



EPISODE I
“ATLANTIS”
- ATLANTIS DSV -

*The year is 2040,
And mankind is once again at war.
Beneath the surface,
We defend the future...*

CAST OF PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS

Crew of the UEO Atlantis DSX-8100

Captain Mark Ainsley ~ *Commanding officer*
Commander James Banick ~ *Executive officer*
Lieutenant Commander Ryan Callaghan ~ *Tactical officer*
Lieutenant Commander Natalie Canebride ~ *Helm*
Lieutenant Commander Madeline Hayes ~ *Helm*
Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock ~ *Commander of Sea Wing DSX-8100*
Commander Michael Reed ~ *Chief Medical Officer*
Major Devlin Cortez ~ *Commander of the Atlantis marines*
Chief Petty Officer Edward Stevens ~ *Chief engineer*

Pilots of the VF-107 “Rapiers” (Atlantis DSX-8100)

Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock ~ *Commanding officer: Rapier One.*
Lieutenant Jane Roberts ~ *Rapier Two*
Lieutenant Thomas Reynolds ~ *Rapier Three*

The UEO Office of Naval Intelligence (O.N.I.)

Vice Admiral Jason Hargreaves ~ *Commander, Intelligence Command Pacific (San Diego)*
Commander Jacob Voss ~ *Admiral Hargreaves’s liaison to Atlantis DSX-8100*

The Macronesian Alliance

Alexander Bourne ~ *President of the Alliance of Macronesia*
General Henry Adamson ~ *Commander in Chief of the Combined Alliance Military*
Admiral Valerie Sark ~ *Commander of ANS Alexander carrier battlegroup*
Captain Nicholas Weyland ~ *Commanding officer of the ANS Alexander*
Captain William Bishop ~ *Commander, 181st Tactical Fighter Wing (the “Black Ravens”)*
Commander Daniel Laney ~ *Executive officer, 181st TFW (“Black Raven Two”)*
Lieutenant Joshua Bourne ~ *Black Raven Nine*

Jeffrey Edmonds. (*Information classified....*)

“ATLANTIS”

PROLOGUE

THE FALLEN

From the Captain’s personal log of the *UEO Atlantis DSV(X)-8100*

Captain Mark A. Ainsley Commanding.

Opening entry, dated November 6th, 2040...

Log start: 09:44:21, Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time.

“It is with the greatest sense of privilege and pride that I make this the opening entry of the Captain’s Log of the United Earth Oceans “Atlantis” DSX-8100 on this, the day of her maiden voyage, and commissioning in to the UEO Navy as flagship of the Third Fleet.

Words fail to describe the sheer sense of... awe... I experienced when laying eyes on this command for the first time since her keel was laid some two and a half years ago. As far as a ship of war can be concerned, I have never seen a vessel of this magnitude in size, power or majesty take to the open seas, and thirteen years ago when I took command of the Nautilus – a small but proud member of the Trident-class - I never would have imagined it.

The sense of pride, accomplishment and workmanship that comes with a ship such as this cannot possibly be passed over in to memory, and I am nearly certain that I will be just one Captain in a line of dozens – if not hundreds – who are destined to command this ship with an equal sense of pride and honour from now until that distant day of her final passing, either in a breakers unknown, or perhaps a battlefield yet to be decided.

Atlantis represents the very best and sadly even the worst of humanity. The paramount achievement shown in her completion marks a significant milestone in the long maritime history of the world, but one must never forget that as inspiring as she may be, Atlantis was bred for war; a final, desperate answer to unassailable political challenges that we face not only as allied nations, but as free individuals who stand on the precipice of an illimitable abyss.

It is my sincerest hope that the solemn duty shall not fall to me to give an order that will press us over that boundary in to the nether; to maintain a fragile peace through goodwill unto man, and on a wing and that prayer, I resign myself to the knowledge that it will be my actions, and the actions of my crew, that will determine how history remembers us.

Atlantis’s crew are some of the youngest, brightest and most skilled men and women I have ever had the privilege of commanding, and this log cannot be written without paying tribute to their efforts, for without them, this ship would be nothing more than a hollow shell of machinery with no soul, life, or future.

Our first voyage should be uneventful; a trip around the UEO’s Pacific nations on a mission to ‘show the flag’ with Captain Oliver Hudson, and the crew of the seaQuest DSV, which will rendezvous with Atlantis some 50 nautical miles south of the Aleutians on our way in to Tokyo before travelling south to the colonies of New Los Angeles, Challenger and Palau Ridge before patrolling the UEO-Macronesian

Demilitarized Zone from west-to-east on our way back to Pearl Harbor; a quick run around the block to let this girl stretch her sea legs for the first time.

The world will be watching this one, so I suppose we should be thankful that Naval Intelligence has given us clear waters between here and Japan... So all I ask are fair winds and following seas.

...It seems I've been given both.

-Mark Ainsley, Captain

Atlantis DSV(X)-8100, November 6th, 2040.

Log end: 09:58:03, Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time.

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**The Phoenix Islands, South Pacific. November 19th, 2040.
Two weeks after the commissioning of UEO Atlantis DSX 8100...**

‘Junior’ loitered around the submerged battlefield like a pebble in a rockslide, ducking under and over hulked submarines and weaving in and out of hot spots. The UEO flagship, *Atlantis DSX 8100*, hovered overhead. Behind her, the *seaQuest DSV* stayed menacingly; her sharp bow eclipsing the subfighters that duelled below, threatening at any moment to lash out and destroy the agile craft.

Junior beat a hasty retreat as a Macronesian *Lysander*-class fighter rolled and tried to strafe with laser fire, and the little spherical WSKR (Wireless Sea Knowledge Retrieval) Satellite disappeared back in to the darkness behind the safety of the *Atlantis’s* massive hull...

...Commander James Banick watched this satellite feed from the command deck of *Atlantis’s* bridge and then looked down at the row of tactical stations beneath his feet on the bridge level below. “Commander Callaghan, reposition WSKRS *Junior* and *Loner* off the bow, covering everything they can behind us...”

“Aye sir,” replied the chief weapons officer calmly as the bridge was racked by another explosion outside.

“Communications,” Banick said, this time looking to Lieutenant Jack Phillips next to him. “Hail the *seaQuest*.”

Banick watched grimly as the bleak image of *seaQuest* sitting off *Atlantis’s* stern changed to an internal camera on the other submarine’s bridge. But instead of a UEO officer standing on the command deck, he was looking at a Macronesian Captain...

...Captain Lance Raymond regarded the face of the UEO Commander coldly from his position in *seaQuest’s* Captain’s chair. Commander James Banick, executive officer of the UEO *Atlantis*, shook his head grimly on the main screen. Raymond stood up and looked around the bridge of the former UEO flagship and ground his teeth. The *seaQuest* was a 1000-foot-long nuclear Deep Submergence Vehicle; one of the most powerful vessels ever built by any navy in the world, and now she stood toe-to-toe with one of her own; the much larger, newly commissioned *Atlantis DSX* over half a mile beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean.

“-Captain Raymond...” said Banick calmly. “I’ll give you one and *only* one chance to surrender... Or I will fire.”

Pointing to the communications officer, Raymond’s face contorted in anger. “Shut him off!” he yelled. Obediently, the image of the ravaged *Atlantis* bridge disappeared, and he spun on his heel to sprint over to weapons control. “Can you reacquire shooting solutions?”

“I’m *trying*, sir!”

“All engines - *Full reverse!*”

...Banick watched the helpless *seaQuest* slowly pulling away, and then looked around his own ruined bridge. He had no choice. He *would* not, and *could* not allow the Macronesians to keep that submarine. “*Fire...*”

From the rear of the *Atlantis*, her three remaining aft torpedo batteries let fly with everything they had left. A split second later, nearly two dozen torpedoes were accelerating at alarming speed to nearly 200 knots. At a range of just one mile, their total flight time could be measured in seconds. With nowhere to turn, and no way to return fire, there was nothing the *seaQuest* could do. She visibly shook as the torpedoes struck her head-on. With the first few strikes, *seaQuest*’s bow was gutted as the torpedoes tore deep in to her hull and ripped apart the boat’s command centers, and the remaining weapons only further sealed the great ship’s fate.

The water lit up in spectacular novas of white fire as the weapons consumed *seaQuest*; tearing apart her once-majestic and graceful hull. It was a painful image to watch: Reeling from the destruction, the *seaQuest DSV* started to break apart, and in a final, defiant scream of protest, the submarine’s pressure hull imploded in a rapid staccato of low-pitched ‘booms’. The massive, sudden release of pressure reverberated throughout the sea for miles, but it was heard on the *Atlantis* as nothing more than a low, trembling ‘thump’ across her decks; an anti-climax of tragic proportions.

Atlantis’s bridge staff watched the death of *seaQuest* in silence. There was no cheering or satisfaction – only the gratitude that they were alive. They had come to the very brink, and they would walk away once more. Around them, *Atlantis* was a shadow of her former self; the bridge – once pristine and gleaming at every orifice just days out of commissioning – was now blackened and scarred from where fires had raged minutes before. The smooth bulkheads that had covered the walls were now shattered and broken by the force of an exploding torpedo that had narrowly avoided crushing the bridge entirely, and broken power cables were strewn from every frame and ceiling. Control stations were covered in debris from the collapsed sections of ceiling, and every light seemed faint through the thin curtain of smoke and dust that filled the air. Finally, there was the avatar of the *Atlantis*’s trident crest that had once hung proudly from the wall, illuminated by the shimmering eddies of the moonpool below. It was dark now; no light shined upon it, and ugly scars from where fire had lashed across it now marred its originally-gleaming finish. It was a victory; but a hollow one. There was nothing here to celebrate. Lieutenant Jack Phillips’s voice was distant in the silence; haunted and tired. “Commander...” he reported quietly. “We’ve just received word from the *Aquarius*. The battle’s over sir. The last of the Macronesians have fallen back. Captain Hornsby is asking if we need assistance.”

Banick sank back in his chair and sighed. They were only a *few* minutes too late. “Tell them what’s happened,” he said tiredly. “And inform them we’re headed back to Hawaii at best possible speed and that we will rendezvous with them there.” Quietly, Banick looked around at his smashed bridge one last time, and then steeled himself for the task of pulling the ship back together. Quietly, he ordered “Take us home.”

