back against her chair, she tried to mirror the Commander's nonchalant air. It felt supremely awkward. Maybe she just needed practice. "Time to launch?"

"We're at the one-minute mark, Colonel."

"This is my favorite part," Des Charognards said, gesturing at the wallscreens. Like floating cities, the massive colony ships swung into their customary configuration, companion ships arrayed behind them. They formed a gentle arc like the outer edge of a boomerang. *Civilization* leading from the center, and *Freedom* taking the position farthest starboard. The Commander practically beamed at the Outbound Fleet. "So beautiful."

"Counting down from one minute," Grayson said.

Liana gripped her armrests and concentrated on steady breathing. At zero count, they would switch from thrusters to the Lambent Field drive and leap instantly to .35L, just over one-quarter light speed. In the ten minutes following, the field intensity would increase until they were hurtling toward home at .82L. That in itself marked an impressive advancement during their journey. Back when the fleet launched from Sol System, it took hours to make cruising speed.

"Thirty seconds to launch."

The deck hummed beneath their feet as the Slingshot drive spun to life. She felt a familiar dizziness as the drive's rippling distortion field passed through

her, stretching to envelope their companion ships in its effect. To their port side, the *Concord's* fleet shimmered behind its own field, as if Liana were looking at it through water. She rubbed her temples and shook the disorientation away. Never get used to that part.

"Ten seconds."

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends," the Commander whispered with a grin.

She kept her eyes forward, her face a stone mask. Just a few seconds and they'd be safely under way. Then she could stop being a little girl and help run this ship.

"....launch."

The breath she'd been holding came out in a rush. Star lines stretched across the wallscreens, and Liana felt herself pressed back against the faux leather chair. Space hurtled toward them at impossible speed. An instant later, the inertial dampers kicked in and she sagged against the armrest.

Beside her, Des Charognards chuckled. "Only twelve more, Colonel," he said quietly. "Then you won't have to hold that poker face anymore."

Despite herself, she smiled, and the tension in her neck began to fade. "I'll look forward –"

The ship lurched to the side.

Liana tumbled from her chair and onto the deck. Warning klaxons rang out across the bridge, clashing with the sounds of tumbling bodies and breaking glass. Shouts of alarm and confusion fired between the crew.

"Report!" Des Charognards commanded over the din.

"Some kind of storm!" Grayson responded. "Minor outages, no major damage. Companion reports confirm."

"Why didn't SPHERE pick it up?" Liana demanded, heaving herself to her feet. Somehow, the Commander had managed to keep his seat.

"Sprang up out of nowhere, sir. We have a fix on it now."

"Let's see it," she said.

Between the command chairs and the forward wallscreens, a glowing circle sprang to life and rose from the floor. Strands of light lifted from it and swirled together, converging into a three-dimensional holographic image. In seconds they were examining a hard light model of their ship, its fleet, and the colossal energy cloud roiling angrily beneath them.

"We're lifting away from it now," Grayson said.

"Were any others affected?" the Commander asked.

"*Concord* hit it the same as we did, but the others were able to veer away."

Liana followed Des Charognards' gaze to the port-side wallscreens. Their neighboring colony ship had listed to the side, but was regaining its attitude as they were.

"Signal Commander Marcus and request their status," he said to the Comm officer. "If they're functional, bring us back into formation with -"

Proximity alarms screamed from the consoles.

"It's shifting!" Grayson cried.

Liana's eyes whipped toward the forward wallscreens, and her insides melted. A massive jet of energy exploded upward from the storm and swept across their path, blocking the way for *Freedom* and *Concord*. Like a flaming ocean wave, it peaked high above them, then tumbled back toward the heart of the storm with their fleets directly in its path.

"Evasive!" the Commander barked.

The wave smashed into them with a thunderous crack.

Freedom shuddered and pitched sideways. Liana barely clung to her chair as crew and equipment careened across the bridge and bashed into each other. Damage alarms wailed over the groans of the straining ship. Half of the aft wallscreens went dark, spitting smoke and sparks.

Violent tremors shook them as *Freedom's* engines fought against the storm. Gathering herself, Liana ran to Grayson's side with Des Charognards hot on her heels.

"What's happening?!" Des Charognards shouted.

"We're caught in the wave!" Grayson called back, keeping his eyes on the displays and his hands on the yoke. "It's trying to drag us into the storm!"

"Can we break out?" Liana said.

"We can't even move forward! And even that won't last."

A high-pitched electrical whine pierced the air. Liana ducked as light fixtures shattered overhead, showering them with blunted shards of glass. The bridge plunged into darkness. Seconds later, emergency lights winked on and bathed them in faint red light.

"What do you mean, it won't last?"

"Storm's dragging us down, Slingshot's pulling us up won't be long before the stress tears us to pieces! We've already got hull breaches, and it'll just keep pulling!"

"Then we can't just wait it out, we need a solution!"

Failure alerts scrolled across Grayson's display, and Liana knew the Commander was right. If they couldn't break free, they'd be dead in minutes.

She grasped onto an idea. "What if we dump all power to the Slingshot? The spike might boost us enough to break free!"

Des Charognards shook his head. "No good! With

Concord this close, we could destabilize their Lambent Field or push them deeper into the storm."

"She's right, it may be our only chance!" Grayson cried.

"NO!" he cast a desperate stare around the bridge.

Liana could see him searching for another solution. Struggling to block out the screams of injured crew and rending metal, she wracked her brain for some other way to survive. The ship bucked and shivered under the strain, clouding her thoughts and filling her with dread. More wallscreen displays crackled and died, hissing and spitting arcs of electricity through the air. Another console caught fire and melted to slag. Fire suppressants must be offline, she mused distantly.

The Commander swung back to them suddenly, eyes wide. "Charge the outer hull with an oscillating current! It may create a static barrier between us and the storm."

"Yes, sir!" Liana leaned down next to Grayson and frantically tapped out commands on his console.

The tremors grew more intense. A stretch of piping burst through the ceiling to their left, spewing a jet of gas and sparks. She entered the final commands and punched Execute. "I think that should do it, sir!"

In seconds, the battered ship began to calm. The violent rattling decreased, and Grayson managed to coax movement from the tired engines. He whooped with joy. "Might take a little bit, sir, but I think we can get out!"

