Interdiction  
A Short Story by YourFriendtheDragon

“Where are we exactly? This map is heavily redacted. Why would the Naval Intelligence Corps hide our own navigational routes?” The young lieutenant commander asked.  
 “Evidently its need to know. Nobody’s saying much. The mission here has something to do with the planet, this is probably the galaxy its located in. I don’t think they want anyone knowing the exact route back to the core systems until they can be sure we’ve contained the situation. Don’t want any threat getting back home.” An announcement came over the hanger intercoms system. “Attention, all hands to briefing stations, clear the hanger for carrier operations. Knife Squadron standby for orders, all flight teams report to craft maintenance bays and prepare all craft for embarkation.”  
 The hanger was emptied of the crew and hands that normally kept the deck. The life support systems and the quiet hum that their components made gave an eerie, still voice to a massive artificial cavern that normally was lively with a chaotic dance, carefully choregraphed in drills and training exercises. It was a quiet pause, the kind that a predator took before they leaped at their prey, rearing its energy into a single precise burst. The Lieutenant Commander and the Commander sat alone near their fighter, a YSS-1000 Demon. Carefully drawn Kanji that ran against the dorsal fin identified the craft, reading KNIFE-70. The names of the two pilots ran parallel. PILOT: Cdr. Fuji Shinatsuhiko. CO-PILOT: Lt. Cdr. Ryujin Owatasatsumi no Okami. The only ones left in the hanger other than themselves were the other twelve pilots of Knife Squadron who were all subordinate to the Commander, and the preflight crews who were completing the preflight checks for the other Demon Interceptor craft and Firestorm attack craft. The hanger crew were just inside waiting for the orders to clear the deck and prepare for carrier operations. Soon the predator would strike. The two dragons rested beneath the port wing of their flying wing. Ryujin sat just to the left of his commander and just barely partly from out of its shadow. The soft light glowing from the supports above illuminated his vibrant blue scales. His fur shifted ever slightly in the direction of the life support systems and betrayed the otherwise concealed design of those machines. His tail, heavy, swayed impatiently and absent-mindedly. He didn’t like the heavy spacesuit that straddled his torso. He had not yet become accustomed to how tight the restraints were on his wings and how cramped they felt in the carapace. Commander Okami folded the laminated map and put it in one of the compartments of his E V A suit, the distraction no longer serving him anymore.  
 His commander, not much older than he, only perhaps by two years or so, waited patiently. He kept still, his head watching the hanger bay doors, waiting for the orders to be passed down. His scales were much less dramatic. A soft, dull bronze coloration defined his complexion. It wasn’t as impressive as his junior officer, but the brilliant mane of feathers that erupted from his head detracted from the restrained hue.  
 “Have you heard from your parents recently Okami? What’s new from the home world?”  
 “They’ve been in meetings all week with the chancellery and have been communicating with the Senate. They’re under a lot of stress right now about the Elysium planet, but other than that, nothing new. They’re more worried about me being here than anything. They weren’t too happy to hear that their young prince was so far away from Takama-ga-Hara, but they know why I volunteered.”  
 Ryujin had begun pressing his chest and massaging his back, he couldn’t contain his discomfort anymore.

“Stop fidgeting with it. The suit needs to adjust to your body. The gel packs need a minute to calibrate and they won’t if you keep moving. They taught that in flight school, how do you still have this problem?” Commander Fuji asked, slightly annoyed by his junior’s fidgeting.

“They have adjusted sir. Its not the G-suit. It’s the carapace on my wings. I still haven’t quite got used to it. It feels awkward without the seat rest, or something for me to put my back against. I’m sure that I’ll get used to it soon eventually but as of right now, it’s entirely involuntary.”

“Ah. I see. Come here. I can help with that. Turn around.”  
The lieutenant commander turned around and presented his back.

“Permission to touch?”  
“Granted sir.”

Commander Fuji tapped his fingers quickly on the suit control interface on the back of the life support pack. A few beeps and lights flashed asking for confirmation for the system requests that were made.

“What are you doing back there?”  
“Just a second. The suit is going to enter into diagnostic mode for only a moment. The armor will lock but then reset and it should solve your problem.”

The armor whirred and clicked. The Commander remained frozen in place for a split second, his arms elevated and extended outward, and then the armor repeated its cycle. His arms dropped. The stiffness he felt was gone.

“What did you do?”

“Adjusted the pinions joining the torso plate with the life support pack. We had to get you into that suit rather quickly, so it doesn’t surprise me that it wasn’t fitted properly. It was a little too tight of a fit. I’ve loosened the joints to the next notch. It should give you a little more breathing room. They don’t normally teach you that since its normally supposed to be handled by the preflight techs. Its useful to know how to handle though. I can show you the command later. Now, what we’re you saying about the Emperor and Empress?”  
 “Its just that they are worried, that’s all. The Senate was very reluctant to go forward with this, the Council of Ten Thousand even more so. It was a few very loud voices that convinced them. Mom and Dad have issues figuring out which of those voices are right. I mean you know the dangers sir, we both do. The very first thing they teach you in the academy has nothing to do with tactics or strategy, or how to even do your job, its about what happens when you take up arms, for whatever reason, and why it happens in the first place. As noble as our goal might be, finding this weapon and stopping it from causing any harm, I can’t help but think that our involvement might just make things worse.”  
 “I know what you mean Okami. We’re literally intending on fighting fire with fire. We’re entering a galaxy that we know relatively little about and hoping to stop something that may or may not even be happening. The logic just doesn’t check out. If we had confirmed in advance that the weapon presented a danger then it would make sense, but we haven’t. We’re going in with the mindset that we’re supposed to find evidence of the weapon providing a danger, to justify our own reason for being here in the first place.”  
 “Do you think it has to do with the Mantle? Its more about the technology than the threat isn’t it?”  
 “It’s not exclusively either or. The technology is the danger, and in more ways than one. Introducing something like it to species that aren’t as technologically advanced could cause their entire culture to be rapidly and artificially changed in a way that they normally wouldn’t experience otherwise. Its irresponsible. But it’s a paradox. We have to go into the galaxy to find Elysium to prevent that from happening, but simultaneously, we are bringing in all of our technology which can inevitably bring about the same consequences. We lose either way. We’re going to cause those changes, regardless of what we want to have happen. Our very presence in the galaxy will ensure that’s the case. It’s now more about controlling to what extent those changes are brought about. At least if we intervene, it won’t necessarily mean the destruction of the whole galaxy if instead we didn’t act.”

“It’s the least worst course of action sir.”

“You mentioned that the Emperor and Empress don’t know which parties in the Senate are right? I think they both are here; The use of the Imperial Navy, as radical as an option it is, the alternative is just potentially as extreme. That’s the point, there is no right or wrong answer here, when we’re so used to having very clear ones. I think its just that they don’t know what to do, so they’re going to the extremes. But that’s ultimately all we can do. Either we ignore the Elysium object and hope for the best, or we go in and try and disable it, and deal with the consequences of doing so. I spoke a lot about how our mission here is flawed, but it was either going to happen eventually or it wasn’t. Even if we did just resolve to a policy of observation, eventually, someone would have found it, Elysium, and then we’d be in the same place. All we’d be doing is tossing the problem to a future generation.”  
 “I guess your right sir. Take my parents for example? They have this mythos around them, being the Emperor and Empress. But the fact of the matter is that they’re just people. They’re doing the best they can to deal with a problem far larger than themselves. The Council of Ten Thousand is looking at the Draconians, at us… now to guide us. We might be large, we might live a long time, but the truth is that we’re not all that different from anyone else in the Empire.”  
 “What about Operation Grand Tour?”  
 “That’s supposed to be classified Lieutenant Commander.”  
 “I hear what I hear sir, remember that my mom and dad mean by consequence I’m exposed to things I probably shouldn’t be. I know that we have a prowler attached to our umbilical docking hanger on the ventral hull, that doesn’t exist, that it’s the current assignment for a blackops Headhunter team, that doesn’t exist, who’s team lead may or may not have been involved in previous operations with the current lead of Ronin team Blue, and that it may or may not be related to some part of a larger reconnaissance mission attached to confirm the observations of the ISS Seaspray and to recover information about the larger galaxy. It makes sense to me, but of course, officially anything that I say now would certainly be denied by the Admiralty, right?”  
 “That’s the official letter of it. That’s supposed to be declassified relatively soon to those with our clearance. They’re in final prep now. Its section two work mainly, nothing too serious. But beyond that I don’t know, and you shouldn’t be talking about it either, so don’t bring it up again.”  
 “Aye aye sir.”