I

PARADISE LOST

Arlington National Cemetery, Washington D.C. NORPAC Confederation. December 3rd, 2040.

For a few seconds, the fluttering of the blue flag of the United Earth Oceans at half-mast was the only sound that could be heard over the frigid, white cemetery of Arlington in the snow-covered city of Washington D.C.

His winter dress uniform was covered in more medals and ribbons than even some of the most senior of Generals - His presence enough to turn the heads of everyone he passed. Captain Mark Ainsley watched as the Marine sergeant raised a bugle to his lips, and began to play *Taps*. Beside that soldier, seven other marines stood perfectly still, their old, post-World War 2-vintage M14 rifles held in white-gloved hands over their chests in port arms.

The gathering of dignitaries, officers and politicians who had come to attend the memorial service for the *seaQuest DSV* and its crew was staggering. From the newly-elected Secretary General, Nathan Bridger, to the Admirals of the Atlantic and Pacific fleets, many had come to pay their respects. Ainsley was the only crew member of the *Atlantis* able to attend the ceremony, as his ship was now deployed in the warm waters of the Pacific, waging a war against those who had brought him there that day.

Opposite him, former officers of the *seaQuest* stood in mournful silence; the now-Captain Jonathan Ford, Captain Katherine Hitchcock, and a handful of others who he did not recognise. A few civilian diplomats visibly jumped when the order was given for the seven marines of the honour guard to fire in salute. They raised the rifles high and fired three times over the large, polished black obelisk in front of them upon which was inscribed the 242 names of the lost submarine’s crew, beginning with Captain Oliver Hudson, and then working its way down in alphabetical order.

The ground beneath Ainsley’s feet rumbled as a flight of four F/A-43 “Corsairs” of the US Air Force tore through the skies above. Soon after, the bugler finished his mournful song, and the memorial service came to an end. Captain Ainsley nodded once to the Secretary-General and the officers of *seaQuest*, and then quietly made his way across the field to the car park without saying a word. He didn’t know the majority of people he passed, but by the glimmer of recognition on their eyes, he could tell that they knew him. It was a reception he got no matter where he went in the armed forces.

His long coat fluttered gently behind him in the cold winter breeze as he buried his gloved hands deep in the pockets on his walk back to the limousine that would take him to Andrews Air Force base, and a plane bound for the city-state of San Angeles over half the world away.

With everything Captain Ainsley had been through over the last several days, he didn’t intend on staying around for bureaucrats to annoy him with false pleasantries and the details of politics in war time. The current political fiasco within the UEO was a fiery one following the resignation of Secretary-General Dallinsley shortly after Macronesia’s declaration of war. The resignation and circumstances surrounding it had caught the UEO off guard, and in an emergency sitting of the general assembly, they had voted unanimously to give the office of the Secretary General to a hesitant and all-too-reserved Nathan Hale Bridger. It was quite possibly

the only good decision the UEO had made in the last ten years. Bridger was a veteran of the Navy, a scientist, an environmentalist, and – while Bridger himself hated to admit it - a superb diplomat. The power vacuum left by Dallinsley was massive... and the member states of the UEO would be looking to strong leaders who had the will and patience to see what was rapidly becoming World War Four through to its end.

The United Earth Oceans organization was the largest, most complex and one of the most powerful political and military alliances on the planet. Established several years after the close of World War Three in 2016 as a successor to the defunct United Nations, it united the Military Confederations of the world in a social and economic alliance that led to one of the most revolutionary expansions of human society in history. The industrial and economic powerhouse nations of Europe, North America and East Asia that backed the UEO in its founding days had expanded their borders to the realm of the sea, and now thousands of major submarine colonies lay strewn across the ocean floors of Earth as home to billions, and represented some of the most lucrative economic prospects for the nations that owned them. It was the UEO’s job to protect those prospects... and it was because of the UEO that they had to defend them in the first place.

In 2025, the United Earth Oceans general assembly made the mistake of lifting a ban they had put on colonial deregulation. Overnight, thousands of colonies had become victim to military action by rival states, hundreds of others declared independence, and piracy ran rampant. The UEO’s military was stretched so thinly in defence of these fledgling colonies that many nations of the UEO grew in discontent of the way the crisis was being managed. They had entrusted the service of their militaries to the UEO, and were now falling victim to its inability to maintain such a massive peacekeeping operation on a global scale. Many nations resigned their membership, and some had gone on to directly oppose the UEO’s hard-line policies on “non-aligned” nations. It had led to a new cold war in the 2030s... and now finally in 2041; full-scale war.

The Alliance of Macronesia – formerly the New Australian Confederation – had made its wealth from the maritime prospects it had established along the sea floor of the Tongan trench, just north of New Zealand. The wealth held there was more valuable than the diamond trade, and the UEO trade embargoes against the Alliance had resulted in an arms race that lasted a decade, with both the UEO and Alliance trying to outbuild each other in both technology and numbers. Ultimately, while the UEO managed to maintain its technological supremacy, the Alliance now outnumbered them by over 5 to 1 in subfighter forces alone. It was not a pretty picture for the UEO nations, and it was not going to improve any time soon.

Macronesia had declared war – and it was guaranteed to be long and bloody.

Stepping inside the limousine, Ainsley removed his cap and put it on the seat beside him with a deep sigh. The chauffeur afforded to him by the navy for the duration of his business in Washington closed the door, but did not re-enter the car. Ainsley waited for a few moments, and then watched as the driver walked around the other side of the car and opened the opposite door, allowing another person to step inside; Captain Lauren Hornsby – the 35-year-old commanding officer of the *Aquarius DSV* – *Atlantis*’s sister ship.

“Well... that was depressing,” said Hornsby as she removed her own uniform cap. She was by far one of the youngest officers to ever achieve the rank of Captain, and had spent nearly a decade fighting a so-called “cold war” that was anything but, but the years of combat she’d seen had left her somewhat jaded on some occasions... and the fact she had grown up in the US state of San Angeles – the 52nd state of the

Union - hundreds of miles off the Californian coast in the unpleasant aftermath of World War Three left Ainsley surprised to hear any degree of sincerity in her voice at all. She was over 15 years younger than him, and had easily seen just as much combat in her considerably shorter years as he had.

“I’m just glad the media didn’t turn it in to the Academy Awards... With all this hoo-har about war and who is to blame-“

“-I know, Mark,” said Hornsby uneasily. “You need to stop blaming yourself. Jesus. The Secretary-General looked like he was going to choke. I just...”

The younger Captain’s voice trailed off. Nothing could be said by either one of them, and the disjointed conversation was turning out to be fairly pointless. The blow to the Navy’s morale from *seaQuest*’s loss had been hard on everyone. A decade ago, the *seaQuest* had stood as being the best hope of beating Macronesia. Now it was in pieces across some uncharted trench in the Pacific warzone...

Both Captains represented the finest of their respective calibres; Ainsley was the most senior and experienced Captain in the UEO; having fought in the final days of the Third World War, then seeing through the crisis-toiled great dissolution of the 2020’s, before rising to near-infamy amongst military circles in the 2030’s with his command of the *Poseidon*-class subcarrier *Reverence*. That particular tour of duty had gained the *Reverence* so much renown that the UEO had since named an entire new class of Battlecruiser after it. When options for command of the *Atlantis* had risen, his was the first name to be dropped.

Hornsby was in many ways the complete opposite. She had not gained her fame from a career of “legendary” combat actions, but rather a rapid advancement through the ranks and a demonstration of ability that exceeded many of her senior peers. With Command positions for the new *Reverence*-class carriers being so contested, and the *Aquarius* being shrouded in utter secrecy, it was perhaps luck that had given her the bridge of the second DSX, and her promotion to Captain was given merely so she could be eligible for the position. When that promotion was made official, the cry of outrage from other Captains in the fleet had been tremendous. Their doubts were silenced within days of her assuming command when *Aquarius* proved its mettle along side *Atlantis* in the first official engagement of the war in the Phoenix Islands – the same, grim place where *seaQuest DSV* had met her fate.

Ainsley was almost a mentor to Hornsby. They had served together aboard the UEO *Aegis* in 2024 shortly after she’d graduated from the UEO naval academy as an Ensign. Ainsley was already a full-Commander at the time, and their service together was one more of coincidence than anything else. Ainsley didn’t really get to know Hornsby until her name began appearing regularly in various fleet action reports.

Hornsby looked back to Ainsley from the window to see the Captain reading the morning paper. Ainsley’s eyes locked with hers for a moment, and he turned the newspaper over, removed his reading glasses, and asked quietly, “I don’t suppose you’ve seen the headlines this morning?”

“No, I haven’t,” replied Hornsby matter-of-factly. “...And when are you going to see a Doctor about that short-sightedness of yours? You know they could fix that really easily.”

Ainsley passed the paper across to her, and she unfolded it and read the front page. “You know how I feel about laser surgery, Lauren. They screw up, and I lose my eyes. No thanks.”

“...”Trial by fire,”” she said aloud, as if she hadn’t heard while reading the headline. “Macronesian President Alexander Bourne publicly expressed

disappointment over the verdict handed down by a UEO navy board of inquiry that cleared senior fleet-Captain Mark Ainsley of any wrong in a decision to ‘defend’ the Nintoku Seamount farming colony on November 7th in a fire fight which sank 4 Alliance attack submarines – a decision which the President used to press his declaration of war against the United Earth Oceans... The President said he questioned the Board’s ability to make a “fair and just” decision, calling for Captain Ainsley to be tried for dereliction of duty in a court of international law...”

Ainsley nodded with a disinterested huff. “I thought the UEO *was* a ‘court of international law’.”

Hornsby shook her head sadly as she read the next few lines on the front page. “Bloody hell. This article would have you believe that Nathan Bridger is going to be the next Hitler. So much for the media being on our side when things got dicey... I wonder how much the Macronesian ministry of state paid them to write this?”

“Probably enough to cover Bourne’s next six re-election campaigns,” directed Ainsley dryly. The media had always loved to cover wars in their full, gritty detail. It was unfortunate for the UEO that the covert nature of submarine warfare meant that for the most part, journalists were allowed no where near the frontline due to security and reasons of operational secrecy, and all they had to report on was the over-zealous propaganda offered by President Bourne and the Macronesian Alliance. It had been that way for a decade, and still the UEO suffered for it.

“I bet fleet intelligence is going to have a field day with this...”