A relieved cheer went up from the remaining crew, and Des Charognards' distraught expression relaxed into a tentative smile. He turned to the Comm station. "Signal our companion ships and inform them of our solution. Relay the message to *Concord* as well."

Grayson's piloting rig screeched aand flashed red.

"What now?!" Liana demanded.

"Sir, that's the proximity alarm," he said, all humor drained from his voice. He stared over at the Concord. "This one's only for ship-to-ship!"

She followed his eyes to their fellow colony ship. They were getting closer! Even through the Lambent Field effect, *Concord* was near enough for her to see flames trailing from multiple breaches.

"What's Marcus doing?" the Commander said.

"They're not responding." the Comm officer called.

A furious shudder rocked the Freedom. More alarms and warning lights blared at Lieutenant Grayson. "Their Lambent Field is touching ours! It's almost like they're..." he stopped short, shaking his head. His voice filled with dread. "Oh god, no. Commander, I'm detecting a spike in their Slingshot drive. They're dumping all power to it!"

Des Charognards' eyes grew frenzied. "Get me Marcus!"

"I can't, they're blocking our signal now!"

Liana felt lost, like they all knew something she didn't. She stepped closer. "Grayson, what's happening?"

The lieutenant turned to her with panicked eyes. "That maneuver you suggested - the one the Commander shot down? They're doing it. Only, they're going further and using our Lambent Field as leverage!" He gestured wildly toward the *Concord*. "They're pushing against us to blast themselves free!"

Des Charognards ripped the comm device from the officer's hand and held it to his lips. "Marcus, don't do this. You don't know what will happen," he pleaded. "We have a way out. WE HAVE A WAY OUT!"

"Too late!" Grayson cried.

Liana braced herself as the *Concord's* Lambent Field spun like a tornado. In an instant, it doubled in size and crashed against the *Freedom*. Then they were spinning.

Freedom's Lambent Field shattered. Inertial dampers gave out, and Liana found herself clinging to the Comm station as the world spiraled around her. She heard the engines scream as they struggled to compensate. With each revolution, the *Concord* came into view again. It was rising away, toward the storm's edge, toward salvation.

One tired hand slipped from its desperate grip. Liana felt herself begin to fall away, until a firm arm grasped her waist and anchored her in place. Craning her neck to identify her savior, she came face to face with the Commander. His eyes bore into hers with molten fury. She gasped at their intensity, like she'd never seen before.

"They betrayed us," he snarled.

Looking out at the escaping ship, she knew he was right.

"Something's happening, Commander!" Grayson shouted, pointing as the *Concord* came into view again.

At the edge of the storm, it's escape had stopped cold. The over-driven Lambent Field burst like a balloon, and a flash arced from the ship's metallic belly. Liana winced at the intense light.

Taking on a life of its own, the flash exploded into a massive energy wave and swept across the *Concord* and its fleet. They disappeared in the blink of an eye, as if erased from existence. Liana's insides turned to water. The breath left her lungs as an entire fleet was blasted from existence before her eyes.

The advancing wave filled the remaining wallscreens with blinding light. In the last seconds, Liana closed her eyes and struggled to feel calm. So, this is how it happens. A wall of force slammed into them with a deafening roar. The world turned bright white, and sound seemed to muffle.

She felt herself tumbling through the air...

Freedom, Part Two
Six Months Later

Cold.

Liana shivered and rubbed her arms through the sleeves of her uniform. They were always cold now. With usable power growing scarcer by the day, they couldn't afford to waste it on luxuries like atmospheric conditioning. She stared through the handful of wallscreens that still functioned, eyeing the unfamiliar stars. Each day, it felt as if the icy blackness crept farther inside the walls.

"Sir?" Grayson said to her.

Her stomach grumbled. She pressed a hand against it to quell the nausea hanging at the edge of awareness. The half-rations weren't helping, either, but what could they do? Freedom's fleet didn't include hydroponics.

"Sir?"

Liana shook the hazy thoughts away and focused on the present. Lieutenant Grayson looked back at her with hollow eyes. "We need him to make a decision now, sir."

Right. More good news. Wearily, she nodded and dragged herself up from the command chair. More sacrifices had to be made, and like always, they couldn't wait. She forced her feet to walk toward the Commander's office adjoining the bridge. A flash of anger raced through her. Six months they had been cut off from the fleet! Six months since the *Concord's* little stunt had destroyed half their companion ships, and blown them so far off course that they couldn't chart their way back. Six months alone, traveling aimlessly, with the rest of their fleet slowly dying. And now it was going to die a little more.

PING

Liana stopped. Was that...?

No, it couldn't be.

PING PING PING

She whipped toward Grayson's pilot station to see him pointing at his console like he'd just seen a ghost. "...c-contact, sir! We've got a contact on SPHERE!"

The Commander's office door slid open with a quiet whirring sound. Liana hurried into the darkened chamber with a new spring in her step, hunger and cold forgotten. The lights were off, leaving illumination to the stars outside and a computer's glowing display.

"Sir!" she exclaimed.

"Do you ever wonder what his last thought was, Colonel Ganti?" Des Charognards said faintly from the shadow. He stood at the window, shoulders hunched, eyes dark. "Commander Marcus. Do you think he realized he was going to die? That he'd doomed himself, too?"

Liana stopped short, taken aback. The *Concord* seemed to take up half the Commander's thoughts these days. During the past months, his humor and easy charm had eroded away, replaced by bitterness and smoldering resentment. It hovered around him now, like a dark cloud.

"Commander, we have -"

"I know, Colonel," he interrupted, voice loaded with regret. "I've decided. Tell the crew to start moving passengers and sealing off non-essential decks."

She stifled a sigh. Oh right, the sacrifices. Across the fleet, air processing units had been failing for weeks, and with no spare parts they had been forced to cannibalize their own equipment to keep them running. Now even that option was gone, which meant they'd have to start shutting down parts of the ship to keep the rest of it alive. In the excitement, she'd forgotten all about the problem. Hopefully, now there was a solution.

"No, sir," she said. "We found someone! Three large settler ships. Contact has been established, and they want to rendezvous in ninety minutes." She moved closer to the Commander. "They're fully outfitted, sir. Once we rescue them, they may have supplies that we need. Shall I give the order to meet them?"

