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October 5, 2498

Resource System Ichan31221-B, On the UPC side of the UPC border with the Non-Affiliated Space zone.

A UPC Star Corp fleet tender glides silently alongside the Star Corp Battlecarrier Isle of Hamburg, tethers and umbilicals form a spidery web linking the two ships together. Data and materials cross between the two ships, providing sustenance. Automated service robots and power suited technicians cluster around three large gashes in the battlecarrier's hull. Several smaller destroyers and flights of state-of-the-art LightStriker fighters patrol the edge of a large asteroid belt nearby.

A bright flash announces the arrival of another group of ships. Three heavy cruisers and ten destroyers form a protective globe around a much, much larger ship. The stenciling on the bow identifies the ship as Sol Fortress One, the flagship of the Star Corp's Home Defense Fleet. A cloud of fighters erupt from its many launch bays. They form a protective bubble around a shuttle making a beeline from the flagship to the smaller battlecarrier.

On the flight deck, Captain Ian Strausburg, commanding officer of the Isle, struggles to fasten the last buttons of his dress uniform as an honor guard forms alongside the shuttle. The shuttle's ramp is not fully deployed when a powerfully built man walks out on the ramp and jumps down to the deck. On his shoulders sparkles the five crystal stars of the Star Corp's Commanding Admiral. His salt and pepper hair cut in the flattop fashion that has become the defacto standard for officers throughout the Corp.

The captain and honor guard snaps to attention and salutes, but before they can begin to play the anthem used to welcome flag officers and other dignitaries, the admiral gives a wave of his hand and says, "Permission to come aboard Captain?"

Still recovering from the admiral's entrance, the captain responds, "Granted, sir. Welcome aboard the Isle of Hamburg. Sir, we were not expecting your visit . . ."

"This isn't a social call Captain Strausburg," says the admiral, "We can dispense with the pleasantries." The admiral turns to a group of people making their way down the just deployed ramp. Two UPC Star Corp officers followed by a five, well-equipped security personnel. "This is my intelligence officer, Col. Samuel Jones, my assistant, Lt. Radian Johnson, and my ... entourage."

The captain shakes each officer's hand and says, "Welcome aboard. Admiral, my apologies that my senior staff was not here to greet you; they are attending to urgent matters at the moment. However, I will arrange for them to mee..."

While the captain is giving his explanation, the admiral surveys the activity on the deck. He spots a group of badly damaged fighters being repaired and says, "Where is Lt. Cmdr. Tod Savoy?"

"The sickbay sir," the captain responds.

"Lead on Captain," the admiral responds.

"Of course, this way sir," the captain points to a nearby hatch.

Several minutes later, the group arrives in the medical bay. Several beds are occupied and the medical staff tends to them. The captain leads the admiral up to an unconscious man with large portions of his body wrapped in bandages. Graphs and other indicators glow faintly in the background, holding a constant vigil over the injured man. An officer in a white lab coat strides up to the group purposefully and says sternly, "I'm sorry, but you will all have to leave, I cannot have this kind of disrupt... oh!"

As the admiral turns around, the woman immediately comes to attention and salutes, "Uh Admiral Collingsworth, I had no idea you would be visiting us."

The admiral returns the salute and says, "My apologies for the intrusion, but we must speak with the lieutenant commander about what happened in the asteroid field."

When the admiral looks away, she gives a “why didn’t you warn me” look to the captain; who shrugs apologetically. She pulls up a device from the foot of the bed and the display springs to life. After a couple of moments, she continues, “His flight suit was ruptured during the attack. He has severe damage to his skin tissues and organs. He came out of a liquid treatment tank three hours ago and we gave him some sedatives to help him sleep. He should not be waked up until his next cycle in the tank, which is later this afternoon.”

“But would waking him up to talk kill him?” asks the admiral, “I understand your concern, but the flight and audio recorder data we have is insufficient. We need to know what he knows. And we need to know now. We need to discover who did this and why to determine if other threats are imminent.”

The doctor taps her index finger on her lips before continuing, “No, it won’t kill him, but you’re not helping him either. Can’t this wait a few more hours; the man barely survived the event.”

The admiral silently waits.

She walks over to a cabinet, pull out a vial, inserts it into an injector, and waves it at the admiral. “Commanding Admiral or not, if this man’s condition worsens as a result of this, I’ll hold you personally responsible,” she says as she injects the man with the contents of the vial. “It will take a couple of minutes for him to be completely awake,” she says.

“Thank you doctor,” he replies.