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UEO Department of Naval Intelligence. San Diego, NORPAC Confederation. December 3rd, 2040.

Vice Admiral Jason Hargreaves walked down a long corridor leading to the command center of the UEO’s Naval Intelligence headquarters, flanked by an entourage of intelligence analysts and officers from various branches of the military; he was at the start of a very long and very trying day. For an entire week, the divisions of Naval Intelligence had been struggling to seek answers on how one of the most powerful ships in the UEO fleet fell in to the hands of the Macronesian Alliance. So far, no one had any answers.

“We’re rapidly running out of leads here, Gentlemen,” sad the Admiral to his aides. “It seems that every report I am given on *seaQuest*’s compromise details little more than how the investigation hit a brick wall. Am I to assume that Alliance Counter-Intelligence has managed to somehow render *every single* avenue of our intelligence bureaus completely superfluous?”

“We’re not saying that our investigations have been *impeded* by counter-intelligence operations, Admiral...” offered one of his aides – a Marine Colonel. “But so far, all we’ve found is that whoever was responsible for what happened was very thorough in covering their tracks.”

Hargreaves stopped at the glass door to the command center and put his palm on a scanner which glowed for a moment before bleeping affirmatively. With a hiss, the doors slid open and the Admiral and his men walked in to the room and descended the stairs to the control floor below. Seeing his entry, an Ensign on the floor walked up to him and presented him with a clipboard and a sign-in sheet. Without much thought for the strict book keeping, Hargreaves signed the sheet and then looked back at the door where he’d come in.

“Someone darken the windows, please. We don’t need this leaving the command center...”

Obediently, an officer stepped up to the bullet-proof window pane and adjusted a switch. A moment later, the windows darkened and turned virtually black. Satisfied, Admiral Hargreaves looked around at the various status global status monitors mounted high around the room. The displays showed little more than satellite orbits, communications protocols across the UEO battle net and other generic data that could have been pulled from any computer in the building. “Charles... Do we have any birds over the Phoenix Islands right now?” he asked one of the officers near him.

“One moment, sir...”

A couple of seconds later, Vice Admiral Hargreaves was looking at real-time, high resolution imagery of a small cluster of islands in the South Pacific. It amazed and concerned him that while his intelligence offices could provide this kind of information off-hand in a matter of seconds, they were unable to complete what should normally be a very basic investigation, in little more than two weeks. The director had been breathing down his neck for days, pressing on him just how vital this assignment was. “This is real time?”

“Yes sir...”

“Good. Do you have the data from the *Atlantis* on where *seaQuest* went down?”

Another moment later, a small crosshair bracketed an area on the image about 40 miles south of the islands. This was then overlaid with location names for various landmarks and lat-long coordinates. Hargreaves and his officers studied this for a moment, before the Admiral began walking for a door on the other side of the command center. “Send this information to the briefing room, Ensign.”

“At once, sir.”

“Gentlemen... if you will follow me?” said Hargreaves sternly.

Stepping in to a small briefing room adjacent to the command center, Admiral Hargreaves headed to the front of the long oak desk there and set his files down. One by one, the gathering officers took seats around the table, passing around briefing papers. One or two still held mugs of coffee which had gone around only minutes before.

“Alright, I will say on the record that this conversation is classified and anything said shall not be repeated outside this room. Once we have moved through everything on the agenda, we will finish with the standard non-disclosure agreement.”

Those gathered nodded in understanding, and the Admiral went on. “Firstly... Well, I’d say we have a problem,” he said, sitting down at the end of the desk. “The director’s office has been on my case for several days now, and I’ve had absolutely nothing to give him... So? Answers.”

“Well, as we said, sir... it’s not like we’ve not been trying. We just haven’t been able to *find* anything,” said the Marine Colonel again

A Captain from the Navy interjected; his worn, impatient features a testament to the kind of life he had led for just over 40 years. “We’re looking in the wrong places. So far all our efforts have been directed outward to Macronesia ... I’ve been saying this for days; we will *not* find any sort of information in the Alliance’s operations. Their counter-intelligence is nearly flawless. They know how to cover their tracks.”

“With all due respect, Captain Krahulik,” protested another Marine Colonel – this one the Commanding officer of the UEO 2nd marine division’s Force Recon battalion. “The intelligence missions my marines have been running from your command have found so many ‘tracks’ suggesting various Alliance covert operations than I know what to do with. If I was to follow every single lead we’ve managed to uncover over the last two weeks, I could spend the next 6 months running recon missions as far abroad as Hong Kong...”

Hargreaves held up a hand, pre-emptively putting a stop to an inevitable argument between the two services. It was well known that the Marine Corps and Navy held stiff rivalries with each other – in particular between the companies of marine force recon and Navy Special Forces. But he didn’t want any such ‘debates’ in his briefing room at that moment, and was slightly annoyed that the two officers would devolve to such petty importunities so soon. “The time for pointing the finger and blame for our apparent lack of progress hasn’t come yet, gentlemen... So let’s keep this civil. As it turns out, you are not the only one to suggest we’ve been ‘looking in the wrong place’, Colonel Thompson... so I’ve had my *own* department look at alternatives.”

The officers stared at Admiral Hargreaves expectantly, not noticing the Commander who had entered through the door behind them. He smiled apologetically to Hargreaves before the Admiral continued by pulling up the satellite data he had requested a few minutes before. “In 2019, terrorists used a set of command codes elicited from a UEO officer to try and take control of the *seaQuest DSV*.”

“The ‘Deadman’ codes,” said Captain Krahulik, remembering the event.

“Yes, Captain. *seaQuest*’s “Deadman” codes were devised by Section Seven as a way of bringing the ship back to a safe port or harbour in the event that her crew was incapacitated or killed. As improbable as the eventuality was, it happened... and the terrorists very nearly succeeded in their attempts to take control of the sub. The codes were seen as more of a security risk than an asset in subsequent evaluations, and no UEO submarine built after 2021 incorporated them as a standard part of the design...” Hargreaves paused, and then added; “...But *seaQuest*’s codes were never deactivated.”

“*What?!*” said one of the officers, genuinely surprised. “I was under the impression it was made a priority after that incident?”

“So were the rest of us,” countered Hargreaves. “But as it turns out... there is evidence to suggest otherwise. Some of our analysts have managed to uncover certain files confiscated by *Section Seven* following *seaQuest*’s loss two weeks ago. One of those files is the official report from the DSX *Atlantis*’s Executive Officer, James Banick, on the destruction of the *seaQuest*. The report states that Commander Banick was forced to use the codes in order to partially disable *seaQuest*’s systems, enabling *Atlantis* to destroy her. At the time, Commander Banick was grasping for straws. He had no idea if the codes would work... but we now know that they *did*.”

“What the hell was Section Seven thinking?!” exclaimed Captain Krahulik, referring to the beyond-clandestine division of the UEO which dealt with the ‘unacknowledged’ operations and matters within the Organization – a division that was all but hidden from the public eye. “Have you contacted Admiral Ezard to get an answer?”

“I have,” confirmed Hargreaves with an affirming nod. “The Vice Admiral was reluctant to give me a straight answer one way or the other, but I think it is safe to assume that he knew about this. S7 has never been known for their willingness to explain everything they do.”

“Perhaps not... But they must have some degree of accountability for this small ‘oversight’, surely.”

“Section Seven has always had the position that vessels with the power and capability of a DSV should be kept on a short tether. They are likely to wash their hands of the matter, as it is out of their jurisdiction.”

Colonel Thompson, who had remained silent during the exchange, finally spoke out. “It would seem we have a problem then... If the Alliance *did* have access to those codes, they may well have had access to the entire *seaQuest* computer. The amount of information they could have taken—

“—Is unacceptable,” finished Hargreaves. “And we are *not* going to find out just what the Alliance took without getting something solid from the source. We need *seaQuest*’s computer.”

“I’d agree with you, sir... but *seaQuest* is now lying over 3 miles down on the bottom of the Hemmingway trench, 400 nautical miles behind Macronesian lines. We have no field agents capable of carrying out such a task,” objected Captain Krahulik.

“I was never considering sending field agents to deal with this, Captain... Well, not alone at least...” Hargreaves looked up at the Naval Commander who had entered the room a few moments before, drawing those seated to turn and face him.

“This is Commander Jacob Voss.” Hargreaves introduced the Commander. “I’ve assigned him from other operations to oversee this operation. The Commander answers to no one but the Director of this division, and my self.”

The Admiral unlocked his briefcase and retrieved several files (marked “eyes only”) which were then handed around the table. “You all have assignments detailed in the files you’ve just been given.”

“Urrm, sir... What exactly *is* this operation you’re talking about?”

“Well, Captain... if you let me finish, then I’ll explain. The problem, as you’ve pointed out, is that *seaQuest* is lying about 400 miles behind enemy lines. Last night I spoke with Fleet Admiral Jack Riley and personally requested the services of the *Atlantis*.”

“I was under the impression that the DSX was still on shakedown, Admiral?” asked Captain Krahulik.

“She is. *Atlantis* is also the best chance we have of penetrating that far behind enemy lines without committing the bulk of the fleet. Commander Voss’s job will be to oversee *Atlantis*’s operations. The main objective will be the recovery of *seaQuest*’s command logs.”

“This is a lot of effort for the recovery of something which may not even be intact, sir...”

“We are confident that it is,” assured Hargreaves. “*seaQuest*’s bridge was designed to maintain its structural integrity even in the event that every other bulkhead from the bow through to the engine room is breached. And I cannot stress enough how important it is that we establish what the Alliance may have recovered from our systems. Captain Ainsley is easily one of the most experienced captains in the fleet. His ship is second to none. Admiral Riley has already agreed to my request... and *Atlantis* has given new orders to proceed directly to the Macronesian border.”

Captain Krahulik was cringing. The plan didn’t sit well in his mind; least of all with the knowledge that Captain Mark Ainsley would be in command. Ainsley was largely responsible for the war they were now fighting, and although not at fault; he was seen as a loose cannon by more than a few high-ranking individuals within UEO

command. “Sir... there has to be other alternatives. What about Captain Hornsby and the *Aquarius*? Surely she is just as capable...”