Des Charognards' head slowly turned toward her, eyes burning like coals. "Which fleet are they from?"

A heavy silence hung over the six passengers of the small personnel shuttle. Liana examined them each in turn, noting the sunken cheeks and hollow expressions that marked each of them as belonging to Freedom. It seemed to her that this recent development should have been a happy one. Yet, upon hearing of the newly discovered ships, the Commander's mood had only sharpened into one of dark intensity. The cloud he carried had grown bigger and spread over the crew.

Not that she was completely at ease, either. After all, none of them had expected to find survivors. But they aren't Marcus, she kept telling herself. They're civilians, alone, probably starving and scared to death.

"One minute to touchdown, sir," the pilot called back to them. The three blocky, building-sized ships lumbered into view. In the center, the *Amelia's* forward bay doors opened to allow them entry.

"Do you ever wonder why they never searched for us?" Des Charognards said from out of nowhere.

Several times before, he'd asked this. Each time, her answer had been the same. "I like to think they did, sir."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure they searched for several hours," he replied with a sarcastic edge. And now, let me ask you - upon whom does our survival depend?"

This one was new. She fumbled around for an answer that felt right. "Well, sir, I suppose it depends on us now."

"Yes," the Commander said, as if she'd answered the most important question. "That's it, Colonel." He fixed her with an intense stare. "From here on, whatever happens, don't forget that. It's up to us."

She met his stare with a puzzled expression, but nodded acceptance to appease him. What does that mean? Des Charognards' choice for an escort suddenly seemed less random. She eyed the four crew members sitting across from them. Each of their uniforms had a matching red slash across the chest, marking their assignment on the ship. What is he planning?

Liana brushed her forearms, confirming that the small objects she'd strapped on under her sleeves were still there. She still questioned why she'd put them on in the first place. This wasn't that kind of boarding party.

When they landed, the settler ship's portly, balding captain was waiting for them outside the hatch. As they emerged into the spacious cargo hold, he ambled forward with a wide grin and a warm hand. "Welcome aboard!" he said, grasping the Commander's hand and pumping it with exuberance. "It's a real pleasure to see another friendly face out here." He turned to Liana and the four escorts. "And welcome to you, too!"

She nodded distractedly, entranced by the feeling that surrounded her. Warmth. After months of bone-deep cold, stepping onto the deck felt like being hugged from everywhere at once. She breathed deeply and relaxed inside.

"Captain Hart," Des Charognards returned with a nod, slipping his hand from the cheerful man's grasp. "I'd like to see your crew and equipment manifests."

"Sure thing, come on with me." Oblivious to the chilly greeting, the captain beckoned to them and turned toward a nearby exit. "We'll stop by the bridge, then get some hot food in your bellies!"

Liana had never been on a settler ship before. Aside from command crew and operational technicians, the vessel was filled with civilian families. Husbands, wives, children - normal people going about normal lives as they hurtled toward a new home. So different from the strict military atmosphere she had lived in most of her life.

Something else struck her as they made their way to the bridge. Of all the families roaming to and fro, of all the children playing, all the busy crew scurrying to maintain the ship, not one of them looked hungry or bleak. If anything, they looked....happy. Content.

"And here we are, home sweet home," Hart chirped.

They passed through a hatch and onto the diminutive bridge. Liana marveled at the difference. At maybe forty feet across, it only boasted eight crew on duty, and the computer equipment was serviceable but old.

Hart gestured to a console at their left. "Edwin, call up the crew and cargo details for the Commander, would ya?"

"Sure thing, boss," a skinny, mop-topped technician replied. His fingers flew across the keyboard, and a moment later he scooted away and gestured at the screen with a flourish. "All yours, Commander."

Without a word, Des Charognards bent to examine the lists. Liana craned her neck to look over his shoulder, and her eyes widened. These three family ships had enough food, equipment, and trained crew to sustain *Freedom*, with resources to spare. She felt a spike of resentment flash through her. How did they get all this? Did Marcus outfit his fleet differently than the others? No wonder they're all warm and fat.

"It sure is a wild stroke of luck running into you folks," Captain Hart prattled on. "Thought we'd be alone on this leg of the trip. You know, 'til we meet up with the others."

Liana's head snapped in Hart's direction. She felt as though lightning had struck her. At her side, the Commander visibly stiffened and sucked in a sharp breath of air. "What do you mean, others?" she said.

He looked at her, confused. "The others. You know, the other survivors. The ones who..." he paused, and realization crossed his face. "Oh, you thought it was just us?"

Des Charognards fixed the captain with a piercing eye. "What are you saying, Hart? Who else is there?"

Hart approached the console they had been studying and keyed in a command. A new list scrolled across the screen - two dozen ship names, with basic descriptions of ship type, crew and cargo. "Whatever that blast wave was, it took out the Concord and most of the companion ships. A few of us, though, got pushed out here. We were scattered, but we managed to modify our communications arrays to find and contact each other." He called up a star chart, and the ship names became pinpoints of light scattered over an expanse of space. "Working together, we managed to extrapolate where everyone is, and plot a new course to Novus."

A thrill exploded through Liana. "You know where Novus is?!" The Commander remained still and silent.

Hart nodded with a wide smile. "Yes, ma'am, we do." He pointed to the lowest pinpoint of light on the star chart. "See, that's us. We're the farthest from our destination. The others are each a little bit closer, but you can see that we've all been scattered along a similar arc. So we've established rendezvous points, and as we travel toward Novus, we'll meet up with the other survivors bit-by-bit. By the time we find home, everyone will have been reunited in our own little fleet." His smile grew.

"How far away are we?" the Commander demanded.

The captain's face fell slightly. "That's the one tough part. See, the wave was stronger than we thought at first. The journey's going to take longer than it originally would have. We thought it would take generations longer, but now with your Slingshot drive we can drastically reduce it. Best guess...." He hesitated.

"How long, Captain?" Des Charognards snapped.

"....another fifteen years, sir." Hart put on a brave face. "But, with everyone to support each other, we can do it!"

Liana felt as if she had been slapped. Fifteen years? They were another fifteen bloody years away?! The colonies would be long established by then! She felt the overwhelming urge to throttle the good captain.