A pressure valve hissed, signaling the opening of a blast door. The Hiss and loud clank that followed the door locks coming to rest within their berths, had reverberated around the hanger walls. The Rear Admiral and the rest of the command staff stood in the doorway. Their figures obscured, the light casting a shadow across their faces, but it was them, there was no mistaking it. The silhouette was clearly that of a flag officer, the outline of an admiral’s cape giving definition and form. They began to approach the two pilots, who stood at attention. The two had now grabbed their helmets and placed them at their left hip, waiting for the orders to be given to begin their sortie. All other officers and flight crew moved to stand along the line, while the essential technicians continued making their final systems checks of each of the fighter craft.

The command staff approached the pilots. Rear Admiral Itami was flanked on his sides by his executive officer and his inspector general. Admiral Itami carried his energy katana on his right hip being left handed. The sword was a symbol of his command and he wore it at all times. It wasn’t just for show. Like the swords carried by infantry, it burned with a plasma torch when activated that could cut through solid steel. The sword, as fearsome as it was could not match the way with which the command staff’s appearance cut the sterilized recycled air. Itami was a no-nonsense officer. He didn’t care for what others thought about him, his superiors or otherwise, he was here to do his duty. So when Commander Fuji and Lieutenant Commander Okami had heard that they were to report to the hanger at 04:00 and await for him, they knew it was serious.

“Commander Fuji and Lieutenant Commander Okami reporting as ordered sir. Knife Squadron reporting ready for duty.” Both officers saluted their superior who nodded in reciprocation.

“Gentlemen. I trust you know why you’re here.” The Admiral had a firm voice, it was automatically one that called for the speaker to be respected. It was immediately apparent to be the voice of a Dragon with wisdom beyond his years.

“Affirmative sir. Intelligence reports from the ISS Seaspray reporting the presence of the Elysian object. Are they confirmed?”

“I’m afraid so. Long range sensors have identified its energy signature, there’s no doubt about it. Records from the last recorded incident are identical, and the frequency bands of its transmissions are exact. Current location is unknown but we’ve pinpointed its radii from galactic center as between 90 and 135 degrees at a distance from anywhere between 40,000 to 60,000 lightyears from the core. If the object is behaving the way that we think it is, then there won’t be anyway to find it from its primary energy output, essentially a sleep mode, but it’s talking to its local network so we know its there. Long range taps, untraceable without point of origin or destination, status of both currently unknown. We know what we’re looking for; We need to move in to triangulate its exact location. Since it would normally be rerouting transmissions along multiple relays, just simply scanning the estimated sector isn’t enough.”  
 Commander Fuji knew little about the Elysian object, only that it was highly classified and was an incredibly powerful weapon, but he didn’t know what kind. He knew that it was very good at masking its true location, but he didn’t know how. He knew that it was massive, but not how large it actually was, and he knew that it was showing signs of activity, but he didn’t know what kind. Fuji had seen some of what signals intelligence could tell him that they knew about how it broadcasted signals between it and its likely numerous satellite facilities, and how difficult they were to detect. Jumping the signals numerous times between vast distances of space via microscopic wormholes that could barely be noticed, even if you did know what you were looking for. To the uninitiated, it just appeared as part of normal cosmic background radiation, but to the trained, while it wasn’t obvious, it was wrong, an out of place noise in a field already very loud. It would be like hearing a beast crying to its young in a screaming howling stadium of spectators for the Imperial Games. Not impossible to do, but very, very hard. Then again, even the smallest wormholes tend to leave a gravitational disturbance that can be seen for quite some time even after they had closed. It wasn’t all that dissimilar to the way the Navy or even the civilian world transmitted superluminal communications, but it was much more intricate it how the communications were networked.

“At the very least sir, we have the advantage of the object remaining hidden. If nothing else its presence should be shrouded by its proxy satellites, but that also means that finding its exact location will be very difficult. We might end up making a lot of noise in the process.

The real problem with the network if I’m not mistaken is that there’s no way to tell where the messages were coming from. You would know it would be there, but not exactly where to find it. These wormholes could be opening at any point along that sector that had any line of sight with a relay. Even if you could find where one wormhole opened, there was no way to determine how many wormholes that a message passing through had previously “jumped” through, and the wormhole itself won’t provide much aid either. It won’t last long enough to trace where it had even originated. It only has just enough time for a signal to make it through and then it closes just behind it. It’s like if you were untangling a massive knot, but the wire was vanishing as you pulled it apart. But what about local presence in the galaxy sir?”  
 “We’ve been given the clearance to go ahead with any operations that we will think get us to the object sooner. The Senate doesn’t want to take any chances and neither does the Palace. I have my own reservations as I’m sure do you, but we need to put those aside. In fact, that’s why the two of you are here. Lieutenant, if you would?”

The junior lieutenant handed Commander Fuji a folder containing another report from the ISS Seaspray. Fuji quickly looked through the reports and was briefly taken aback. The documents seemed unrelated to the Elysium Object and instead contained several pictures of alien spacecraft. The ID tags showed that they were documented by long range probes from the ISS Seaspray. A timeline of events listed that the Seaspray shortly detected radiation spikes emanating from these ships, and that it was only shortly after it arrived along the galaxy’s rim, when it was just beginning its mission to confirm the Elysian Object’s presence. The spacecraft looked like it was formed by two teardrops or bubbles connected in the middle by a thin whip like structure. A large pair of dagger-like, or fang like antenna protruded from the underside of the second “tear” where the engines extended from the rear of the vessel. Commander Fuji continued to look through the documents until he found an image that made him shudder. The probe recorded an image of the vessel firing what appeared to be an energy beam weapon toward the surface of a planet. Fuji read the reports to make sure that he wasn’t misinterpreting the image. The report read:  
 “Unidentified vessel began firing a ventral energy beam down to planetary surface. High energy plasma weapon with enough latent heat to turn planetary earth material into glass and slag. No planetary defenses detected responding to act of aggression. Evidence of debris indicates that orbital presence of native inhabitants had been destroyed. It is of the opinion of this officer that the ISS Seaspray has witnessed a hostile invasion of an alien planet.” Commander Fuji handed the folder to Lieutenant Commander Okami who then just as quickly was shocked as his senior.  
 “How recent ago are these reports?” Asked Commander Fuji.  
 “Fifteen minutes ago. Ensign Coeus did a thorough analysis of the situation. We didn’t want to have to wait for the full report to be compiled so we ordered you here to station the minute we even made first contact. They call themselves the Gossip. In their language Koxxyb. The planet they are attacking is a colony of a collection of sapient species known as the United Creatures, or UC. Their defenses have been overwhelmed. Given that I’ve been given the authority to decide when to use military force in the galaxy pending the arrival of the fleet; I’ve elected to do so now. This is why the ship is still at yellow alert.”

“Are we sure that this is the right call sir? It will draw an incredible amount of attention toward us, we’d be creating one hell of a scene.”

“Normally I would agree with you. But the reason that this is different is because it doesn’t look like anyone is coming to help them. We’re all they have, and its better to arrive in the galaxy with *some* reason than seemingly no reason at all. Besides, it’s the right thing to do. Even if everything else was untrue, or the circumstances were different, we’d still be doing this. I don’t care what the Senate has to say about it, they gave me the authority and I’m using it. All tactical officers have been ordered to their ready stations for briefing and the crew will be made aware in exactly ten minutes. I want you to take point on this. You’re going to be running offensive reconnaissance and target critical systems for the Standard Deviation, the Mediator, and the Seaspray before we engage.” Replied Admiral Itami.

“Your orders, Commander are to take Knife Squadron and your escort and engage enemy frigates along the perimeter of the planet’s orbit, then mark critical systems of the enemy fleet. We’ve already uploaded the full tactical information we’ve made available that you’ll need to the flight computers of each of your craft. We count seven vessels total, ranging from 500 to 2000 meters in length. We will be coming in hard so make sure you clear the area as soon as the targets are marked. We don’t want to chance a risk of fallout to the planet below so we aren’t arming your fighters with fission devices, but each Demon in your squadron will have three pure fusion devices and each Firestorm will have one each in addition. Use them wisely if you need to break up a large formation of enemy fighters or disable point defense systems only. If you think you have chance to knock out a frigate with one, do it, but don’t be stupid.”