“Hornsby is an excellent commander without a shadow of a doubt... But she has never had experience in this kind of operation, and *Aquarius*'s duties in the Marshall Islands are considered of the highest priority. *Aquarius* is the only unit in that area with the flexibility to deal with the Alliance 4th fleet. “

Krahulik nodded in defeat. He wasn't going to convince Hargreaves otherwise, and the mission seemed to have been decided already. “Well, sir... if the details of this operation have been set in stone, then perhaps we should take our leave to handle our respective assignments...”

Krahulik was already in the process of unhappily packing up his files, and Hargreaves nodded silently. “Very well...” he then handed out several forms to those in the room, taking one for himself and signing it at the bottom. “Standard non-disclosure agreements... Leave them on the desk and I'll take care of them. Commander Voss... will you stay behind a moment, please?”

“Yes sir...”

Signing the legal forms, the Colonels, Captains and Captains at the meeting gathered the last of their papers and one by one, left the room in silence. Hargreaves rubbed his tired face as he turned to look out the briefing room windows that overlooked the command center below. Colonel Thompson was the last to leave the room; closing the glass-pane door behind him, looking once at Voss and then at Hargreaves before descending the stairs that led back down to the main control floor.

Hargreaves turned from the window to face Voss and extended a hand to a chair at the table, inviting him to sit down as he took his own seat at the end of the desk. “Commander, I know I don't need to remind you how important this mission is...”

“No sir, you don't.” replied Voss quietly.

The Admiral nodded again before pulling out a sealed envelope and handed it to the Commander. “Your orders; signed by the Director this morning. You will be flying out from Coronado this afternoon bound for San Angeles. You'll be taken directly to the *Atlantis* from there.”

“Yes sir. Does the Captain know I'll be arriving?”

“No, he doesn't... This mission is being treated as need-to-know. You can, of course, tell the Captain what you need to when you arrive... I'd personally suggest you do so. Ainsley is not known for ‘appreciating’ unexpected surprises.”

Voss smiled. “Should I assume then that Captain Ainsley has clearance for full-disclosure?”

“Ainsley is the most senior command officer in the fleet. There isn't much he's *not* cleared for. Although... I wouldn't tell him anything he doesn't ask. His job is to get the *Atlantis* to where *seaQuest* went down. After that... anything he knows is subject to your discretion.”

“I'll keep it in mind, sir.”

“You're dismissed, Commander... Good luck.”

~

**UEO Atlantis DSX 8100 Battlegroup. On shakedown in the Pacific.
Secure UEO Waters. December 4th, 2040...**

The UEO *Atlantis DSX 8100* glided through the sea: massive, and elegant. Her sleek lines and broad-swept wings completely dwarfed the small squadron of Attack submarines that surrounded her. At four hundred and ninety meters long, she was nearly two hundred meters longer than the preceding *seaQuest* class, and displaced over seven times *seaQuest*'s mass at almost a quarter of a million tonnes. Her armament was second to none – 24 rapid-firing sextuple-tubed torpedo batteries, nearly two dozen laser banks, and a sea wing of subfighters numbering nearly 100.

She had been developed and built in absolute secrecy over the course of the last decade with an unknown black-budget as the UEO's final, desperate answer to the massive numbers of Macronesian submarines that left Australian shipyards every year. The Navy's registry board couldn't decide what designation suited the mammoth submarine, so they had settled on “Deep Submergence Experimental”, or simply “DSX”. While a bland designation that didn't seem to do her justice, *Atlantis* had no equal – above or below the waves.

She was less than a month old.

Lieutenant Jane Keiko Roberts stood on an observation platform high above *Atlantis*' cavernous internal hangars, watching the busy activity of ground crews as they swarmed around subfighters, speeders and utility craft that were constantly arriving and departing via the big moonpools at the center of the holding bays. One couldn't tell from just reading her name on a sheet of paper, but Roberts was Japanese, having been born to an American naval aviator based in Yokohama, and a Japanese mother after the third world war. Both parents had been against her joining the navy, but with the exposure she got to her father's job aboard the carrier *USS Thomas Jefferson*, it had probably been inevitable that she followed his footsteps. She gazed down at an SF-37/E Raptor fighter of the VF-107 ‘Rapiers’ that sat alone in the squadron's holding bay. The fighter was gleaming – it's sea-grey hull divided by a long navy-blue pinstripe that ran down the length of its back, framed by twin black tails and grinning at her through a set of menacing shark's teeth that had been painted under the nose, along with a delicately painted name below the canopy; “Lieutenant J. Roberts.”

She sighed as she looked down at her splinted and braced arm, flexing the elbow gently. Roberts had broken it badly almost exactly two weeks ago when she'd been forced to eject from her doomed Raptor fighter during the Battle for the Phoenix Islands. Her cockpit module had sat on the edge of the Hemmingway trench for 10 hours before recovery teams had finally pulled it from the water and brought her back to the *Aquarius* in a severe state of exposure. Hypothermia had set in, and for a time, doctors aboard the DSV had feared spinal injuries. She hadn't sat in the cockpit since then while she recovered, and idly wondered when she would do so again.

Roberts was startled by a sudden ‘thump’ from the first-level hangar floor below as a familiar Raptor rumbled up the recovery ramp at nearly 40 knots, spraying salt water in to the air in its wake from the twin turbines at it's rear before coming to a halt on its landing skids. The number “00” (or “Double Nuts”) on the fighter's wing brought a smile to her face – it was Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock's fighter, her CO and the commander of the *Atlantis*'s sea wing. Cradling her arm, Roberts set off for the stairs at the end of the catwalk to the hangar deck below...

The 40-year-old Gabriel Hitchcock was a maverick. Perhaps not in a sense of being insubordinate, but his reputation came from a career record that spanned over a decade of being in the wrong place at the right time. He had made his career and lethal combat reputation from being utterly ruthless in the cockpit whenever (-and this was frequent) a squadron under his command engaged the enemy. The Macronesians knew him for his monolithic kill record, while the UEO simply knew him by whatever squadron he was in command of at the time as it was frequent for such squadrons to be plastered across the front page of the Navy Times. The fact his career was a required case study for any Macronesian pilot to pass through the Alliance’s fighter school was certainly a testament to the pictures the media and various official reports painted.

Climbing out of the cockpit, he slid down the ladder and landed on the steel grates of the deck with a solid ‘clank’; his heavy boots making more noise than the quietly idling fighter engine behind him. Before he had even removed his gloves, fighter technicians were crawling all over the Raptor to secure it. Unbuckling his helmet, Hitchcock handed it to one of the technicians and wiped sweat from his brow before signing a roster that had been put in front of him. He waived it off quickly after signing it and began a quick walk-around of his Raptor; running his hands over the wet surfaces and intakes – checking for things that he may have snagged during his flight. He stopped for a moment as he passed the starboard canard and looked at each of the small red eagles that had been marked there... There were almost too many to count. Each one represented a pilot who would not fly again – and after so many years in the cockpit, he didn’t give a damn.

Lieutenant Tom Reynolds descended the ladder of his own Raptor gingerly, carefully placing a boot on each rung before stepping down on to the deck quietly. Beside him, the Wing Commander was still running over his fighter with sharp eyes, looking for problems or things that he could mention to the fighter maintenance crews. Reynolds didn’t bother... He trusted the technicians to do their jobs, and had been in the business long enough to know that the hangar chief probably had more love for the machine than he did. The Raptor was the newest fighter in UEO service, having been introduced to the fleet just two months prior. The ‘Rapiers’ had been the first squadron to take delivery, and had spent nearly 9 months in an elite training course in preparation for them. It was a tiny machine compared to the big Macronesian Lysander that he faced so often; being a mere 12 meters long from nose to tail with a snub wingspan of just 6 meters. But small didn’t mean compromise – the Raptor was armed and equipped with some of the most advanced and lethal systems in the world, not the least of which were the twin S/GA-14A “Hades” supercavitating gattling guns mounted in the nose. The 25-millimeter rail guns were monstrously overpowered weapons, capable of firing over 4500 rounds of heavy, explosive uranium-capped slugs per minute. And with a top speed of just over 330 knots, it was the fastest subfighter yet introduced in any navy around the globe.

Unfortunately for the UEO, very few squadrons had taken delivery of them, and the only active squadrons which utilized the craft were strictly-DSX based... and that meant they were also the most experienced Squadrons. The majority of the UEO Navy would still be using the older SF-2/C Spectre for many months to come.

“Well that was interesting,” said Reynolds to Hitchcock idly. “I must have flown that scenario two dozen times, sir... But that is the *first* time I have *ever* seen someone pull a stunt like that.”

Commander Hitchcock smiled wryly. “Next time you want to engage an SSN, Lieutenant, make sure your wingman is using an ASQ-66 rather than a ’27. The

conflicting sonar returns will keep them guessing on how many birds you’ve got in your wing.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that mind, sir. Although you have to admit... that flight controller’s response was priceless.”

“We aim to please, Lieutenant...”

Reynolds tucked his gloves in to his helmet just as he saw a familiar figure walking towards him from a nearby catwalk. He grinned broadly and laughed as he jogged over to meet Lieutenant Roberts who was looking quite smug. “Hey! *Deadstick!*” he called in surprise.

“I thought we settled this, Tom,” rebuked Roberts, feigning hurt. “There is no way you’re painting that on the side of my cockpit...”

Reynolds laughed again as he threw his arms around his grounded wing-leader. “You know I love ya’,” he said playfully. “It’s good to see you on your feet. I was afraid they’d never let you out of that bed.”

Roberts pulled back slowly and smiled as Reynolds let her go. “They’ve still got me off the flight rosters, but at least I can stretch my legs now, yeah?...” she looked around the vast hangar around her, taking it all in for the first time in over two weeks. She hadn’t left the ship’s hospital in that time even once. She then planted her gaze squarely on the gleaming Raptor in the corner of the hangar. “...And *that* I love,” she said smiling mischievously. “It’ll probably never be that clean again... assuming I ever get to fly it, that is.”

“Well, well, Jane,” said Hitchcock as he walked over from his fighter slowly. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

She saluted sharply. “Thank you, sir.”

“At ease...” he said with an easy smile. “You’re not on the duty rosters again yet, Lieutenant. Give it a rest. And until you lose that splint on your arm, don’t think you will be, either.”

“I know,” she said reassuringly. “Don’t worry... I won’t be knocking any teeth out of the *Spectre* pilots any time soon.”

“Funny”, said Lieutenant Reynolds, deadpan. “I didn’t think the SF-2s had any teeth to begin with...”