The Commander's fists clenched until his knuckles cracked. The air seemed to thicken around him, and Captain Hart drew back with trepidation. Liana took deep breaths, struggling to keep her calm. Marcus. Marcus and his fleet did this to us.

With grim determination in his eyes, Des Charognards turned to their four escorts - with the red-slashed uniforms of security officers - and nodded to the leader. The officers returned crisp salutes, and each withdrew a defender capsule from a small sheath at their hip. Each resembled a baton made of black composite material.

Hart took another step back. "What's going on?"

The Commander's voice became a growl. "This vessel, is now under the direct authority of the colony ship *Freedom*. Your crew and resources are hereby commandeered, and will be transferred immediately to vacant positions in our fleet."

Hart gaped at them, his eyes nearly popping out. The bridge crew looked stricken and shocked. "But, you can't do that! You have no authority to -"

"While you've been wallowing in luxury, my people have spent six months frozen and starving!" Des Charognards barked. "Sacrificed by one commander, abandoned by the rest, yet still we've beaten the death sentence they laid on us. Now we're our own fleet, our own authority."

"I'll not allow you to -"

"Oh, but you will allow it," the Commander stated. He nodded again at the security leader. The black batons popped open, twisting and transforming into sleek, assault rifles. "Your people will join us. Your resources will sustain us. Your ships will be broken down to repair and augment our fleet. And when we arrive at Novus, they will see that we are stronger without them!"

Horror painted Captain Hart's face, then anger. Keeping his eyes on them, he rushed to the comm station and picked up the earpiece. "To *Magellan* and *Yeager*, we're under assault!" he shouted. "Run -"

"They're already boarded!" Des Charognards spat. "Your ships were ours before we ever spoke."

Hart flung down the earpiece and held a finger toward them. "It wasn't just you, you know. We were all left behind! But I will not allow this to stand, and you will not destroy what's left of Commander Marcus' fleet!"

At the mention of Marcus' name, Des Charognards'

face reddened and contorted in sudden, unbridled rage. Stalking forward, he drew a smaller defender capsule from his pocket. The device sprang open and shaped into a pistol, which the Commander put to Hart's forehead. "No, you were left behind. We were betrayed."

With a snarl, he pulled the trigger.

Captain Hart's body dropped to the deck like a bag of stones. Shouting and chaos broke out as the bridge crew rushed to defend their fallen captain. The officers charged forward, pushing the crew against the walls.

From the corner of her eye, Liana spotted movement. Standing behind them, forgotten, weak-looking Edwin slipped his hand into a small compartment and drew out a long, razor-edged dagger. With surprising speed, he charged toward the Commander's back.

Time seemed to slow, and Liana watched the scene play out as thoughts raced through her mind. The Commander had been right about so many things more than she had given him credit for. They had been betrayed and abandoned by their own people, and now this civilian crew wanted to live fat while they struggled and starved? Every day's worth of suffering, every shred of the anger and resentment she had been pushing away for six months came crashing down, and she felt her heart turn to ice. They were their own people now, and one day their betrayers would know it and fear them.

Slipping between Edwin and Des Charognards, Liana flicked her wrist. From beneath the sleeve of her uniform, a classic Earth-model pistol snapped into the palm of her hand. Training it on Edwin, she pulled the trigger.

He went down screaming.

The Commander whirled around, eyes wide at his near demise. Clutching his knee and writhing in agony, Edwin glared up and spat in Liana's direction. She wrapped herself in cold fury. Standing directly above him, she aimed again, this time more finally, and fired.

The bridge fell silent. Turning, she locked eyes with Des Charognards. He gazed down at her and nodded. "You remembered. Who does our survival depend on?"

She drew herself to full height. "On us. No one else."

The Commander moved back to the computer display and pointed at the star chart. "We have a rendezvous to make, Colonel Ganti. Have a look."

Liana examined the screen and understood his meaning. They would follow the *Amelia's* plan to meet the *Concord's* fleet, and soon those too would be theirs.

"How would you like to arrive at Novus in a battleship?"

On the screen, she spotted it. At the fourth rendezvous point, they would intercept the *Dauntless*, a formidable vessel of war. A cold smile crossed her lips. "Commander Ganti. I like the sound of that."

Maiden

January 3, 2541

The *Lexington* was old and faded. The bridge, if it could be called that, was laughably small – barely twenty feet across. Everything creaked and groaned. Still, it was home now. He liked it. Never did trust anything with too much shine on it anyway.

Thrusters cycled through their test sequence. John Raynor could feel them through the aging hull. Pre-flight checks had completed with the acceptable amount of red flags for a ship like this, and soon the captain would order them skyward. John sat in the pilot's chair and scanned the controls for the thousandth time. Today was special, and he wanted to be ready.

Heavy footsteps clanged against the deck behind him. "Not sure how I feel 'bout some codger flying this boat," a gruff voice said to his back. Short and barrel-chested, Reno Canton moved to John's left and lounged against the empty co-pilot's console with a cocky grin. "Some of us got more life to live."

John ran a hand through his graying hair. "Nice to see you, too, Reno."

"So, tell me some'n, old man." The younger man scratched his scarred chin with curiosity. "How in God's galaxy you get this job, when you ain't never been off Abilene?"

"Hey, be nice to the newbie." A petite young woman with bright red hair and a grease-covered tank top strolled onto the bridge. Popping open a control panel, she braced herself with one hand and shoved the other deep inside the tangle of cables. "Cap'n says he's the best sub-atmo pilot on the planet."

Reno scoffed. "Sub-atmo? That's barely flyin', Billie - 'specially on this glorified border town."

He had a point, John had to admit. The planet Abilene sat on a far edge of the Caliburn Confederacy's territory. Despite its industries, the planet had achieved little of the sophistication or population booms that characterized the core worlds. Still, it had been a happy home for sixty-three years, and Reno's demeanor had suggested a challenge of some sort. "Mind flipping those blue switches behind you?" John asked. "They're a little far for me."

"Well sure, old-timer," Reno said with feigned sympathy. Grabbing the console for balance, he leaned back and reached for the controls on the far bulkhead.