Several minutes later, the man moans quietly and finally opens his eyes. As soon as he recognizes the person sitting on the edge of the bed, he tries to salute but the admiral places a hand on his arm, stopping him, “Not necessary son. Doctor, could you please give us some privacy?”

With a sigh of frustration, she walks away and goes to check on other patients, always keeping her eye on the admiral and the group with him.

“Lt. Cmdr., can you understand me? We need to know what happened out there,” the admiral cuts directly to the point.

Over the next few minutes, the wounded pilot slowly gives a summary of the events that transpired in the asteroid field. He finishes up with, “... since our communications were cut, ... I decided that we were ... going to go along with the pirate’s instructions. ... We were in visual range of the pirate’s ship ... when the rest of the flight attacked. We were caught in the crossfire. ... No markings ... the pirate claimed to be with the M’lok Brigade.”

“Did the pirate identify himself?” the admiral asks.

The man glances around at the other people then locks gazes with the admiral and says nothing.

Looking around himself, the admiral says, “Please wait outside, I’ll be but a moment.” The rest of the group exits the medical bay.

“Ok, we’re alone now. You know who it was, don’t you?” he asks.

Tears begin forming in his eyes, “I’m sure she wasn’t ... with them willingly. ... No way she would ... attack us like that ... on her own,” he says then coughs slightly.

“She? The pilot was a she. Who was it Tod?” the admiral asks.

With tears rolling down his face, he turns his head from side to side, fighting the question, “Amanda, ... it was Amanda,” he replies, his voice breaking up.

“Amanda? Amanda Bragan? Lt. Cmdr. Amanda Bragan? The same Amanda Bragan who cashiered her commission and career then fled instead of facing a board of inquiry for her actions? That Amanda?” demands the admiral, with anger creeping into his voice.

The man nods then says, “We talked before the flight attacked, ... she wouldn’t say why she ... was doing what she ... did, but I could tell she regretted the past ... and that she was in ... over her head. She ... <moan> needs <moan> your lo ...,” he begins moan heavily.

Just before he can start crying any louder, the doctor steps by the admiral and injects something into the man. He slowly sinks into unconsciousness. "I'm afraid there is not much more for you to learn admiral; at least not for several hours. Do you know this man personally? And the person responsible for this?" she asks.

The admiral collects his thoughts and stands up from the bed. When he turns to face the doctor, the aura of authority and the look he gives the doctor causes her to step back. "He's my nephew doctor, and the number of people who know that can be counted on one hand. Be sure it stays that way. Anything you may have heard in your eavesdropping is considered classified alpha one data. You will not speak of it to anyone. Reveal what you know to anyone without my direct permission, and you will find that I'm most unpleasant to deal with. Do we understand each other?" He says.

"Perfectly sir," is all she can muster to say.

He looks back down to the bed, "Take good care of him doctor," he says then leaves the bay. He starts heading towards the flight deck.

The colonel comes up beside him and says, "Sir, what did you learn from him?"

The admiral walks silently for several steps before answering, "Captain Strausburg, Colonel Jones and Lt. Johnson will be staying behind to analyze this event, provide them anything they need. Lt. Johnson, pass a message to the captain of the cruiser Dexter, tell him he will be remaining behind to bring you and the Colonel back to Mars. Colonel, you will question everyone involved in this matter, copy all relevant data, and bring it back to headquarters for analysis. The Lt. here will assist. You have one week. If the doctor's facilities cannot restore the Lt. Cmdr. to full health, bring him with you when you return. Any questions?"

"No sir," all three men reply simultaneously.

"Good, we're going to get to the bottom of this one way or the other," he replies.

The admiral and the security detail climb the ramp back into the shuttle. Just before entering the shuttle, the admiral turns around and says, "Lt., put in a call to the JAG office and the UPC Stellar Investigations Unit. Have them post a wanted notice for Amanda Bragan, former Star Corp Lt. Cmdr. The charges are treason, piracy, murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, whatever else they can think of. Start the reward at 500,000 credits and increment it according to the standard scale. Be sure they stress she is to be captured alive and must be able to stand trial. Otherwise, the reward is only 1000 credits for their time and trouble. Post it to all Star Corp commands and UPC civilian facilities down to the local level. Have the Colonel post it to those places the UPC doesn't officially recognize. I want this done today." Without waiting on a response, he turns and enters the shuttle. It begins its launch preparations.

"Yes ... sir," the Lt. responds. He turns to the Colonel with a question on his face.

The Colonel looks back to the shuttle as it moves towards the launch bay. "Son, take note, there goes one pissed off individual. Whoever this Amanda Bragan is, she's just got a world of hurt after her."