“Ouch. You’d best be thankful Lieutenant Dutch isn’t around. He would have knocked *your* teeth out for that.” Roberts smiled wryly, folding her arms as she looked across the hangar to another Lieutenant who was sitting on the port fin of his SF-2/C *Spectre*. He looked back, frowning in wonder about why she was looking at him so. She winked, and then turned back to Reynolds.

“Speaking of comrades in the *Spectre* squadrons... I’ve got to get to flight ops,” said Hitchcock. “Good to see you on your feet, Jane... I’d like my XO back sooner rather than later, so don’t get yourself in to any trouble, ok?”

“Right, sir. See you later.”

Helmet under-arm, the Wing Commander tossed a casual salute and then headed across the Hangar for the exit, Leaving Roberts alone with Reynolds as the few remaining Raptors of the squadron thundered up the recovery ramps. Several more of the pilots had gathered around the side of the flight deck, and seeing Roberts standing there, quickly made their way over.

“*Wooo!*” said one of the pilots with animated surprise. “Look who’s here!” Wilhelm Shraeder, perhaps better known to pilots of the Atlantis as ‘Rapier 4’, was the perfect stereotype of a German. With grimly-short blonde hair, blue eyes and broad shoulders, he was not exactly the most inconspicuous pilot in the squadron. At 6 foot 4 inches, he stood over a foot taller than a younger British pilot, Ensign

Elizabeth Chambers, who was beside him, and looked as if he would have been more suited to a job with the Marine Corps.

“Back from the dead, hey Lieutenant?” offered Chambers quietly.

Roberts smiled as the pilots gathered around her, a few of them slapping her on the shoulder that wasn’t slung. “Not yet, Liz... Just visiting.”

“Damn. The Boss still hasn’t given your wings back, eh?”

“Not yet. Give me another week and I’ll lose this crutch. So what happened out there?”

A few of the pilots laughed. Reynolds went red as he tried to hide a smirk. Shraeder put a hand on the American’s shoulder. “Well, looks like Tommy here is buying the drinks-”

The German didn’t even get a chance to finish as the hangar’s blaring loudspeaker drowned him out. “...VF-107 *Rapiers*, please report to Flight Operations immediately.”

“...Saved by the bell,” said Roberts with a knowing smile. Whatever had transpired during the *Rapier*’s training sortie, she’d have to find out later. For them now, duty called.

Commander James Banick - the executive officer of the *Atlantis* - stood in the Flight Operations Command Center overlooking the hangar decks far below. The FOC was built on the deck directly above the hangar, and seemed to hang some 30 meters above the flight decks far below; offering controllers full 360 degree views of everything that was happening through the thickened, reinforced plexiglass which surrounded the command station. It was a sophisticated facility, with constant real time communication with the ship’s bridge at the other end of the ship providing them with every bit of tactical and situational information the flight controllers could ever need.

While the *Atlantis*’s bridge infrequently had very few staff during graveyard shifts, operating just with an officer of the watch and a couple of helmsmen while the rest of the senior staff slept, the FOC never rested. The *Atlantis*’s flight bays were operational 24 hours a day, every day the ship was at sea, or even in port. It was the first part of the ship to respond to threats to *Atlantis* and her battlegroup, and entire squadrons could be in the water just seconds after the orders were given.

Banick turned around to see Wing Commander Hitchcock enter the command center, still in his flight suit. The marine who guarded the entrance snapped to attention and saluted as the “CAG” entered the room. ‘Chief of Air Group’ was a title carried over from the days of surface warfare aircraft carriers – a title denoting the officer in command of the pilots of the air wing.

“Quite the display, Commander,” remarked Banick, suitably impressed by the mock battle he’d just witnessed. “You killed three *Defender* class SSNs and left the fourth one running for the shallows. Not bad for a bunch of fighter jockeys.”

Hitchcock smiled. Banick’s modest compliment probably came as a result that he’d lost a wager which said that the ‘*Rapiers*’ wouldn’t even be able to take on a single SSN and survive. The XO held out a hand which had pair of credit chips, and dropped them in Hitchcock’s palm. “I believe the bet was 50 credits.”

“Thank you,” said the fighter Commander briskly. “If I’d had Roberts with me, it would have been a hundred.”

Banick looked at Hitchcock with a sceptical grin. “...Gabe... The day one of your fighter squadrons manages to kill the *Atlantis* is the day I become Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet.”

“...You don’t want to make a bet on that per chance, do you, Jim?”

Banick hesitated. “...I think I’ll cut my losses. With my reputation, how I ever got to be where I am now is a god damned miracle as it is. “Fleet Admiral” doesn’t sound that far fetched.”

Hitchcock chuckled. It was no secret that Commander Banick had a reputation for causing trouble with superiors. Just over two weeks ago he had hit the *Atlantis’s* acting-Captain Arnold Randbrough square in the jaw before relieving him of command for gross dereliction of duty. The poetic irony of that particular event was still spawning jokes amongst the crew, and while neither officer had openly spoken about it – there was clearly some truth to the rumour that Banick and *Atlantis’s* Captain Mark Ainsley had met in what was said to be “heated” circumstances some 5 years previously when Banick had still been a Lieutenant.

The other ‘Rapier’ pilots entered the command center, most of them waving casually at the two Commanders who stood at the observation deck as they filed through towards one of the briefing rooms across the way. Hitchcock nodded to them politely, and once they’d all disappeared in to the briefing room, turned to the *Atlantis* Exec once more. “Well... I’d best get this over with. I’ll speak to you later.”

“Right. I should be getting back to the bridge anyway. See you at 2200.”

“Will do.”

Without further word, Hitchcock left the control deck of the FOC and followed his pilots in to the adjoining flight-prep area being 50 credits richer than he had been 20 seconds before. Banick shook his head as he looked down at the flight deck far below once more; the SF-37s of ‘Rapier’ squadron were being pulled from the recovery area in to holding bays surrounding the moon pools. Engineers were clambering all over the 12 fighters, securing hatches and ports wherever necessary, and cleaning them up. Banick expected that the craft would be fully turned around and ready to go again in just a couple of short hours – the ‘Rapiers’ were *Atlantis’s* first-line squadron, and at least 6 of the pilots were on call 24 hours a day. He did not envy them, and was only too happy to sit on the bridge of the DSX in his duty hours.

“The deck is yours, Lieutenant,” announced Banick to one of the controllers at the FOC’s command station. “I’ll be on the bridge.”

“Yes sir.”

~

...Lieutenant Commander Natalie Canebride, age 28, was the youngest member of *Atlantis’s* senior staff, serving as the ship’s Third Officer and chief helmsman. It took about 2 minutes to walk from her quarters on E-deck to the nearest Mag-Lev intra-ship tram station that took her to the bridge every afternoon. In the month she’d been aboard *Atlantis*, she still didn’t know her way around every section of the vessel. The 250,000-tonne submarine had the equivalent of over 50 miles of corridors spread across 12 decks, some of which were split-level and made absolutely no sense in the manner in which they were named. The bridge, for example, was located on B-deck, but the only way to access it was through D-deck. On a submarine of this size, though, and with so many considerations given to the most structurally-sound internal bulkheads and watertight doors, it was understandable how things could get so confused.

She smiled as she passed a very young Ensign who looked particularly nervous – he probably hadn’t been out of the academy much longer than a week, and she had only started seeing him around the *Atlantis* just recently. In a crew of 1050, there were bound to be those she didn’t know, but the crew was still small enough that new faces were similarly rare.

Sighing as she hit the call button for the Mag-Lev station, she let down the zipper slightly on her uniform jacket; UEO uniform jumpsuits were notoriously stuffy, and most of the ship’s engineering personnel who spent the majority of their time around the *Atlantis*’s massive fusion reactor didn’t wear one at all, opting instead to use simple utility vests over their white turtlenecks. Command officers frequently berated the tech crews for it if they happened to see it, but the engine room was so far away from the bridge that very few actually cared, and Canebride didn’t blame them. After a few seconds, the deck grates hummed beneath her feet as the Mag-Lev arrived - hidden behind the corridor bulkhead – and the doors slid open.

James Banick stood in the carriage, and raised his brow in surprise. She smiled as she stepped in the car and the doors closed behind her. “Hey...” she said shyly, looking up at Banick cautiously.

“Hey, Natalie,” he replied gently. “How was... *urm...* How was your morning?”

“Oh... not bad...” She paused for a moment. “I’m still a little tired.”

Banick repressed a wry smile, clearing his throat as the Mag-Lev hummed to life and began accelerating down the length of the ship once more. “Sorry...”

“Oh no, don’t be. I had fun last night.”

“And so did I...”

The air inside the Mag-Lev was extremely tense for the next few seconds. Not a sound was heard above the hum of the car and the occasional ‘whoosh’ of a passing mag-rail. Banick then realised that she was holding his hand gently, and she broke the silence, much to his gratitude. “You know, people are starting to talk...”

Banick drew a line in the sand and turned to face her fully, looking straight in to her blue eyes, and taking her other hand in his. “I didn’t know we were trying to hide it. Is everything OK?”

“Of course,” she said, putting her forehead against his. “...Unless you can think of something.”

Banick gave her a lopsided and nonchalant smile as he moved closer to her slowly; putting his hand around her waist. “I can think of one or two things...”

They went no further as light poured in to the Mag-Lev and the doors hissed open to reveal the main corridor outside the *Atlantis*’s bridge, and a marine who stood at attention on the other side of the hall whose eyes momentarily lit up in surprise. The soldier returned to his hard, blank stare across the hall just a fraction of a second later, his expression betraying nothing out of the ordinary. Reality hit home, and both Canebride and Banick beat a hasty retreat and smiled inwardly as they stepped out of the Mag-Lev and turned to head towards the huge clam-shell doors at the bridge’s aft end.

The massive interlocking titanium-carbon composite doors were about 2 feet thick at their center, and spanned a bulkhead that was about 15 feet wide. The blast doors were rated to withstand pressures in excess of 30,000 pounds per square inch, and were designed specifically so that the bridge would remain intact even in the most catastrophic of hull breaches. The bridge they defended was as equally impressive... Stepping through the doors, Commanders Banick and Canebride were met by a vast room that spanned some 50 meters in length over three decks, each bulkhead along

the walls flowed in to the next, seamlessly joining each control deck in an almost organic architecture that flowed back over the command deck, and straight to the two sets of clam-doors on either side of the bridge’s rear.