When his fingers brushed the blue switches, John flipped a switch of his own. With a whoosh, the starboard thrusters spiked to full power and tilted the ship hard to port. Reno's precarious balance evaporated and he tumbled hard against the bulkhead, his face

smacking into the switches. An instant later the thrusters powered down and the ship righted itself, as if it had never happened.

Billie howled with laughter. If not for her arm wedged inside the panel, John expected she'd have been rolling on the deck, clutching her sides with glee. He allowed himself a grin and a small chuckle.

Reno whirled on him, clutching his right eye with indignation. It was already swelling. "Where you get off doin' that?!"

John leaned back in his chair. "You're much prettier now."

Reno's face froze in fury, as if all the curses he knew wanted to come out at once. Billie guffawed again, and finally Reno regained enough sense to stalk to another area of the ship.

John shook his head and turned to the redhead. "Billie, is it?"

She nodded and flashed a mischievous grin. "Wilhelmina Rogers, at your service." She offered him her free hand, which he shook gently. Her fingers were calloused and strong. "I'm the ship tech."

"John Raynor, newbie pilot," John replied with wry smile. He cocked his head toward the hatch Reno had escaped through. "He always like that?"

"Don't worry, he'll warm up to ya." She yanked hard on something deep inside the console.

"Really?"

"...no. But he's like that with everyone." She shrugged. "Lucky for us he's a scary good tracker."

"That's comforting."

"Hey, so don't take this the wrong way, but what're ya doin' here?" Billie yanked again, and the hum of the idling engine changed slightly. "I mean, most newbie spacers are..."

"Young?"

She looked embarrassed. "Well...yeah."

John's eyes drifted back to his console. Just above the yoke sat a thumbnail-sized holocube. An image of a brunette, olive-skinned woman hovered in the air above it, smiling back at him. "Always wanted to travel. My wife and I, that is. You know, see the stars?" He sighed. "It was so expensive, though, and we never had money."

"Ah, so ya got wise and figured on workin' your way off-planet. Clever." She pulled her hand free and leaned back against the bulkhead. "Why ain't she with ya?"

John stared down at his hands. The silence stretched until Billie smacked herself in the forehead. "Aw, man. Sorry. When?"

"Couple years ago. Then I retired. Couldn't sit still, so I learned how to fly little puddle-jumpers." With effort, he looked up at her. "Turned out I was good at it. Word spread, jobs got bigger, and here I am." He gestured at the panel. "We're running different now. You fix something?"

Billie's eyebrows shot up. "You felt that?"

"Yeah."

She tilted her head, as if reexamining him, and nodded appreciatively. "Not bad, newbie." She resealed the panel and headed for the exit hatch. "Well, welcome aboard. Don't crash the ship an' we'll be best friends."

John chuckled and directed his thoughts back to the job. Grief and missing were for quiet times, and today was a good day. He took advantage of the solitude to double-check pre-flight test results and cycle up the main engine. The moment drew ever closer. His palms were sweating now.

"She's pretty," a softer, lilting voice said.

Craning his neck toward the rear hatch, John caught sight of Jean Wyatt coming up behind him. He nodded at her. "Captain."

Her eyes were on the holocube. "Looks about twenty there. Yeah?"

He nodded. "Annie always looked like this to me."

"Smart to bring that with you." She glanced out the window, to the overcast sky beyond. "It's an adventure, but you gotta have an anchor. Those that don't – they're the ones get lost out there."

John's eyes followed hers, and then fell back to Annie. He felt a familiar pang. "She always was my anchor."

Captain Wyatt plopped into the copilot's chair and swung her leg over the armrest. Long brown hair flipped to the side, revealing slightly gray temples. Her eyes twinkled at him. "I'm takin' a chance on you. Never flown with a green pilot before. Ready for your maiden voyage?"

John looked to his console and couldn't help but grin. "I've been ready."

She returned his smile and nodded. "Then let's take her out."

*****

The sun was setting. With the ship prepped and crew strapped in, the captain had settled in beside him.

Not to be a watchdog, she had insisted. It was just, first flights needed to be shared.

The yoke was firm and taut under John's grip. The thrum of *Lexington's* thrusters vibrated through the deck, up the controls and into his hands. Planet-side transports only gave a faint rumble, but this – this was real power.

Through the main viewport, he could see bushes sway and sheets of dust rush away from the ship in all directions. Billowing clouds swirled in the sky overhead. Then, suddenly, the clouds drew just a little bit closer. The yoke came alive in John's hand, and his breath caught in his throat. They were off the ground and steadily rising.

Higher and higher they lifted, over treetops and mountains and wide-winged scavenger birds. The ground sank away, the sky opened its arms. *Lexington* plunged into the heavy cloud bank, and the waning light winked out.

A realization struck John that this was the highest he'd ever been. The farthest away from his home. His body tensed at the thought, and the ship shuddered.

"Hey," Captain Wyatt reached over and rested a comforting hand on his forearm. "Relax, it's okay." She gazed out the viewport with wondrous excitement. "This is my favorite part."

"What is?" They broke through the top.

And then he saw it.

In the setting sun, the clouds were a sea of fire. Reds and pinks and oranges danced over each other, painting the world underneath the *Lexington*. Above the darkening horizon, blue skies faded to purple, then to black, then to the darkest velvet sparkling with the light of a billion stars.

"Oh my God," he breathed, overwhelmed. "They're..."

"I know." Captain Wyatt squeezed his arm and settled back in her chair with a sigh of contentment. "They are, aren't they?"

John's eyes fell to Annie's smile, and tears slid down his cheeks unbidden. His heart swelled to bursting. "We did it, Annie," he whispered to her. "We made it."

"Aw, newbie," Wyatt said with a tender smile. "You ain't seen nothing' yet."

Last shrouds of Abilene's atmosphere fell behind them. The vast expanse of space opened up and reached out to John, filling his eyes with more wonder than they could fathom. He felt breathless. He felt joyful. At last, he was here.

He was home.

Shatter

November 3, 2661

The fragmented remains of Tesla loomed in the distance. Captain Jaden Fox pressed the second of five red buttons, kicking her engines to stage two and boosting her speed. She relished the sensation of being pushed back in her chair. Most pilots dialed up inertial dampers to get rid of that feeling. Not her, though.

"Isn't our destination in the other direction?"