“What can we expect of the enemy defenses? CAP, point defenses? ISS Seaspray has been on station for some time, what have they recovered?”

“We have limited intelligence against enemy combat air patrol at this time, so be selective and don’t linger in the AO for long, we know they have some fighters on station, but we don’t know what they’re capable of. Radiation analysis from the fighters indicate they are powerful, but the Demons outmatch them easily, you have more energy to work with than they do. As I said, anything we do have is already in your flight computers; what the Seaspray can confirm so far is that the Gossip are the aggressors, unquestionably. But you shouldn’t take any chances pilot; get in, and get out. I apologize about the less than ideal level of situational awareness, but time is short and the stakes are high. Enemy forces aren’t aware of our position at the current moment, so as soon as you launch we’ll make a short warp transit maneuver to come in from behind the planet’s moon, that will keep us hidden until we are ready. From there, we can go to launch the attack as soon as you give the signal. Can you make it happen Commander Fuji?”  
 “Yes sir.”  
 “Then may the stars be your guide. Good luck Commander. Dismissed.” Commander Fuji and Lieutenant Commander Okami saluted their superior, he acknowledged then turned and walked back down the hanger toward the blast door. Commander Fuji and Lieutenant Commander Okami turned around, pivoting on their heels to face their squadron, and addressed the pilots.  
 “Alright, you heard the Admiral. Our intel is limited and time isn’t on our side. At the very least we have the element of surprise; the enemy doesn’t know we’re coming. We go in strike formation, we’re the tip of the spear. Lieutenant Anno, you’ll cover our approach, you come from above and below or from the sides at your discretion, ambush their fighter picket and clear the way for our Demons to mark the targets and disable critical systems. We’ll have to read fast, all the relevant data we’ll need is already in our flight computers, and this briefing is going to have to be short; the planet is already burning and we need to douse the flames, but that’s why we’re always at alert isn’t that right?! Alright Knife Squadron, lets make it happen, get to your ships!”  
 The whole of Knife Squadron complied with a hearty “Yes sir!” The shuffling of the metallic boots of the armored space suits as the pilots made their way to the craft marked the beginning of the dance. Helmets were just as quickly sealed and attached, the faces of each of the pilots now obscured by a deep blue visor, each of them now taking on a new persona, each of them becoming avatars for their machines. The hanger alert system played the musical accompaniment, the alarms wailing their warning to clear the flight deck.

“Attention all flight crews, clear the fighter launch area, stand by for hanger teams to begin preparations for marine assault craft.”  
 Commander Fuji and Lieutenant Commander Okami ran up the ramp of Knife-70 quickly. Okami pressed the panel to retract the boarding ramp and made their way to their seats. Okami sat on the right, the position of the pilot and Fuji on the left, the commander’s seat. They attached the harnesses and straps to their suits and began activating ship systems one by one. Quickly confirming to each other the activation of each of the systems as they were brought to life.  
 “Electrical Bus Main, check! Life Supports, check! Aeronautics, check! Flight Navigational computer, check! TacCom and Communications, check! Sensor Array, check! Inertial dampeners, set to 5-G maximum tolerances, adjusting flight controls accordingly to match. Detaching from Mediator Hanger umbilical. Main Engine ignition sequence on!”  
 The intakes on the wings began to glutinously consume the hanger air as the engines began their preheating cycle. The sound of the thrusters grew exponentially louder. The flame began yellow, then moved to blue and finally a white hot tip that shot out from behind.  
 “Exhaust velocity at two point eight million meters per second, make that exhaust velocity at .940-C, magnetic confinement of reactors stabilized, engines at normal operating parameters. Switching to closed cycle, sealing intakes now and switching to Hydrogen-Helium fuel tanks.”

The intakes closed, and as the fusion rockets began annihilating the atomic mixture, they grew even louder and more furious in their efforts. They produced an enormous amount of thrust and a noise that even the largest Dragon couldn’t hope to match. They would deafen anyone who wore only the strongest of hearing protection and incinerate anyone within twenty feet of their plume. The velocity of the plasma that was ejected out the rear of the exhaust produced a gale that could rival the strongest hurricane, and demanded a heavily reinforced blast shield during the ignition sequence as the miniature star that powered the twin engine nacelles was brought to life. Okami quickly throttled the engine down once the reactor had reached operating temperatures and the blast shields were lowered. Even still, the crosswind demanded all crew to be well clear of the launch platforms.  
 “All craft, this is Commander Fuji, report in.”  
 “Knife-71, go command. Knife-72, go. Knife-73, go! This is lieutenant Anno, all firestorms are green to go!”  
 “Hanger control, this is Commander Fuji, requesting permission for departure for strike ops on enemy fleet. Squawk zero-zero-zero-zero. All craft report green for flight, over.”  
 “Knife Squadron this is Hanger Beta-Six flight control, you are green to proceed for launch on vector bearing 22-mark-33-mark-51, departure on frequency 123.6, then proceed for distance of six kilometers before warp transit, good hunting Knife seven zero, over.”  
 “Copy that hanger control, make that a flight heading of a hard right out of the gate. Knife Squadron complying with your direction, Knife Squadron out.”  
 Fuji and Okami leaned back into their seats. Fuji transferred control to Okami’s chair who activated the VTOL thrusters and primed the reaction control engines that would be needed for maneuvering in the vacuum of space. He took firm grip of the controls and slowly lifted Knife-70 above the hanger deck, orienting the nose to face toward the hanger bay doors. Then when aligned, he pushed the throttle full forward and the ship began to rapidly accelerate away from its berth. In a matter of thirty seconds, all of Knife Squadron was under way.  
 Lieutenant Commander Okami grinned and whispered to himself; “This is my favorite part. Here we go.”

They complied with the angle heading quickly diving, turning and pitching to match the angles on the X-Y-Z coordinate grid. Okami switched the navigational computer from docking to maneuvering mode and selected his grid reference. He loaded the coordinates of the targeted Gossip fleet from the flight computer’s memory and the system quickly changed to orientate the whole universe with the flagship of the fleet as its new center. The prey had been marked.  
 “Knife Squadron, by my command, prepare for warp transit. Mark!”

**Dragon’s Breath** “Admiral sir, Knife Squadron is halfway to target, eta to target, five minutes at current velocity.”  
 Rear Admiral Itami Hanzo was carefully inspecting the tactical displays in front of him. But at this point he was passing time; he already knew what he needed to know. In truth his attention was elsewhere. It was also a distraction. He knew that this decision would likely be met with scrutiny, but he had hoped that by intervening, that the Empire would be able to establish good relations with the natives of the galaxy. That it would mean finding the Elysium Object earlier, as soon as possible, potentially saving lives. He knew how destructive it was, what it was capable of.

Itami was taller than most Ryu, standing at just under four meters. It was hard for him not to stand out, both professionally and physically. He was exceptionally lean and his whiskers long, but clean and well kept. A slight beard of fur grew around his muzzle and he had rounded, twisted horns that protruded from the back of his head. Between being a head taller than most other Ryu and having a very odd set of horns, and being as slim as he was he had a very curious appearance for a dragon indeed. However, the Admiral was younger than most in his position, in some cases only five years older than the most junior officers, yet somehow despite this, he had earned the moniker of the “Old Father” from his crew. He had however proven exceptionally qualified. He had seen some of the most defining moments of the modern Imperial fleet and he understood more than most what was at stake and why what he was doing was so controversial. He trusted in Knife Squadron to do what was asked of them, he trusted his whole crew; and they trusted in him.

“Bravo-231? Is he on station?” The Admiral asked the Executive Officer, Captain Asuka, his second in command. He had been giving him whatever he needed to know as the crew made final preparations for the assault.  
 “Blue-Actual is aboard the Standard Deviation, he’s already armed and prepped for combat. He was in a live fire training exercise with Marines. The rest of Blue team is arming now. They will be ready. And I’m sure you want to know about the Shadowveil. They’ll be leaving shortly, quietly. No one will know they’re gone. Alpha-Nine is already aboard. Bravo-231 already said his goodbyes to Alpha-Nine Actual, they shouldn’t have any issue.”