“XO on deck!” announced one of the bridge officers, a Lieutenant Commander named Ryan Callaghan – Banick’s second in command until the Captain returned to take charge.

Those who were able saluted sharply to Banick as he ascended a small staircase to the command deck and took his seat in the Captain’s chair – a privilege he kept reminding himself not to get used to. “As you were. Lieutenant Commander Callaghan, I have the Conn. SITREP?”

“Aye, Commander... You have the Conn. The fleet is still on planned patrol, sir. Nothing out of the ordinary to report. We passed Schjetman Reef about 15 minutes ago. Engineering reports they’ve repaired that port intake, so, we can get back up to speed as soon as you give the order.”

“Very well. Commander Canebride? Increase speed to one-two-zero knots. Steady on course...” - Banick checked his status monitor on the side of the command chair – “...two-eight-six.”

“Aye, sir. Ahead two-thirds, steady on course two-eight-six. Relaying orders to the fleet.”

“Good. Chief of the watch? Make the log show we increased speed to one hundred and twenty knots at sixteen-twenty hours.”

“Yes sir.”

With that out of the way, Banick sighed deeply and kicked his feet up in the comfortable, body-shape moulded command chair. *Atlantis* had been built with a black budget – the ship’s construction cost of thirty six and a half *billion* US Dollars was only a tiny fraction of the full bill, and with nine years of advanced research and development behind it, no one really knew how much the project had cost the UEO.

Looking at the chair, with its carefully-stitched leather cushions, wood-grain and leather arm rest, fully integrated command console with holographic display screen and even a complete set of controls for the chair’s foot rest, reclining back, headrest and lumbar, Banick considered with a good degree of absurdity just how much of that so-called “black budget” went in to simple luxuries as opposed to practical systems.

On more than one occasion, Banick had caught Captain Ainsley asleep in the chair on late shifts, and he could easily understand why; the chair was longer than it was tall, and when fully reclined, the person sitting in it was almost lying horizontal. It felt like a couch that had been designed for space travel or a fighter pilot – not for the Conn of a Deep Submergence Vehicle.

The shimmering light from the moonpool behind the command deck left hypnotic, soothing patterns across the dark and smooth metal surface of the chair, making Banick turn to look at the pool briefly, and the great wreath-framed three-pronged trident avatar bearing the name “*ATLANTIS ~ 8100*” emblazoned across the gun-metal bulkhead behind the pool, reflecting the shimmering waters like some kind of sculpture. It was a design feature common to UEO DSVs – the first elaborate instance of the design being found on the ill-fated *seaQuest* with its famed hammerhead shark crest. It had become tradition, and while perhaps superfluous in many ways, it was still a fine tradition that instilled pride and inspiration in a crew that lived very dangerous lives many thousands of feet from the safety of daylight on the surface far above.

“...Jim?”

The question startled Banick, who swivelled around in the chair to find Ryan Callaghan standing just a few feet away. “Sorry, Ryan... Got a little distracted there for a second. I’ve had a fair bit on my mind lately.”

Callaghan – *Atlantis’s* tactical officer – smiled knowingly; turning and looking down to the helm on the deck below... and Natalie Canebride. “Yeah. I’ll bet you have. How are things going with you two anyway?”

Banick smiled at his friend. The bridge was busy enough that casual conversation could easily be had without it becoming the center of attention, so he was happy to indulge Callaghan with an answer. His earlier question to Canebride about personal secrets had been only half-serious; it was true that both officers were doing their best to keep their relationship low-key. For two senior staff to be so involved with each other was not ‘wrong’ in any way on a personal level, but professionally, it made the crew ask questions – questions that were largely unwelcome.

“I’d say things are moving along,” confessed Banick. “I saw her again last night...”

“Spare me the details,” smiled Callaghan wryly. “I know your reputation, Jim... Just don’t make it too public.”

The Commander rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. Natalie tells me that ‘people are starting to talk’... I’m wondering what about.”

“Well I could tell you the rumours, Jim, but I’m sure you could work out the sordid details yourself.”

Banick grimaced. “Yeah. Alright I get the picture... but anyway... What can I do for you?”

Callaghan narrowed his eyes, looking around to make sure no one was paying too much attention before continuing. “...There is something else I didn’t mention from my report. The SOC received an encoded transmission from CINCPAC about two hours ago... it was an eyes-only message with a level 7 security clearance requirement.”

“...Well that’s a little unusual isn’t it? Captain Ainsley, us and Wing Commander Hitchcock are the only ones on this ship to have that kind of clearance rating.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t bring it up in my report.”

“So what was in it?” asked Banick, curiously frowning over the news.

“We’re apparently being ordered to the Macronesian border. On top of that, we’re to expect company some time over the next 2 hours – Naval Intel is sending someone out here.”

Banick blinked a few times in disbelief. “Two *hours*?! And what do you mean ‘sending someone out here’?”

“We’ve been instructed to take someone from Intelligence aboard as soon as we get to the border. We have no idea who they are or what their mission is... That information wasn’t in the orders. I ran this through Vice Admiral Richter personally, and he’s confirmed it’s authentic.”

“Well that can’t be good. Captain Ainsley won’t be back for another six hours. What are we going to do with this ‘guest’ of ours in the meantime?”

“I was sort of hoping you could tell me, sir...”

~

II HIGHER POWERS

Macronesian Presidential Residence. Melbourne, Australia: Greater Macronesia. December 4th, 2040.

“...I suppose the point is if the UEO is going to insist on these heavy-handed approaches to resolving crises around the world, then it is effectively in violation of its own international laws. I’m not saying that Nathan Bridger is not a good man, but the organization which he serves has *a lot* to answer for... and no one to answer to!” declared President Alexander Bourne passionately from his place at the long state dining hall table. Seated around him were numerous ambassadors and dignitaries from all across the Macronesian Alliance – the state Governors of Australia, the ambassadors from New Zealand, Indonesia, the East Asian Confederation and about half a dozen other sea-states in the Alliance which had no terrestrial borders what so ever. Bourne was infamous for his ability to ‘entertain’ dignitaries in the Alliance. Even when his Alliance was embroiled in war, he still found himself sitting at such functions listening to a string quartet while sipping on a glass of red wine from New South Wales’s Hunter Valley. The world had many words to describe Bourne; from tyrant to visionary, or revolutionary to patriot. They were not words he put to people’s mouths, but if nothing else... Bourne was an idealist.

“In any case...” the President continued, “This war, while tragic – mark my words – will set the course of history for the next hundred years. Fortunes willing, it will bring in a time of freedom for so many people across the world... And as Winston Churchill once said, I intend for history to look upon us favourably...”

...General Henry Adamson was not the sort of man who would blindly worship President Bourne. But like so many others in the Alliance, Adamson had duties which he had to fulfil, and dealing with the President was increasingly demonstrating that patience was a very useful, if scarce virtue.

Adamson walked down the main hall of the state house’s western wing with a purposeful stride. Beside him, his aide – Commander Thomas Blake – shared a similar, determined demeanour. Both men wore full dress uniform, having been called away from Bourne’s formal reception for the Chaodai ambassador to deal with a matter which had only been called “urgent” by the messenger who had been sent for them. Adamson was the Commander in Chief of the entire combined Alliance military, having replaced Admiral Armand Stassi several months previously after his retirement. Stassi had not been particularly old, and the circumstances of his resignation were still suspicious, but Adamson knew from his conversations with Stassi prior to his departure that he had been growing increasingly bothered by Bourne’s foreign policies and military strategies. Indeed, Stassi’s position had become largely ceremonial as Bourne had progressively taken more and more control of the armed forces.

“The President won’t like this,” remarked Blake quietly.

“Probably not. But then there isn’t much we can tell him lately that he *would* like,” countered Adamson of the grim news he held.

“How long ago did the UEO send this order?”

“Only a few hours ago. The SIS has been watching UEO intelligence very carefully lately ever since they started investigating our capture of *seaQuest Atlantis* has had a red flag over it ever since that battle in the Phoenix Islands.”

“That much I knew.”

Reaching the great marble foyer at the end of the hall, Adamson and Blake entered the bustling dining hall through a set of double doors, passing a pair of guarding marines who snapped to attention respectfully. The hall was classically styled in traditional ‘Federation’ décor - so common to British colonies of the early 1900s – and Bourne sat at a large oaken table near a window overlooking the Victorian hills beyond. Exchanging a concerned look with Commander Blake, Adamson quietly approached the table from behind...

“...I trust that all here will agree with me, Ambassador, when I say that the Chaodai Confederation’s *generosity* to the Alliance in this most difficult of times owes much to your superb standing as a statesmen here in Macronesia.”

Politely, the other Macronesian dignitaries at Bourne’s table applauded lightly, a few of the raising their glasses, appreciative of the sentiment. The charismatic President raised his own glass towards the slight man of Chinese descent and smiled before spying General Adamson out the corner of his eye.

“Ah, Henry. So good of you to rejoin us,” said Bourne pleasantly. “I trust these matters of “urgency” have been dealt with?”

Adamson didn’t dress it up, merely shaking his head. “I’m afraid not, sir. I’m sorry to say this is something of a matter of state that requires your rather... *immediate* attention.”

Bourne pulled his lips in to a tight, thin line. He was unimpressed. “General, you have this amazing habit of interrupting me at the most inopportune of times. What is this in regards to?”

“*Atlantis* has been given new orders, sir... She’s coming here.”

“I see...”

Bourne looked at his concerned guests and smiled. “I do apologise... I will return momentarily. Please, if there is anything you require, do not hesitate to ask one of my aides.”

Bourne smiled again as he got up from his chair, leaving the table and walking off in the direction of a small private study on the far side of the room. Blake and Adamson followed closely in his wake, with the younger Commander closing the door behind the as they entered the study.

Bourne looked at Adamson with annoyance. His displeasure at being distracted in the middle of a very high level state reception was masked only by his concern over what little he knew about the *Atlantis*, and its current disposition. “Mister President, first of all I apologise for the intrusion. I assure you I would not have brought it up if it were not that serious.”

“I know, General,” said Bourne quietly. “It’s why you are standing there. Now what do you mean *Atlantis* is on her way *here*?”