Jaden tried not to roll her eyes at her client, seated next to her in the tiny ship's cockpit. Always questioning, this one. She wished he could sit back and enjoy the ride. He'd paid a premium for it.

"I'm going to slingshot us around Tesla," she said. "What's left of its gravity'll lend us some speed."

Dr. Isaac Altair eyed the roiling behemoth with a dubious expression. "They say the Shatter is dangerous to approach. You are confident of this?"

The Shatter – that was the more romantic name for this place. It had been two centuries since the Outbound Fleet had arrived at Novus. After the gradual splintering of the fleet, it had only taken a century for war to break out. The moon called Tesla had been one of the casualties of that war. An experimental gravity bomb had torn the planetoid to shreds, along with the Sidonian colony settled there. A remnant of its former gravitational force had survived, however, and the broken remains had spent the last hundred years spinning in its tenuous grip.

Jaden gathered her blonde hair into a pony tail. "Dangerous to fly into. It's like the asteroid field from hell. Rocks of every size constantly moving, smashing into each other. To fly near, though…no problem." She grinned. "Not for me, anyway."

"If you say so," the doctor said, unconvinced. "Your people spoke of your skill."

By "her people", she supposed he meant her employers, the Aphelion Trade Alliance. She nodded with satisfaction. "They wouldn't waste me on an average delivery."

"Good. Mine is of the highest importance."

"That why you rented my entire hold?"

"Such as it is." He waved a dismissive hand at the door to her diminutive cargo compartment. The silver cylinder he'd brought aboard had measured seven feet long and three feet thick – enough to take half her available space.

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Think they'd send a freighter? You wanted speed, so you got me. My *Glimmer* will get you there in half the time, with half the attention."

"Is that why you cost so much?"

"No." She punched the third red button and the ship surged forward. "It's why I'm worth so much."

"Let us hope so, Capt-"

The green fire of a beam weapon erupted across the nose of the ship. Warning alarms blared, and *Glimmer* shuddered and lurched from the sudden impact. Jaden's teeth rattled as staccato blasts rang through the cockpit.

"What is happening?!" Dr. Altair demanded.

A black shadow flitted silently across the viewscreen, a barely-visible silhouette. Dread crept across Jaden's chest. All these years, she'd managed to avoid their notice. What had changed? With a glance at the doctor, she thought she knew. Shoving away the tangle of fear and suspicion, she let her fingers fly across the controls. At her command, the ship switched to manual piloting and a control stick slid from the console.

"Captain, I asked –"

"It's a Nightblade," she snapped.

Terror crossed his face. "A S.H.A.D.E. assassin ship? Why would they attack us?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you?"

He looked away. "…I don't know what you mean."

Jaden jerked the ship to port. A green beam filled the space they had occupied an instant ago. She pulled back, flipping them into a tight loop and searching for a glimpse of their ghostly adversary.

Sparkling countermeasures ejected from a chute on the ship's belly. They would do nothing to confuse a beam weapon, she knew, but might serve to illuminate their quarry. Though the Nightblade was only lightly armored, a hull coating of Ardentium made it completely SPHERE-invisible. A black ship against the black of space, and the only way to spot it was with her eyes. She tried not to calculate their odds.

"They've got no reason to come after me!" she said. The countermeasures caught a reflection and she juked the ship starboard, narrowly avoiding another blast. "What'd you put in my hold?"

"Can't you shoot back?" he deflected.

"*Glimmer's* built to outrun, Doc, not out-shoot. If I didn't have ferro-armor, we'd be dead already, and you didn't answer my WHOA!" A shadow cut across their path and the ship lurched again. Sparks jetted from a panel behind them. This couldn't go on. Her armor advantage was boiling away into space, and her enemy was practically invisible. She had to level the playing field. Jaden's eyes slid over to Tesla, and her stomach churned along with it. Okay, then. Time to see if I really AM worth the money. Setting her jaw, she punched the fourth red button.

"What are you doing?" Dr. Altair gripped his armrests white-knuckled and pressed back in his chair. "You're not going in there?!"

"Watch me." *Glimmer* leaped forward, and Tesla

filled the viewscreen. Jaden did her best to block out the prayer Dr. Altair chanted and keep up their evasion. The space around them glowed green with furious attacks. She held her breath, counting the remaining seconds, and the doctor's prayer reached a crescendo.

The Shatter swallowed them. Jaden gripped the control stick firmly and plunged into the dance of death, ducking and rolling across a sea of swarming rocks. Every instant, the landscape changed and they careened in a new direction. Sweat dripped from her brow as she threaded through a thousand obstacles at once.

"You've outrun them, sihr ahad!" Dr. Altair exclaimed with a smile.

To their starboard, a chunk of rocky debris exploded in a blast of green. Jaden spun them down and away from the attack, spiraling through a cloud of dust. "They're not quitters, I'll give 'em that," she said through clenched teeth.

The assassin fighter pursued them through every twist and turn, spraying their path with a relentless barrage of energy blasts. The space around them filled with hurling fragments and fiery stones, a meteor storm from every direction. Jaden winced as pieces clanged against her hull.

Her anger spiked with every impact. "Okay," she demanded. "Tell me what's in that container."

"I did tell you!" the doctor insisted. "It's a piece of the ancient hyperspace ring, and I must –"

"The Syndicate couldn't care less about the ring, or about Earth, and everyone knows it! SKRIT!" A blast of green sizzled over their heads, shearing off an auxiliary sensor array. Jaden spiked her reverse thrusters and cut low, dropping away as the Nightblade flew by. *Glimmer's* belly glanced across a spinning boulder and screeched in protest.

She winced at the sound and kicked up her speed again. "I bought us a minute at most. Start talking or I'll call out a surrender and let 'em have you."

His eyes widened. "You can't do that! Our agreement guarantees–"

"Our agreement was void the second you lied about the cargo!" Jaden shook her head and reached for the comm button. "I'm done with this."

"Wait!" Dr. Altair's hand shot out to grab her wrist. "Please."

"Start talking, then."

"It's not a ring fragment." He took a deep breath. "It's my father."

She stared at him. "....what?"

He shook his head in despair. "The moon I come from is very small. The colony has grown and prospered due to one fact – our mines discovered the richest deposit of Ardentium outside of New Sidonia territory. The Syndicate attempted to buy it. When we refused, they resorted to threats and intimidation. When that failed, they brought in their legal sharks to bribe their way through a loophole. Watch out!"