“Fine. I’m more concerned about the Standard Deviation. Captain Hu is taking a big risk allowing his ship to be boarded like that. But if the Navitians are correct, it might be the best chance we can get to figure out why the Gossip are attacking the UC. This is clearly an act of aggression on their part, and I don’t think that they will surrender easily. I don’t know what the motivations for their attack are but we need to find them out.”  
 Admiral Itami pulled up a display of the planet which had been designated as G-759-III. It was the third planet in the star system, orbiting around a G-sequence star and numbered according to its position within the arm. The enemy fleet had been marked by orbiting stealth satellites in geosynchronous orbit around the planet launched by the ISS Seaspray. Telemetry was also still being received from the earlier probes which were monitoring the enemy fleet. Contact with Knife-Squadron would remain impossible while they were in transit, gravity distortions and ionizing radiation would prevent communication until they arrived. The seven ships were all on the sun-facing side of the planet. They were attacking a region of the planet that had heavy industrial capacity, where it would have been early morning. Orbital debris had suggested that a small space elevator located along the equator near the area was destroyed, likely as part of the first wave of the attack. Destroying the uplift would have made evacuation of the planetary surface more likely difficult for the UC. It was too early to tell for sure. The seven ships were arranged in a triangular formation, with the largest ship, likely a carrier at the center. The Office of Naval Intelligence had already began interpreting the formation from all possible angles. If the formation was purely tactical, or if it had some larger symbolic meaning, they would be the ones to figure that out.  
 The seven ships ranged in size, the largest being around two kilometers long, but most were only around five hundred meters. At five kilometers, the ISS Mediator easily dwarfed all seven ships, and analysis from the radiation from the Gossip ships’ engines likely suggested that the Mediator also had vastly more energy reserves. Mediator’s Quantum ZPE Reactor drew massive amounts of power and could transfer to the other two ships in the Imperial detail. Most of the power was being transferred of course, to the ISS Standard Deviation, the ISS Seaspray having her own ZPE reactor. Standard Deviation was only fitted with a very high efficiency Fusion reactor core, technically three, with two primary reactors and one tertiary to power its Mass Drivers and weapons systems. The ship computers had already run several thousand simulations of every possible combination of tactic and weapon deployment, cross referenced impact data from kinetic weapons against enemy shields vs. field penetration, the effect of maser banks and laser banks against the electromagnetic field, and particle field, and even the hull and estimated the odds in favor of the Imperial fleet, heavily. There was no reason to fear the outcome of the battle.  
 And yet, the Admiral couldn’t help but be worried. The real concerns weren’t the initial engagement, but the political ramifications that came afterword. *Later*, he kept telling himself. The Senate would have their answers after the battle was over. It was essential that he, and consequentially, the Empire act here and now, and he was vested with the authority to do so.  
 “I know what you’re thinking sir. If you believe the attack is unnecessary or unwise, we can still pull out and continue our primary.” Said Captain Asuka.  
 “Negative. We make our move here. This is our best opportunity to make connections here in this galaxy. We won’t be able to find Elysium on our own. The Council of Ten Thousand knew the risks and we have to take them.”  
 Asuka swallowed his breath uncomfortably and nodded. “Its been some time since a first contact scenario, and there’s no telling if what happened all those years ago will happen again. You don’t need to assume the worse. I’m worried what will happen if you do. But I’m in agreement, we do have to do something. Whatever you decide to do, the crew stands with you sir.”

Admiral Itami looked back at the holographic display and stared intently at the Gossip carrier. He leaned over the table and sighed.  
 “Its not going to be easy though. We had to leave so quickly. The Mediator and the Standard Deviation, we don’t have a full crew complement. We didn’t even get a chance to test the ship systems. The regulators for the energy weapons need to be replaced, they’re not even properly fitted, and the Standard Deviation is a brand new ship, with a brand new crew… Why the Admiralty chose us is beyond me. They said its because we were the closest to the outer rim, but if speed was the issue, then why not send a corvette?”

The Admiral was only half listening. He sympathized with the Captain’s view but understood that the situation was complicated.

“All that I’m saying is that if we’re doing reconnaissance, why not send a ship designed for reconnaissance?”

“I won’t let it happen again. I won’t let the Navy make the same mistake. Not again. Display grid Kilo-Six Five, Continent Alpha.”

The holotable switched displays from orbit, to the surface. A 3D holographic representation of the planet below displayed a part of a massive river delta near the southern coast of the continent requested. It was the location of a UC wet naval vessel retreating to open waters. It was a battleship that was attempting to lose itself in the ocean and escape from the Gossip invasion forces landing there. It was likely the only military asset remaining on the planet and was desperately trying to communicate with neighboring colonies pleading for assistance. It had connected with what few remaining communications satellites were capable in orbit of making superluminal connections, but the signals were being jammed by the Gossip before they could be received by the satellites. The messages were being sent in random directions and from Itami’s best guess, that was to prevent any one colony from being singled out and thus targeted next. Gossip strike forces appeared in-bound to eliminate the battleship. Standard Deviation was relaying the message along the same pattern and band using the same protocol. The Imperial communications had not been jammed, and were not detected, and likely wouldn’t be unless the fleet wanted its presence known. The fleet was simply too far away and wormholes propagating the message were being formed within the ship shields, masking their presence.  
 “If the message that the Standard Deviation received was correct, than the commander of that vessel is soon going to be the acting governor of the colony. There’s nothing we can do no for the Governor and his cabinet. The commander’s name… Admiral Halsey I believe was his name sir.”

“As soon as we enter orbit, I want a flight of Demons to that position immediately, protecting that ship is priority one. We need him alive in order to contain the situation.”  
 “Admiral, please, a moment if you will. I know that you are wanting to somehow make up for what happened with your Grandfather Itami, that you are trying to make up for what happened at Suragou. But it isn’t your fault what happened. You were only an Ensign then. Your Grandfather was an ensign when what happened to him occurred. This is ancient history Admiral. Don’t let it consume you. Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed by a false sense of guilt.”

The Captain was older than the Admiral. He would have been about the age that the Admiral should had been, had he been following the traditional career ladder. Asuka was a very tempered Draconian. He took his orders with very calm temperament and was known for being an excellent teacher. He for a while was an instructor at the Imperial academy who decided that he wanted to transfer into active service. His goal was to provide a personal tutor for the many junior officers being recruited into the Imperial Navy which had been expanding in recent years. He ended up being the tutor for the Admiral it had seemed. Itami never treated Asuka as a subordinate. In many regards he treated him as if he was his superior and he often sought his counsel. However, when the time to make final decisions came, Itami bore the weight of responsibility.  
 “It’s the reason that the Mantle exists Captain. All of it. And I saw it fail. I need to do this. And we’ve already discussed it. We agreed that intervention was necessary.”  
 “I don’t disagree with that. I just don’t think that we should be charging in with the whole Cruiser, let alone the cruiser and the escort. Its too much. We need to be moderate in our actions.”

“Admiral, sir!” One of the crewmembers spoke, it was the Flight Ops Officer. “Knife Squadron exiting out of warp now, they are moving to engage!”

That was the signal, Fuji and his pilots were in position. It was time to rendezvous with the Seaspray. Admiral Itami moved to his chair and secured himself with the restraints. Captain Asuka followed closely behind and sat in his chair to his right, then did the same. All other crew aboard the bridge made their way to their positions and repeated the action.

“Doesn’t this make you as uncomfortable as me sir? I don’t think the Senate understands what they’re getting themselves into. Finding Elysium ourselves might not be worth the risk. We should just let it lie where it is.”   
 “We have our orders Captain. We may disagree, but we have them. The Senate isn’t being honest with themselves right now. They’re hoping for miracles from us and I don’t know if we can deliver them. They’re going to be questioning us every step of the way, and that’s fine, but I hope that when the time comes they are willing to realize that this is going to be a costly endeavor.”  
 “Its ironic sir, isn’t it. The Mantle? We’re going against it in this trap we’re setting up with the Standard Deviation. We’re hoping the Gossip boards it to steal our tech. Its an admittedly massive risk.”  
 “We can’t hope to defeat our enemy if we don’t understand them. I’m not sure about it either, but the surface is utter chaos. Our chances at taking a Gossip alive are better here in orbit than on the ground. But that isn’t your point is it? I understand what you’re saying. I understand Captain, thank you. I’ll be careful, we won’t fail again. Blue Team will make it work. They have to. We all do.”