“Several hours ago, UEO Command issued orders for *Atlantis* and her battlegroup to head to the border north of the Marshall Islands. There was a good deal of communication between UEO Naval Intelligence and Pearl Harbour before the orders were issued... specifically, between the offices of Admiral Jason Hargreaves, and Fleet Admiral Jack Riley.”

“...Hargreaves...” said Bourne quietly to himself. “Isn’t he the one who was heading up the UEO’s investigation in to *seaQuest*’s ‘incident’?”

“Yes sir. He is.”

“General... What makes you so sure that a change of orders for *Atlantis* and this communication are linked?”

Adamson remained reserved, despite Bourne’s growing impatience. “Shortly after the orders were issued, UEO Intelligence put in to affect a complete communications blackout in Hargreaves’s department. We lost all long range sensor contact with *Atlantis* and her battlegroup approximately two hours later. Her last known course was heading south west on a direct heading for the Marshalls border. With her speed at the time, she would have reached the border within 2 hours.”

Bourne now appeared alarmed. “General... if that ship manages to cross the border undetected, I don’t need to remind you just how much damage it could cause. Do we have any idea of what her objectives are?”

“Unknown. I think it would be safe to assume it has something to do with Hargreaves’s investigation in to *seaQuest*. But for the sake of security... we should probably operate under the assumption that *Atlantis*’s mission is a tactical one, and do what we can to find her, and at the very least, deter her from attacking.”

“...Agreed,” said Bourne quickly. “General I want you to *personally* see this matter is dealt with. Every day that DSV is sitting in our waters, it poses an increasingly severe risk to our operations. See to it that this doesn’t become an issue.”

“Yes sir,” replied Adamson. “I’ll have the *Alexander* and her battlegroup redeployed from the Marshalls to deal with this immediately.”

“Good,” said Bourne, heading for the door. “Get this matter resolved quickly, Henry.”

Bourne left the study without saying another word, leaving Adamson and Blake to stare blankly after him. The General looked at his younger aid with concern. “Alright... It seems he’s left the matter to us. Where is the *Alexander* now, Tom?”

“About 50 miles west of Tuvalu, sir.”

Adamson nodded, motioning for Blake to follow him as he left through a side door that led straight back out to the main corridor outside the reception hall. “So... She’s about a day out of the Phoenix Islands. Good. If *Atlantis* is going to be looking for *seaQuest*, then that will almost certainly be where Captain Ainsley begins his search.”

“Should I relay the orders, sir?” asked Blake, continuing to follow Adamson down the hallway.

“Yes. And advise all the units we currently have around Phoenix to stay on alert. Under no circumstances are they to engage *Atlantis* alone. If they make contact with her, make sure they understand to relay the position to the *Alexander* and await further orders.”

“Of course.”

Passing the guards in the hallway again, Commander Blake stopped and frowned. “Sir...” he said inquisitively, looking after Adamson.

“Yes?”

“...Aren’t the UEO ‘Rapiers’ assigned to *Atlantis* under Wing Commander Hitchcock?”

Adamson nodded carefully, remembering the much-publicized UEO “Elite” squadron of Raptors subfighters. If they were famed within the UEO Navy, then they were infamous in the Alliance, having been responsible for the wholesale destruction of no less than a dozen Lysander squadrons over the past month. Standing orders for

Carrier commanders in the Alliance were to take every possible measure to ‘neutralize’ the troublesome squadron should the opportunity arise. “Yes... they are.”

“...And Captain Bishop’s ‘Black Ravens’... Aren’t they currently assigned to the *Alexander*?”

Adamson narrowed his eyes. Commander Blake’s implications were serious, not just tactically, but *personally*. The General opened the door to the study again, re-entering the room and ushering the Commander inside, regarding him sternly. “What is your point, Commander?” he asked cautiously, closing the door.

“Sir... Please understand I mean no disrespect... But I know you had a history with Commander Hitchcock prior to the Great Dissolution, when you still flew subfighters for the UEO.”

“...And?”

“...If the ‘Black Ravens’ engage the ‘Rapiers’, sir... then a lot of pilots will die – and *not* just ours.”

Adamson had a mind to reprimand Blake for what he seemed to be implying. The ‘Black Ravens’ were easily the best squadron in the entire Macronesian Fleet – Captain William Bishop had been decorated more than any other pilot, and the squadron’s reputation was fearsome. Pitting aces against aces was risky, and stakes would be high. The brutal history of the second cold war had shown that the success of campaigns often hinged on the experience of the soldiers involved. The wanton slaughter of elite pilots could prove costly in the long run, but the General knew that this was *not* what Blake was implying.

“My history in the UEO is no different from anyone else in the Alliance, Commander. And my “history” with the Wing Commander was professional, regardless of whatever misgivings we may have had for each other. If you are implying that I would risk-“

“No, sir... of course not,” said Blake apologetically. “...But just the same, I assume you’d like to brief Captain Bishop on this?”

“Yes...” said Adamson curtly. “Is he still in Melbourne?”

“I’m afraid not sir.”

“Damn...” General Adamson sighed, rubbing his exhausted face. “Very well. I’ll make a note to have Admiral Sark brief him personally and advise him of the situation.” It had been a long day, and Bourne’s reception was growing tiresome. The bureaucracy of the event had left him drained; he was a soldier, not a politician. “I’ve had all I can stand for one day, Commander. Pass on my apologies to the President, but I’m going to call it a day.”

“What would you have me tell the President, sir?”

Adamson smiled inwardly. “Be creative.”

~

UEO Atlantis DSX 8100 Battlegroup. 200 Nautical Miles North-East of the Marshall Islands. December 5th, 2040...

It was 6 O’clock in the morning by the time Captain Mark Ainsley disembarked the speeder that had taken him from the port of San Angeles to the *Atlantis*. Stepping off the small, high-speed transport sub, he found himself met with half a dozen senior officers of *Atlantis*’s crew. They all looked shockingly tired, Commander James Banick included. They had all probably been roused from bed not long previously in order to make ‘Stand To’, But the ship’s XO still seemed genuinely

pleased to see the Captain again as he smiled and offered a sharp salute as Ainsley stepped on to the deck.

“Captain on deck,” Banick said, prompting the other officers behind him to come to attention.

Ainsley smiled, looking around the flight deck of the DSV and all the activity there. He returned Banick’s salute as he approached. “Permission to come aboard, Commander?” he said formally.

“Permission granted, sir.”

Banick dropped the salute, but did not come to ease. “I am ready to be relieved.”

“I relieve you, sir,” replied Ainsley in turn.

“I stand relieved. The log will show that command was transferred to Captain Mark Ainsley at oh-six-hundred-and-three hours ship-time.”

“Company is dismissed,” said Ainsley finally to the assembled officers. Extending a hand to Banick, he smiled pleasantly. “Good to be home, Commander.”

“Yes sir. How was Washington?”

The Captain grimaced slightly. “As good as could be expected, I suppose... Not much to expect from a memorial service. I take it things have been holding together around here?”

Banick smiled wryly. “*As well as could be expected*, sir. It’s been an interesting few days.”

“I’ll look forward to reading your report, Jim,” said Ainsley with a wicked smile.

The XO grunted, displeased with the idea of writing out formal documents. It seemed that every time someone blew their nose, they needed to write a 4-page requisition report detailing the loss of tissue paper thereafter. He envied *Atlantis*’s chief engineer – Chief Petty Officer Edward Stevens – who, despite his area of responsibility, hardly ever had to deal with the bureaucracy of command.

Ainsley and Banick approached the gathering of senior officers, who had not yet left the flight deck. Banick knew them all, of course – as did the Captain; Lieutenant Commanders Madeline Hayes, Natalie Canebride and Ryan Callaghan, along with Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock and Marine Major Devlin Cortez.

“Good to see you, sir,” said Callaghan politely.

“Lieutenant Commander,” acknowledged Ainsley quickly. “How did those repairs fair? Are we back to full-operational status?”

“Yes sir. Chief Stevens finished the last of his repairs yesterday. Systems calibration is coming along well... Madeli... *I mean*, Commander *Hayes* has been aligning the tactical sensors.”

Ainsley narrowed his eyes for a moment over Callaghan’s slip. He saw Hayes’s eyes look away quickly, but he brushed it aside in an effort to avoid a topic he probably didn’t need to know about. “Right then... Well if there is nothing else... I’ve not slept in about 24 hours, so I think I may try and get some rest before things start to get ‘interesting’ around here.”

Banick exchanged a concerned look with the other officers around him, nodding at them curtly. As if some kind of unseen message had passed between them, they filed out of the room, leaving Banick alone with his Captain.

Ainsley immediately knew something was awry, and regarded his XO carefully. “...James... Is there something I’ve not been told?”

“Yes sir,” replied Banick cautiously, his voice no louder than a whisper. “We’ve received new orders from CINCPAC.”

The Captain frowned, finding it odd that he had received no news on a change of orders for *Atlantis* or her battlegroup since leaving Washington D.C. Why his executive officer had found out before him, he had no idea. “Orders? Commander... what is this about?”

“We should probably discuss this somewhere quiet, sir...”

~

Commander Jacob Voss sat quietly in his comfortable guest quarters aboard the UEO flagship working his way through several intelligence reports at inhuman speed. Each of the 20-page documents he scanned over in just a few minutes each, analysing every detail; dotting every ‘I’ and crossing every ‘T’ without missing the smallest detail. A lot of the information he was sorting his way through pertained directly to the *Atlantis* herself – capability reports, design schematics and reports on the ship’s abilities that were classified at some of the highest levels of secrecy. He’d been given the documents and the appropriate clearance to read them from the Office of Naval Intelligence headquarters in San Diego, where *they* had got the information he didn’t particularly want to know. There were many different names for people in his position – some of the more commonly stereotyped including “spy”, “secret agent” or simply, “spook.” None of the terms were accurate, and the descriptions of each term were probably even less accurate. Voss was an Intelligence Officer, and most of his work for the UEO’s Office of Naval Intelligence consisted of hours upon hours of doing exactly what he was now – reading information and analysing it. His boss’s name was Jason Hargreaves, not “M”, and his Doctor’s name was McKinney, not “Q”.