Jaden pulled her attention from him and dodged through a gauntlet of colliding fragments, chastising herself for breaking concentration. A fragment the size of a battlecruiser loomed into view. Aiming toward the underside of its hulking mass, she settled into the shadow of a crevice and burst her thrusters to match its slow spin. "Keep going," she ordered.

Dr. Altair wiped sweat from his brow, breathing hard with fear. "With this trickery, they have come close to legally stealing ownership of our home. However, one obstacle remains. For them to succeed, the current governor must sign over ownership or vacate his position." He looked pointedly at her. "And death counts as vacating."

She suddenly understood. "Your father's the governor, and you're smuggling him out."

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "This cryochamber serves as his disguise and protection. It seems, though, we have been betrayed!"

An alert buzzed on the console. Jaden called up the SPHERE display and scanned the surrounding area. "Time's running out."

"You said they were sensor-resistant."

"Yeah," she said. "But the rocks they're blowing up aren't. See that? They're shooting everything in sight, and they're getting closer."

"Please, sihr ahad!" he begged, clasping his hands together. "If they win this fight, they will raze my home to the ground. Ten thousand people dead, and all for a piece of metal. Please help us!"

Jaden stared at him grimly, fighting her own battle inside. Two voices screamed at her. One warned not to get involved – to make a deal and run, get out of danger, watch out for herself like she always had, to turn and forget and survive. The other....

She sighed. "I have an idea, but...."

He grabbed her with those desperate eyes. "But what?"

She eyed the door to the cargo hold, thinking of the special box she kept stowed there at all times. "....but you'd really have to trust me."

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Hans Demetrius pounded a fist on his armrest. "Why aren't they dead yet?"

"Apologies, Kolonel," the pilot said at this side. "Their SPHERE signature is weak in the Shatter."

"The Shadow Kaiser will not tolerate failure! He orders them dead, and you will comply!"

"Yes, Kolonel." The pilot's fire rate increased, reducing rocks to molten rubble. Demetrius knew victory was only a matter of time. With its heavy weapons and Ardentium hull, the Nightblade was all but invincible in the black of space. No pilot could hit what they couldn't see.

A klaxon sounded and the pilot swung them hard to port. "Contact. They are running for open space!"

"Intercept them!"

Fast as he dared, the pilot weaved through the maelstrom, twisting and turning his way across the ever-changing earthen sea. They burst from the clutches of the Shatter and locked onto the tiny ship as it fled. The targeting computer painted a red triangle around its fleeing form.

"Fire!" Demetrius shouted.

"Sir, we are at extreme range. When we draw closer, I will have a better –"

The Kolonel drew his sidearm and pointed it at the pilot's temple. "I said fire now!"

The pilot squeezed the triggers and lit up the darkness with bursts of green. They slowly drew closer to their prey as it ducked and dodged through the weapons fire. Anger and frustration lit a fire in Demetrius' veins. Why was this nobody disobeying his orders?

"They should be dead now! Why are they not dead?"

"The ship is quite fast," he said reluctantly. "And the pilot is unusually skilled."

"No excuses will be tolerated. Just kill them!"

His orders must have had the proper effect, Demetrius determined. The ship began to grow larger on the viewscreen. Their relentless pursuit was taking its toll, obviously, and the target could not maintain its pace.

They drew inside standard weapons range and the pilot loosed another long, heavy barrage. Green fire raked across the ship's aft quarter, blasting open the aft bay doors. The transport's engines sputtered and died, sending it into a slow tumble.

"Direct hit!" he announced. Their cannons suddenly cut off with a hollow clicking sound. "Main batteries depleted. Three minutes to recharge."

Debris spilled from the open cargo doors and spun lazily in their direction - fragments of a wooden crate, sealed food pouches, medical supplies, and a long silver cylinder. The Nightblade slowed to a crawl and approached the wreckage. Demetrius crossed his arms and allowed himself a satisfied smile. "Finally you obey me. And there is our prize." He pointed at the cylinder. "Destroy it."

"Cannons still charging, Kolonel, and ramming it would damage us. Surely the vacuum of space will –"

"I want to see his death. Shoot him now!"

"Sir, it is impossible!" the pilot said in despair. "Batteries still need two full minutes to…wait…what is that?" He pointed at the viewscreen. As the debris rolled toward them, the cylinder's topside came into view. They had expected a glass partition offering them a view of the cryo-frozen governor. What they saw instead was a person in a zero-g encounter suit, strapped to the cylinder by the legs. "What in the galaxy…?"

Demetrius squinted at the figure, and at the long object resting on its right shoulder. "Is that a…?" His eyes sprang open like saucers, and he pounded on the console. "Get us out of here now!"

The pilot stared closer, and then he saw it. With a gasp he sprang into action, frantically pawing at the controls. The suited figure waved its left hand at them. Its right hand tensed, and a small double-flash brightened the viewscreen. High-speed engines spooled to life and the ship began to back away.

Too late.

Twin trails of light streaked toward the Nightblade with fury, each carrying a missile from the shoulder-mounted launcher. Proximity alarms screamed, red lights flashed, and the two S.H.A.D.E. Syndicate operatives knew they were finished. In defiant rage, the pilot drew his own sidearm and pointed it at the Kolonel.

"Arrogant fool!" he barked, and pulled the trigger twice. The Kolonel slumped back in his chair. Dropping the gun, the pilot turned back to his controls in time to watch the missiles fill his viewscreen. He closed his eyes.

A bright flash. A loud noise. Then there was nothing.

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A sigh exploded from Jaden's chest. She crumpled onto her back, exhausted, and closed her eyes. The launcher still clutched in her right hand. A moment later, the comm crackled to life.

"Did it work?"

She smiled giddily – the smile of a person shocked to be alive. "Yeah. How's my ship?"

"It will get us there. A few repairs and it will fly true again." He seemed to hesitate. "Thank you, Captain. Thank you for helping us."

She waved his gratitude away, even though he couldn't see it. "When we get to *Monte Cristo*, you can thank me with a big fat tip."

Dr. Altair chuckled. "I believe that can be arranged as well. Still, just from me…he is my father, Captain. I am grateful."