Itami pressed a button on his command interface and secured the bridge blast doors. He then picked up his radio set and placed it over his head, securing the straps around his horns. He pressed the button on his microphone and switched the channel to fleet wide. The entire crew of all three ships now would hear him speak. The command crew swiveled to face him and listen to him at attention.  
 “Attention all hands. This is the CO speaking. You all volunteered for this mission. You all know why we are here. You all know about the danger the Elysium Object presents, and that if it is found by the natives of this galaxy, and used, that it can lead to the devastation of millions of lives. There was debate in the Senate as to whether or not we should have intervened at all, and you all know why. Our very presence in this galaxy as outsiders puts everyone at a degree of risk, a risk which we have decided worthy enough to take. This is a gamble, but it is one that you all have made, and one that you all agree is right. I’m here to tell you now that our mission isn’t to find the Elysium Object. Our mission is to save lives. We are going into battle with a skeleton crew, with minimum intelligence, and nothing but each other and our wits to our advantage. Today, all of us together, we make the first steps toward a new frontier, and together we will see the end, alive. All hands, red-alert, man your battle stations!”  
 The ship alarms sounded as the order was given. The bridge lights dimmed, and all terminals switched to tactical display. Hydraulic fluid was pumped to the bridge supports and wall cross sections to reinforce the room in the event that the upper sections of the ship collapsed. The holographic displays around the bridge were brought online and displayed the exterior view of the ship as if the bridge was floating in space alone on its own. It stripped the walls, the hull, the decks, the weapons, life supports systems and instead presented the void that surrounded the ark for so many personnel in this hostile environment.  
 “All stations are checked in and secure. Helmsman, take us into warp, take us into an approach behind the moon.”  
**Spitfire** “All fighters, close ranks and standby to engage, arm weapons systems and switch to attack maneuvering mode. Okami, raise shields.”  
 Knife squadron had exited from warp. They were fifty kilometers away from the Gossip fleet. Almost immediately, proximity alarms sounded in the cockpit of their interceptor.

“We have enemy fighters coming in at relativistic speed. Energy signatures indicate weapons are armed, don’t bunch up, fangs out everyone. Okami, maintain control of the craft, I’ll handle weapons systems. Hold your fire unless we’re fired on, I’m going to charge the EMP, let’s see if we can disable these fighters for capture.”

The fighter craft looked like flying manta rays. They were a bright blue-teal in coloration, the underbellies of each of the craft with mechanical and electrical equipment exposed haphazardly. This likely meant that these craft were not designed to operate in an atmosphere as the exposed machinery would create excessive drag. The craft otherwise seemed relatively aerodynamic. In a way, they were not unlike the sharp flying wings that the Demons were, and they reflected the overall architecture. The craft had two sets of tails following behind the craft with a strong magnetic field being directed between them, likely the propulsion system. Scans from earlier, the Admiral had said, showed that the craft did not have power supplies as robust as the Demon interceptors. The lack of shields on any of the craft seemed to support this.

“Those fighters look built for agility and speed over strength, we should adjust our formation accordingly sir. They don’t have shields; we won’t need full blast on the missile charges.”  
 Commander Fuji pulled his seat forward and reclined. He toggled the operations panel to RIO control and quickly began optimizing the weapons management system. He set the missiles to the appropriate stand-off range and dialed in the yield for the Stardust intercept missiles. Okami had already selected his first targets; the enemy fighters were together in very close formation. *First mistake*, he thought. Okami set for radar lock on the formation and switched missile safeties off. The Lieutenant Commander kept his fingers close to the triggers, ready at the instant that his comrades or him craft came under attack. Commander Fuji primed the non-nuclear EMP, and it slowly began to charge. As the weapon charged, the Gossip craft began to fire bolts of plasma, not waiting to come into range. Most of the bolts missed, but one bolt landed just above the cockpit of Knife-70, striking the shields of the interceptor. The craft was shaken and the flight computer compensated by firing the reaction control engines to maintain its previous heading.

“Damnit, Okami, go loud!”  
 “Ready one, viper one away!”  
 Okami fired off the missile. Fuji then took remote control of the missile and without hesitation programmed the rocket motor to prioritize acceleration. The enemy fighter formation didn’t have a chance to break off. Within seconds the missile was traveling at thirty percent the speed of light, the fusion rocket generating incredible amounts of thrust. The targeting computer sounded with an intense series of beeps as the missile approached. The missile flew past the lead Gossip fighter and into the center of the formation. It then exploded with an incredible display. The formation of fighters was instantly incinerated.

“Got them! Enemy formation destroyed; our vector is clear!” exclaimed Ryujin.

“Lieutenant Anno, move forward and give us cover fire, evidently they shoot first and ask questions later! Move on approach two-two ought six, mark three five, mark seven-three ought nine. All Demons keep your distance and keep the formation loose, we don’t want them taking us out in a group.” A green light flashed in the cockpit indicating a positive response.  
 “Sir, request that your Demons push forward in a finger four formation, it will make the approach vectors more defensible since they’ll have to take on your craft one at a time.”  
 “Affirmative Anno. All craft move into Finger four formation. Second Element, break into second formation on our flank and follow our trail.”   
 Knife-70 pulled forward while the three demons moved back into staggered opposing positions within the formation. Then, two of the craft broke off and proceeded to a parallel approach vector approximately one kilometer off the starboard flank of the Commander. Using their reaction control systems they translated to the position while retaining forward motion.  
 “At 20 kilometers out, full reverse thrust, get us into orbit around this planet then prepare to come about and begin our attack run.”  
 Knife Squadron prepared to execute a series of staggeringly difficult maneuvers. They were having to work against the gravity of the planet and the basics of orbital mechanics. The engines needed to provide enough thrust to quickly stop their momentum, then reverse their entire orbit to make multiple passes against the Gossip Fleet. Each time they came around and passed the Gossip ships, they would have to make a deorbital maneuver burn, an orbital entry burn, and then a rendezvous maneuver with the fleet, and repeat, for each individual pass made.   
 “We’re coming over the fleet now, this is it!”  
 The fleet of Gossip ships were strangely beautiful. They didn’t resemble warships at all. The design of each craft was made of very delicate curves. Looking at the craft from above Fuji remembered the picture of the craft as seen from the probe. From below, the craft looked like two teardrops connected together, but from above, it now appeared to resemble a large squid head, with purple-blue skin.  
 “I wouldn’t have expected such an aggressive species to using ships quite like these, they don’t look like the ships of alien conquerors, they look like the ships of artisans or traders, sir.”  
 Commander Fuji shook his head. He had a mission to attend to. The appearance of the ship aside, these ships were still being used to commit horrible deeds.  
 “We can admire the design later, we have a mission to focus on. Activating warp core now, you got only a few seconds Okami, mark those targets now!”

Each of Knife Squadron’s spacecraft could use their warp cores to temporarily distort space to translate within the fleet for precision attacks, but the technique expended vast amounts of energy, as it required the flight computer and the core to have to be constantly readjusted. Unlike a traditional warp transit maneuver, where the startpoint and endpoint would already be calculated in advance, this kind of maneuver would mean a nearly infinite number of tiny course corrections that would quickly overwhelm both the core and the reactor power supply. At most each craft had a total of thirty seconds before it needed to reset its position and come around for another pass. The larger capital ships had the power supply to conduct such maneuvers indefinitely while in combat, but fighters needed a tether of their own to provide the energy needed to do the same. Without the ISS Mediator and its ZPE reactor, Knife Squadron would have only precious seconds to act while in the Gossip Fleet. It was imperative that the initial start point was exactly accurate. The orbital plane needed to be correct, the eccentricity of the orbit, the angle at which the fighters approached; any one variable being wrong could lead to a miss or even worse.

“ETA ten seconds, we’re passing over the fleet now, they have us locked; brace for their Point Defense, engage countermeasures!”

Commander Fuji began activating electronic countermeasures, launched decoy flares, jammed radar, anything he could do to make the Gossip weapons miss their targets. The Thermal profile of any object in space was enormous and simply impossible to hide. But launching decoys could trick a targeting computer into firing against a dummy or prevent it from properly identifying what was the actual target. If the target was small enough, it would work. Gossip plasma cannons began firing wildly into the Squadron, each shot narrowly missing each of the fighter craft passing by. The formation was still moving too quickly for each of the individual turrets to track effectively and had successfully spoofed their signature that made tracking even more so difficult.

Okami had pitched the nose of Knife-70 down and aimed at the weapons bank of one of the Gossip Destroyers. He spooled up the rotary coil guns and set the power to maximum. A quick four second burst of 120mm sabots was expended and impacted the Destroyer. The rounds had simply passed right through the electromagnetic shield of the Gossip ship. The Gossip ship did not have a particle stream against the shield that was strong enough to prevent penetration, and an electromagnetic field on its own would only protect against radiation. The rounds perforated the hull creating visible breaches. A second later, several of the turrets detonated from explosive decompression of the bulkhead below them.

“Commander, enemy CIWS bank disabled, advise the Admiral that enemy fleet shields are radiation shields only, advise the admiral use kinetic weapons and lasers, advise ISS Seaspray to adjust Maser output accordingly to defeat field strength.”

As the Lieutenant Commander finished, the computer had contradicted him and indicated that a plasma envelope and particle field had began to form around the Gossip vessels.

“Uh, never mind. belay that sir. Arming particle beam to penetrate shields, switch targeting systems settings to compensate for EM interference from plasma stream. Loading MAHEM rounds into coil guns to improve penetration capabilities.”  
 Okami switched the magazine cartridge for the rotary cannons to the MAHEM rounds and armed the ventral particle beam. The beam would fire a stream of particles into the field that would temporarily disrupt the shield by deflecting the flow of particles in the field, then, firing the MAHEM rounds afterwards would bypass the plasma envelope. The sabots contained a small explosive device which when detonated would create a stream of molten metal fired out of an electromagnetic field that would pierce straight through the plasma. The tungsten rod would be superheated into a liquid almost instantaneously after the device activated and would flow right through the ionized gas. Particle shields or not, the defense would be defeated.

“First pass, marking targets now, I’ve targeted what I think are the ship hanger bays, ship designs have dorsal hanger sections and bay doors on the port side, bays on the starboard side are coming into view now.”

The Commander had observed that aside from the carrier and the cruiser, all the Gossip ships were of the same design. In marking just one of those ships, he would successfully identify the weak points on all the others by their shared design.

“Okami, target the cruiser and the carrier, the frigate escorts are lit up. Wait, hold on; Chikusho! They’re launching fighters to intercept us! Lieutenant Anno, you’re up!”  
 Sensors in the cockpit alerted the launch of several fighter craft from the Gossip Carrier and Cruiser that were being rapidly deployed to try and defend the fleet. Commander Fuji quickly prioritized the fighters in the carrier as the main threat. Lieutenant Anno acknowledged, another green flash confirming the targets in the cockpit of Knife-70.

“Copy that, Knife seven-seven, on the way. All Firestorms, form up and engage.”

Lieutenant Anno and his Firestorm fighters dove at the hanger bay. The fighters armed their railguns and aimed at their targets. The cockpit of the Lieutenant’s craft shook as the cannon spit fire. The shells ripped against the manta-shaped Gossip attack craft, tearing the craft apart. The fighters behind Knife 77 climbed from below and struck the underbelly of the fighters as they were leaving the hanger. Several Gossip fighters crossed their path, having been launched from another vessel to counterattack.

“Okami, target those hangers on our next approach, prevent those ships from launching anymore fighters. Go for the Carrier and that cruiser, that’s where the escorts are coming from.”

“Understood, standby for retrograde burn, brace, brace, brace!”

Lieutenant Commander Okami reoriented the wing to face a predetermined marker along the horizon. He pressed a switch that activated the reverser thrusters and fired the engines at full throttle. Lieutenant Commander Okami and Commander Fuji were forced back into their seats at their forward momentum was cancelled out. They were now free falling, the gravity of the planet beginning to pull them down toward the surface. The computer had the engines burn for ten seconds then automatically shut down the thruster. Okami then lurched forward and quickly depressed the same switch again, shutting the reverse thrusters off. He then flipped the wing completely around and set the throttle to full yet again. Again the two were thrown against their seat as their orbit was reversed. The computer compensated for the loss of altitude from the surface and returned the craft to its original distance from the ground. They began moving against the rotation of the planet and again toward the Gossip fleet.

Lieutenant Anno and his Firestorms were engaged in a deadly game of chance, dodging the flak from the Gossip fleet while out pacing and out circling the Gossip fighters. Knife 70 was the closest Demon, it returned to the fleet first. Anno had watched as the interceptor passed below, then above as it pitched its nose toward the carrier hanger, and then toward the cruiser’s.

“We need to take out those shields, EMP won’t break that defense. Arm the fusion devices!”

At both positions, there was a flash from the leading edge of the wings.

“Taipan one, away! Taipan two, away! Flash-flash flash!”

All pilots in Knife Squadron pressed a tab on their helmets. A dark blast shield was dropped over the helmet. An intense, bright flash followed, and a large electromagnetic pulse followed. Detonating only a dozen or so meters away from the shields of the carrier and cruiser, the small yield fusion torpedoes had temporarily disabled the shields. Knife 71 followed suit with another missile barrage at the same targets.

“Knife 71, Vipers one, two, three and four away!”

The primary hangers for both the Gossip Carrier and Cruiser had collapsed. The remaining fighters, their pilots blinded by the intense light from the nuclear device had broken up. The result was chaos. Several of the craft crashed into the Gossip carrier destroying defense systems on impacted and creating hull breaches.

“Knife seven-seven, you are clear, take out their engines and let’s go home, I think that should do it, targets are marked. Okami, are we clear?”  
 Okami looked out the cockpit window. He didn’t need the sensors. The damage was evident. Knife Squadron had done a serious number on the fleet. They had caught it completely by surprise. A part of the Lieutenant Commander believed that the ISS Mediator’s involvement would have been excessive overkill.

“Affirmative, we are clear, critical systems are marked. Targets are the ship fuel lines and engineering berths.”  
 The Gossip carrier began to reactivate its shields, as did the Gossip cruiser. Both ships were winded, but they were in no position to surrender now. Now they knew the danger presented by Knife Squadron. The computer in Knife-70 sounded its all too familiar call and alerted its pilots that the fleet began arming all point defense systems. It began diverting power from all available sources and focused on the immediate danger.

“And I think that’s our que to leave. Admiral Itami, this is Commander Fuji, we’re done here, we’re clearing the area now, you are free to engage, this is Knife Squadron, out.”  
**Pointless Violence**

“Sir, Knife Squadron reports the targets are marked. Orders sir?”

“Full ahead, bring us into view of the target. Make ready, raise shields.”   
 Captain Asuka was just finishing his communication with the UC government on the surface. His timing had been well.  
 “Good luck your honor. We’ll save this colony. We promise. ISS Mediator out.”  
 “Well?”  
 “That was the Governor, he gave us the security codephrases and the frequencies that we will need to contact the remaining UC forces. He’s given us our word that he will advise them of our arrival. He’s having his Defense Secretary issuing one last order. Gossip forces are closing on his location. It will only be a matter of time before he’s trapped. We’ll have to send a rescue team later. The area isn’t secure.”  
 “Agreed, but we just need to focus on that right now.”

The ISS Mediator and her destroyer escort, the ISS Standard Deviation came into view of the Gossip fleet. Their massive shapes came out of the shadow of the moon and the ISS Seaspray began its approach from the far side of the planet. On either side the Gossip fleet was surrounded. The Gossip fleet recalled its frigates closer to the carrier and maintained their position.

“Full stop!”  
 Itami assessed the scene. The computer began tracking Knife Squadron making its return to the Mediator. Long range probes magnified a view of the Gossip ships firing on those interceptors before they were no longer in effective range. The damage that the squadron had done was immense. The scarring and scoring on the hull was quite visible. Once Knife Squadron had left the fleet, the Gossip vessels turned their attention away, not to the Mediator or Seaspray, but to the surface of the planet. The energy beam weapon of the carrier was charging again. The radiation from the weapon was detected on long range sensors. Only a moment later and the cruiser also began to charge.