She smiled again and nodded inside her helmet. "Don't sweat it. Now, come and get me. It's freezing out here."

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Guardian

December 14, 2661

"Take your positions!" the major shouted.

Equipment clattered as the twelve commandos vacated their benches. They lined up in two columns in the drop-ship's center. Hiro Makoto took his spot on the right.

He struggled to quell his nerves, then checked the gear's settings again to hide his fidgeting. It wouldn't do to seem unequal to the challenge - especially in front of his new unit. The atmosphere around him was tense already. Not the tense that grew from fear. The tense of a cobra preparing to strike.

Major Quarren, graying and scarred and tough-as-stone, planted his feet at the head. His steely eyes met them each in turn. "Shinzou has activated their beacon."

A subtle shuffling passed through the ranks. Hiro knew the stakes had just risen, and his heart pounded faster. Shinzou, an autonomous outlying settlement, had been one of the Exile Guard's earliest and most staunch supporters. In the many decades since, it had rarely called for assistance, and no incidents had been critical. If they'd used the beacon provided by the Guard, their situation must be dire.

"Five days ago, the Shin discovered a new, uncata-logued mineral in their soil." The major paced in front of them like a wolf on the hunt. "Two days ago, New Sidonia decided this planet should belong to them, and showed up with a battleship and an ultimatum. After refusal of their claim, they placed the planet on lockdown. Their cruiser sits in deep orbit, jamming transmissions and blocking all incoming ships. However, the beacon signal made it's way out, and here we are.

"As they've proven time and again, the Sidonians feel it is their right to control everything in this galaxy." He stopped pacing and stared at them. "Today, you will show them how wrong they are." Quarren gestured at a screen behind him, and the diagram of their battle plan glowed into view. "Gentlemen, prepare for a Sky Lance."

Hiro's whole body tightened with anticipation. This was why they had been called to duty. A Sky Lance maneuver required soldiers to drop into the highest atmospheric layer and dive toward a target at greatest possible speed. This offered two advantages - their size made SPHERE detection nearly impossible, and the move was considered so insane that no enemy would think to prepare for it. Enter the unit that Hiro now stood with - specially trained, and masters of the insane.

"Upon dropping from high orbit," the major contin-ued, "you will touch down on that vessel, capture the bridge, and remove these Sidonian trespassers from the premises." He tapped the screen and a countdown appeared. "One minute to deploy, people. Armor up!"

A series of clicks echoed as Hiro's squad mates tapped a button on their forearm. He followed suit, hurrying to keep up, and his mobile suit came alive. Billions of inky black nanobots raced across his body in a sea of motion, rearranging and transforming themselves. They swarmed over his arms and legs and across his torso. He held his breath as they crawled over his face.

The nanobots snapped together, forming a microscopic crystalline lattice around his body. Layer over layer, they locked into place and resolved into body armor - strong as steel, flexible, and as light as a feather. His HUD came to life and readings scrolled across the display.

Basic data on his squad mates appeared. He could see each of them now, sheathed in their own armor, black and gray and alien like something out of an adventure holovid. If Hiro looked half as fearsome as they did, the enemy would not soon forget this day. He looked down at himself and flexed his arms. A feeling of invincibility rushed through him. So much power...

"You all know your job," the major said from behind his own armor. "Be fast, be fearless, and follow orders, whether it's your hundredth mission," his eyes lingered on Hiro. "Or your first."

NINE flashed on the screen.

Hiro stood straighter, reminding himself that Quarren had expressed confidence in him during his recruitment.

EIGHT

The squad had also welcomed him with stoic but open arms. After this mission, he would truly be one of them.

SEVEN

He allowed that thought to penetrate him, to feed his determination. Today, he would prove it to them all - their faith had not been misplaced.

SIX

"Who are you?" Quarren called.

FIVE

"Guardians!" the squad replied.

Hiro shouted with them, feeling as if the strength of the squad flowed through his veins.

FOUR

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"GUARDIANS!"

Hiro's blood boiled away the fear. He could do this. Every cell in his body knew it.

THREE

He was justice.

TWO

He was a shield of the people.

ONE

He was a Guardian.

LAUNCH

The floor opened beneath him.

Tech Cards Detailed

Tech Cards are only used during the game phase at the bottom of the card, and they never use a Move Action.

Military Retrofit - This tech allows a player to draw two cards from their Build Deck and place them into their hand for free. The Player must then discard back down to their hand limit if necessary. This Tech Card may be used anytime.

Holographic Emitter - This tech allows a player to pick up any two of their own fleets on the board and swap them, as long as neither one of them is in a Battle. This card can only be used during a player's own turn.

Improved Fuel Reserves - This tech gives a player two extra Move Actions during their turn. This card can only be used during a player's own turn.

Repair Bots - This tech allows a player to remove one point of damage (a marker) from any single Ship Card during battle regardless of how much it was damaged. Even if the ship being repaired was fully destroyed with extra damage left over, the Repair Bots Tech Card will allow the ship to survive with one circle remaining. Ships lost on preceding rounds may not be repaired using Repair Bots. This card can only be used during Battle.

Modular Launch Bay - This tech allows players to replace any Ship Card that is completely destroyed at any point in the course of battle with a new Strike Craft Card. This Card may only be used during a players own Battle.

Volatile Warheads- This tech allows a player to add +6 points to their total Fleet Power in any single Battle round. The card must be announced and displayed before players set their Tactics. This card is only used during a player's own Battle.

Reverse Engineering - This tech allows a player to draw one card from their Design Deck and place it into their hand for free. The Player must then discard back down to their hand limit if necessary. This Card may be used anytime.

Cloaking Field - This tech allows a player to place any Fleet Token from their Player Area onto the board in any space inside the player's Home System Tile (excluding split spaces on the border). This card can only be used during a player's own turn.

Sensor Pulse - This tech allows a player to scan all Fleet Tokens in a 2 space radius around one of their fleets. Using this card does not cost a Move Action. This Card cannot be used by a battling Fleet Token. This Tech Card is used during a player's own turn.

Incendiary Rounds - This tech allows players to add one point of damage (a marker) to any Ship Card during Battle, regardless of its defense level. The card must be used after Control Cards have been revealed and damage has been applied. This card is used during Battle.