“Chikusho! They’re still at it! Have they spotted us? They had to have, why are they still focused on the planet?” Captain Asuka was exasperated. He couldn’t believe the brutality of his enemy. Their foolhardy bloodlust didn’t seem to have an explanation.

“Admiral, Captain, sir! ISS Seaspray reports that her maser banks are offline! They need another minute to arm the weapons system!”  
 “Why aren’t they already armed damnit!? Blast it! Tactical, arm the mass driver. fifteen percent charge. Target that weapons array, stop them from excavating this planet any further.”  
 “Aye aye Admiral.”  
 Captain Asuka glanced over at the Admiral and swallowed his breath for the second time today. The Admiral nodded, symbolizing his consent to allow him to speak freely.  
 “Arming the mass driver sir? Are we sure that’s necessary? At fifteen percent charge? That might destroy the whole carrier. It might end up killing everyone aboard.”  
 “We don’t have much of a choice. We need to penetrate those shields and we can’t allow that beam to continue burning that planet. We can’t worry about who’s aboard that ship. We can only hope that the display will cause the rest of the fleet to surrender.”  
 “Admiral Itami, this is Captain Hu.”  
 Captain Hu’s voice came in over the headset, slightly muffled by interference with radiation from the beam. Admiral Itami adjusted the frequency to clear the channel and improve the reception.  
 “This is Itami, go ahead Standard Deviation.”  
 “Standard Deviation stands ready to arm her Mass Drivers, priority targets?”  
 “Negative Captain. Arm your guns and be prepared to fire but do not engage.”  
 Captain Asuka spoke again. “Admiral, critical systems have been marked, could we not use ship torpedoes or the main guns to disable the ships from here? Do we have to resort to the mass driver?”  
 Itami hesitated in his response. He knew what he was doing and he regretted the fact that he had to resort to it. As evil as the Gossip’s actions were, there was no way in telling who was responsible for the crimes that had been committed. And unless he acted now, countless innocent lives on the surface would be ended unless he resorted to the magnetic cannon.  
 “Not at this distance. We don’t have our masers fitted yet, we were expecting to have time to do so because we didn’t account for a scenario like this, and with the Seaspray’s masers down, well, we don’t have weapons either both strong enough or with enough range to hit the target. Energy weapons would dissipate at this range, the guns haven’t yet been brought up to spec because of the need to leave before shakedown, and I don’t think the smaller caliber coil guns could crack those shields. That only leaves one option. We have to use the mass driver. We can only hope the fear it brings will give them reason to surrender, as I had said.”

“Aye. I only hope that fear doesn’t spread to the planet below.”

Admiral Itami shot back and looked at Captain Asuka and nodded, understanding the comment.  
 The Helmsman locked his controls and transferred command of the ship’s engines to the tactical console. The entire ship was now a loaded gun. The klaxon of the master alarm sounded. Admiral Itami cleared the alarm and unlocked the firing safeties on the gun. All twelve capacitor banks were now charged and ready to be primed.  
 “Target marked, range three hundred and seventy six thousand kilometers, charge at fifteen percent, estimated time to impact, eight point five zero seconds. Magnetic Accelerator Gun is loaded, capacitor banks charged, firing control reports ready to fire.”  
 “Fire!”  
 The entire ship structure shuddered as the massive capacitor banks drained their entire reserve of power, pooling all the energy into the magnetic cannon. The temperature of the magnetic superconductive rails was visible on the tactical control screen. They jumped from nearly below two hundred degrees centigrade to well over five hundred degrees in the matter of less than one second. A brilliant flash was displayed on the bridge screens as a large ferromagnetic slug rocketed out the bow of the ship. The engine systems fired to account from the recoil of the gun, and to maintain the ship’s position in space. The shell weighed close to thirty metric tons and was now travelling at fifteen percent the speed of light. The slug was exposed to so much stress that the shell exterior was no longer solid metal. It had molten to a liquid casing of magma for a white hot, solid tungsten core.  
 *Five seconds,* counted the tactical officer: *three, two, one.* One of the displays captured the moment of impact up close. The same feed from the probe earlier. The shell dove straight through the heart of the Gossip carrier. It went in one side, and immediately, out the back. The kinetic impact ripped the carrier apart. The entire ship was split clean in two from nearly the whole distance away toward the planet’s moon.  
 “Fire control reports that second round is cycled through, we are ready to fire second volley.”  
 “You may fire when ready, target that cruiser!”  
 The main gun was pumped full of coolant to bring the temperatures down to below freezing. The capacitors went from a quiet hum to an aggressive buzz as they drew power from the tertiary reactor. The whole cycle only took ten seconds. The rails were now at just zero degrees and were again ready to face the brunt of another round. The Tactical Officer repositioned the ISS Mediator and fired his second volley. Again the ship shuddered, another earthquake in space, and another brilliant flash of light beamed from the front of the vessel.

The Cruiser was just as quickly impaled. It too was split in half and left to float in the debris field. Both ships had been knocked off course and began to drift toward a new orbital plane. The rounds had impacted from underneath, and diagonally from the port side.  
 “Targets destroyed. Enemy carrier and cruiser are nonoperational sir.”  
 Itami could see the path of the cruiser’s remains. The rear section of the ship impacted one of the nearby frigates and crushed its hull, destroying another ship in the process. The carrier continued to travel along its path and posed no danger to any other ship in the Gossip fleet. They had lost roughly half of their fleet with two rounds from the mass driver.  
 “Helmsman, stand by, I want you to take us in close. Close distance to fifty kilometers. Standard Deviation, Captain Hu? Come in.”  
 “This is Standard Deviation actual, go ahead Mediator.”  
 “You have your mass drivers prepared, correct? Fire three warning shots across their bow. Let them know we are prepared to stop them and that we mean business. Tactical, fire one last round, place it right across the lead destroyer.”  
 The magnetic cannon was fired for the third time. Admiral Itami engaged the safeties and locked the gun. The Standard Deviation complied and began to fire its barrage just afterwards. The Tactical Officer than transferred control to the Helmsman who plotted the intercept course.  
 “Do we have a messaged prepared? I think this is enough of a warning to convince them to stand down.”  
 “Yes sir, Ensign Coeus of the ISS Seaspray has a message prepared and is ready to transmit,” Replied Captain Asuka.  
 “Let him speak, open a channel and play it here. I want to hear it.”  
 The Communications and Signals Intelligence Officer complied with the order and sent a message authorizing the Ensign to transmit the surrender request. The Ensign spoke clearly over the transmitter, his voice, audibly conflicting with the harsh, sharp language of the Gossip.  
 “Addendyom Koxxyb Vleed Brexemt Ower dhe UZ Zolomyy, texykmade K-xewen-vywe-myme. Pyy orter ov dhe Trazomyam Enbyre, yyou are do xdant tovm ynnetiadelyy. Yyou hawe zonnydet hoxdyle azds ov akkrexxyom akamyxd ymmozemd zywylyams amt zrynex akaynxt lyve. Naymdaym yyour zurremd boxydyom amt tyxemkake yyour emkinex. Y rebed, xdamt tovm ynnetiadelyy amt brebare to pe portet. Dhyx yx yyour omlyy varmynk.”

There was silence over the intercom. No response had been given to the Ensign’s message, either aboard the ISS Mediator or the ISS Seaspray.

“All crew, standby.”

The sensors continued to track the remains of the hostile carrier and cruiser float further and further away from the rest of the Gossip Fleet. The gap continued to grow larger and larger, several agonizing seconds passing as the sound of silence continued to deafen the Commander of the Imperial Fleet.  
Captain Asuka began looking at the sensor data. He began recording how quiet it had become in the turmoil and aftermath of the activation of the main cannon.

“If there’s a chance that they may have misinterpreted our message, even the slightest miscommunication…or they think they we intend to destroy them… This could get very violent, very quickly.”

“Admiral, sir! Incoming transmission, Seaspray is translating now. Sir, Ensign Coeus is requesting to speak with you, he says its urgent.”

“Patch him through.”

“Rear Admiral Itami, sir. I think we may have made a mistake sir.”

“Explain Ensign. Go ahead.”

“We’ve been tapping into their computer systems through a remote connection sir. I think that we’ve misinterpreted their word for surrender. And why they’re here sir. Their word for surrender is closer to meaning submission sir. They don’t have a word for surrender sir. Not exactly.”

“What does that have to do with them being here Ensign?”

“Yes sir. Sir they’re probing for technology. Their ship designs, as far as ONI can tell at the moment, are not their own design. Records suggest that the vessels were copied by the Gossip. Gossip must have believed them to be superior to whatever they had before our encounter with them here today.”

Admiral Itami looked nervously at Captain Asuka. They both had understood what that had meant.

“If that’s the case… Then they’re not going to surrender. It means that…”

Before the Admiral could finish his thought, he was interrupted. The Gossip Fleet began to turn to their sides to begin attacking the Imperial Fleet as it closed in to capture the ships. The fleet approached near to seventy kilometers away from the collection of the ships. The vessels resembled pale dots in the distance from their position, but they were nevertheless just as large a threat now as before.  
 “They’re not standing down. Hard Starboard, ready weapons and prepare to fire! Captain Hu, move in and breach their lines!”  
**Wings of Fire** “Chikusho! That was danger close Mediator, you could have warned us that they were arming the main cannons!”  
 “Roger that Knife actual, this is flight control, we receive. We apologize but time was of the essence.”  
 Okami had just barely made the course correction in time to evade the magnetic slug. The order came in only moments before the gun was fired. If he had even hesitated, the interceptor would have been turned to dust.  
 “That’s why you never question a course correction when it comes in. Just make the maneuver and don’t ask.” Okami had joked.  
 The computer began crying again, a wail indicating that the fleet had began a hard turn to the starboard side. The port weapons were now turned to broadside and were making ready to fire.  
 “Shit, dive, dive, dive! Okami!” The Lieutenant Commander pushed hard forward on the stick, diving down below the cone of fire of the two massive warships that flanked them on either sides. The two were forced down into their seats as the reaction control thrusters burned hard to force the craft down and underneath the inferno that erupted above.  
 “It never gets easy does it? Okami, take us home.”  
 “Not for long commander, we have another mission for the both of you. Return to the hanger and rearm, you’re taking your fight to the surface. Knife 72, Knife 73, break off and head to the following planetary coordinates: two-two degrees, thirteen minutes, eleven seconds north, eight-two degrees, three-six minutes, four-nine seconds west, objective is a native battleship on the surface, rendezvous and clear the airspace of Gossip hostiles on approach. Confirm?”  
 “This is Knife seven-zero, we confirm, Knife seven two and seven three, break off and proceed.”  
 Knife 72 and Knife 73 peeled away then began a deorbit maneuver that would place them near the coordinates that were provided.

“Flight control, this is Commander Fuji. What’s our new mission?”  
 “Commander, we need you and Commander Okami in archangels on the surface. You two are going to run support for Ronin-Team Blue. We’re going to try and save some lives. We have the dropships prepped in hanger alpha-three. Don’t worry about post-op report, we need you tapped in asap.”  
 “This is Commander Fuji. We acknowledge, Knife Squadron out.”  
**New Frontier**

Captain Hu clenched at the arm rests of his crash seat. The ship was only moments away from impact. The engines were plotted for a collision course with the last Gossip destroyer.  
 “Captain, this is Blue Actual, Ronin-Team Blue has landed, we’re proceeding to establish landing zone for additional reinforcements, give them hell up there sir. They sure did give it to the UC down here, no mercy.”  
 The Captain didn’t have time to respond. The shields were raised full forward as the Standard Deviation raced closer and closer to the target.  
 “All hands, brace for impact!”  
 The Standard Deviation struck the Gossip Destroyer, heading forward at nearly seventy thousand kilometers an hour. The Inertial dampeners reacted and retrorockets fired immediately after the collision was detected. The ship began violently decelerating as it plowed through the remaining warship that refused to stand down. The enemy vessel had been arming another energy weapon that was intended for a surface target. The Captain and all hands aboard the command deck were thrown forward in their seats. Airbags for the Helmsman were deployed, as they were closer to their console than the rest of the bridge crew. The Deceleration was close to ten standard Gs. Had it not been for the inertial dampeners and the shields, it would have crushed the bow and thrown the crew to their dooms.

“All decks, report in, medical teams standby for casualties! Flight Surgeon, give me the worst!”

“No serious injuries detected. Couple of scrapes and bruises, but all hands show as fine on life supports systems.”

“Engineering, give me a damage report, what did the Gossip do to my ship?”

“Its just as we expected them to do. They tried slicing into the computer servers. We locked them out but the computers have been tampered with. Its going to take some time to get them back online. We have plasma scoring on decks five through eight, no structural failures detected. They got into the wiring, they wanted to try and recover what they could from the ship in the short window they thought they had. It wasn’t enough. We’ll get it patched sir.”

“Security teams, report, is the ship secure?”

“Yes sir. All decks are secure, we have the Gossip technicians surrounded, we’re taking them into custody now.”

Captain Hu looked at the screens in front of him. The Gossip fleet was in ruins. The remaining vessels were all shattered, burning husks of metal. The destroyers had significant hull breaches and were visibly leaking their atmosphere. True to the Ensign’s word, not a single ship had surrendered at any point during the fighting. They didn’t surrender after the Mass Drivers destroyed their carrier. They didn’t when the Cruiser succumbed to the same fate, and they didn’t when the ISS Seaspray’s masers were brought online. They didn’t surrender when the Mediator began a broadside volley and they didn’t surrender when it became clear that they were surrounded and outnumbered, outgunned and outmatched. The Captain didn’t understand any of it. It was suicidal. At a certain point, the fleet would normally have just stopped firing. There wasn’t any point in continuing to do so, it would just be wasteful. That was, however, save for the fact the Gossip seemed adamant in their efforts to raze the surface, to reduce it to nothing more than a pile of ashes.

Captain Hu looked around the bridge. He found his executive officer, Captain Kubieko-no-Mari who had left his chair. He was helping to rekey a communications terminal near the front of the bridge.

“Kubieko? Are you alright up there? Do we have injured?”  
 “Negative sir, communications got knocked out after impact. I’m rekeying the system to reroute our transmissions to the secondary relay, its likely a crash, we’ll need to have the techs look at it once we are clear.”   
 The XO entered his final keystrokes into the terminal and the communications system was restored to normal functionality. Admiral Itami began speaking again.

“Captain Hu? This is Rear Admiral Itami. What is your status over? I repeat, what is your status Standard Deviation?”

“Operational sir. Shields at three quarters strength. All Gossip vessels are inoperable.”

“Understood Captain. Good to hear that you’re all in once piece after that stunt. I’m standing the fleet down. Scramble your archangels, lets see about rescuing any survivors we can. I don’t want to just abandon this mess. I’m ordering the construction battalions to their stations. We need to clear this scrap from orbit. See if we can recover anything from the remains that gives any clue as to what in the seven hells happened here.”

“Understood sir. My ship and her crew are fine, we will precede immediately to surface action per your orders. Commander Michizane and Commander Inari have been advised of the situation. Commander Inari will be in-route to the surface as soon as the Dark Horizon is clear. Captain Mari, any word from Knife seven-two and knife seven-three?”  
 “Yes sir. They’ve just cleared the AO. The Battleship is secure. Request permission to transmit to Admiral Halsey?”  
 “The Ensign is sure that the translations are correct? I don’t want another miscommunication if we can avoid it.”  
 “Aye sir, they had more time with the languages of the UC than they did with the Gossip. It should work.”  
 “Go ahead Mari, you have the conn, take care of that while I report back in with Commander Oda.”  
 Captain Hu released his restrains and left the bridge, leaving his headset on the seat. Captain Mari moved and took his spot, switching the console and stood down the red alert. He took the headset and spoke into the microphone:  
 “Attention all hands, this is the XO, stand down. I repeat, stand down to yellow alert.”  
 Mari leaned back into his seat and breathed a sigh of relief, appreciating that at least for now, the battle in orbit was over and had been won. He took the moment in and collected his breath, then leaned forward and placed the headset over his muzzle.  
 “Captain Mari, Dark Horizon is receiving us sir! Transferring you now!”  
 Captain Mari collected himself and then pressed the side of the headset to speak on the secure channel:

“This is Captain Kubieko-no-Mari, ISS Standard Deviation. Admiral, it is a pleasure to hear from you…”