Voss picked up a cup of coffee that had been sitting beside him and sipped it quietly. The spacious guest quarters aboard *Atlantis* lacked very little, and even provided him with a large window overlooking the submarine’s massive starboard quarter deck in the darkness of the ocean beyond. The window was made of about 9 inches of reinforced plexiglass that was crystal-clear, and almost appeared as if there was nothing between him and the water at all. Absolutely no hint could be found of the huge titanium carbide blast door that was concealed below the window that would clamp shut prior to battle. Failing that, it concerned him somewhat that the door to the quarters was easily as heavy in construction to the mammoth clam-doors that protected the ship’s bridge. He guessed that the quarters themselves were designed to act as a second pressure hull in the event of a breach.

A knock at the door made him put his reports down, and get up from the lounge chair. He knew who it would be before he even opened the door.

Atlantis’s Captain, an Englishman he knew very well by reputation named Mark Ainsley looked noticeably apprehensive. No doubt Commander Banick had told him of his ship’s change in orders, and it was even more obvious that the reason for Ainsley’s concern was Voss’s presence aboard the submarine.

“Good morning, Captain Ainsley,” said Voss, opening the door entirely and saluting respectfully, allowing the Captain to enter.

“Good morning, Commander...?”

“Voss, sir,” said the Intelligence officer quickly; dropping his salute after Ainsley had returned it. “Commander Jacob Voss, Naval Intelligence.”

“At ease, Commander. I hope I didn’t wake you...?”

It was 6:30.

“No sir, I don’t sleep much... I’ve been awake for quite some time, now.”

“Well... very good,” said the Captain curtly. “Commander... I’m sure you know why I’m here, so I’ll skip the pleasantries and get straight to the point. Perhaps you can explain to me why my ship is being deployed to the Macronesian border so soon after her last bout with the Alliance? We’ve not even finished shakedown, and already UEO command has this ship doing more errands than the entire First Fleet combined.”

“I apologise for that, sir. I know these orders must come as a shock. Admiral Hargreaves has instructed me to answer whatever questions you may have.”

Ainsley worked his jaw in dissatisfaction. “Commander Voss... that list of questions is somewhat *extensive*, to say the least. Perhaps you could simply start from the top?”

“Well, to be perfectly blunt sir, *Atlantis* is largely the reason I am here... Or at least because of what your Commander Banick did last month.”

“...*seaQuest*,” said Ainsley slowly.

“Yes sir,” confirmed Voss. “Since *Atlantis* was forced to destroy her, Intelligence has been investigating how the Alliance was able to capture the vessel in the first place. Boarding her may have been possible, but it also would have been a very slow process, and *seaQuest* *should* have had time to transmit a distress call before they took control of the bridge.”

“But that didn’t happen,” said Ainsley almost needlessly.

“Yes sir. The *only* rational conclusion we’ve been able to reach is that *seaQuest*’s loss may well have been the result of an...” Voss hesitated. “...*Information warfare*... attack.”

Ainsley said nothing, and just stared at the Intelligence Commander blankly.

“...*seaQuest*’s ‘deadman’ codes, sir,” clarified Voss.

Ainsley worked his jaw, but still said nothing. He didn’t seem surprised to hear this. Voss kept on explaining. “Captain... I don’t need to tell you how much of a problem it will be if Macronesia has managed to compromise something as tightly guarded as the command and control protocols for a DSV. They are more highly classified than this submarine’s nuclear launch codes.”

“Thank you, Commander...” said Ainsley dismissively. “I am – as you say - fully aware of what this means for the security of the UEO if it is true. But the question remains... What does this have to do with my boat?”

“*Atlantis* is the only ship in the fleet with the capacity to breach enemy lines and operate behind them for extended periods of time, sir. We *need* *seaQuest*’s computer memory banks so we can find out just what the Macronesians know.”

Ainsley nodded as he slowly began to understand what was being asked of him. “...And *seaQuest* is on the bottom of a trench about 400 miles behind the front line.”

“Yes sir.”

Ainsley’s grave face was set in stone as he walked up to the room’s window and looked out over his ship’s upper decks beyond. He flexed his hand a few times silently, but Voss did not interrupt his train of thought. After a moment, the Captain exhaled slowly. “...Commander, you realise that there will be so many Macronesian forces between us and *seaQuest* that we may not even be able to cross the border without being noticed, let alone run 400 miles past their front line fortifications to begin a salvage operation... right?”

“I am aware of that sir, yes. So is Admiral Hargreaves. It’s why we came to you.”

The Captain smiled inwardly. “Very well. *Atlantis* is at your disposal, Commander. My orders are to afford you every resource you require, along every courtesy – and I fully intend to. But just so we are clear; this is still *my* boat, and any command decision regarding her operations will be *solely* mine to make. I will get you to the *seaQuest*, but do not think for a minute that I will put this mission ahead of the safety of this ship, or her crew.”

“I’d expect absolutely nothing less, Captain,” agreed Voss without hesitation.

“Excellent. Then I don’t think we’ll have any problems. Oh, and by the way... Don’t feel that you are restricted to quarters. The mess is open 24 hours a day. You *can* use it, along with any other facility on board.”

“Thank you sir... I just... generally prefer to keep to myself.”

Ainsley raised an eyebrow as he headed back to the door. “...Suit yourself, Commander. If there is anything you need, you can find me on the bridge. Failing that, Commander Banick will see to it.”

“Yes sir... Oh, and Captain? There is one last thing...”

The Captain stopped, and turned on a heel. “Yes?”

“While I was instructed to give you full disclosure of anything you needed to know... This *is* a classified operation, and I must ask that you not discuss this mission with any other member of your crew.”

“Very well. But I don’t like secrets, Commander... So you would do well not to let red tape get in my way.”

“I’ll do my best.”

~

Ryan Callaghan walked up behind Madeline Hayes on the bridge quietly - perhaps too quietly, because when he put a hand on her shoulder, she nearly jumped out of her seat restraints in surprise. She put a hand to her chest as she swivelled around in the chair behind the ops console to face Callaghan, removing her audio headset. “Jesus, Ryan... What are you? A spy?”

He smiled apologetically. “Sorry... I didn’t think I was being *that* quiet.”

“Yeah well... we all only got about 5 hours sleep last night thanks to the Captain. So I’m a little jumpy, and I still haven’t had coffee.”

He smiled again, raising a steaming mug above the chair so she could see it, and held it out. Hayes grinned happily as she looked at him, surprised by the offer, and accepted the offered drink. “Oh... Thanks. You shouldn’t have gone to the trouble-”

“Oh, I didn’t,” he corrected her with a mischievous smile. “Lieutenant Phillips just got back from the mess. I’ll tell him you said thanks, though.”

“You’re a bastard, Callaghan. You know that?” she said, laughing quietly before sipping the dark liquid. “And to think I was about to call you a “*gentleman*”.”

“Me? Gentleman?” said Callaghan incredulously. “Now there’s a laugh.”

Atlantis’s tactical officer turned around, shaking his head, and headed back across the control deck. He only took 3 or 4 paces before Hayes called after him. “Hey... Ryan... Come here”

He smiled wryly before turning, and heading back to the Ops station. Hayes shook her head. “So what do you think?” she asked.

“About what?”

“This ‘mission’ we’re rumoured to be going on.”

“Do you want my official answer? Or my unofficial answer?”

She smiled. “Let’s go with the official one.”

“Well, I’d say it’s a fine allocation of military resources to a crucially important mission to retrieve valuable technology that cannot be allowed to fall in to enemy hands, and therefore-“

“On second thought, give me *your* opinion on it.”

“-*Bullshit*,” corrected Callaghan non-discreetly. “Complete and utter. I have absolutely no desire to get any closer to Macronesia than I am right now, unless we’re going to be accompanied by the rest of the Third Fleet, and even then, it needs to be with the intention of turning the Alliance in to a breeding ground for 3-eyed, radioactive super-trout.”

“...And I’m absolutely certain that Admiral Jackson would be thrilled to hear you say that,” interjected a familiar voice from the back of the bridge. It was Captain Ainsley, with Commander Banick trailing not far behind.

“*Crap...*” whispered Callaghan, noticing that Hayes’s face was covered in a delightful smirk. “-Captain on deck!” he reported quickly, straightening as his CO walked on to the command deck above him.

“As you were...” said Ainsley. “...Actually, on second thought, you’d better relay that order. I’m not sure I want to see you “as you were” 30 seconds ago. Just give me an update, Commander.”

Callaghan unsuccessfully tried to hide a lopsided smile. “...Nothing out of the ordinary, sir. We’re still holding course for the border. Sonar has picked up large amounts of civilian traffic near Schjetman Colony, but they’ve been steering clear of us, sir. We had a local civvie patrol craft take a brief interest in us, but they didn’t hang around.”

“Good. We don’t need the attention right now... I have the Conn.”

“Aye sir, you have the Conn.”

“Commander Canebride... bring us about to heading one-three-zero. Mister Phillips? Relay nav-data to the fleet, make sure they acknowledge change of heading and orders.”

“Urrm... yes sir,” replied Canebride warily. “Coming about to one-three-zero. Helm is answering left-full rudder on all planes.”

“Fleet’s responding, Captain,” said Phillips casually. “They’re holding formation... but a few Captains are wondering what’s going on.”

“They’ll find out when they need to, Lieutenant. That’s all for now.”

“Aye sir.”

Banick took a few steps closer to Ainsley and whispered under his breath. “Sir... I know our orders, but how do you think the crew, let alone the fleet, is going to take this? We’re just expected to waltz on behind enemy lines without so much as a sneeze from them wondering what we’re doing?”

“Unfortunately, Commander... That’s the reality of the situation right now. I’ll speak to the crew shortly and give them some inclination of what’s happening, I don’t like this either, but I’ll offer more of an explanation once we cross the border, and after we know we’re not raising any alarms with Macronesian Command.”

Banick looked sceptical. “...You think that’s likely sir? Having a DSX cross the border with a small armada of SSNs unnoticed?”

“Stranger things have happened, Jim,” said Ainsley with a mysterious smile, taking his seat at the center of the command deck. Sitting down in the chair, he smiled and allowed himself a short moment to appreciate it. Being out of the chair for days had made him realise how much he missed it.

~

Lieutenant Jane Roberts was growing increasingly frustrated with the cast that bound her arm. The doctors said that the subdermal biogenic grafts had done their work, and that the severe fracture had all but healed. They had said to her the day before that the only reason the cast was remaining on now was because they wanted to be sure the bones had fully set, and that the grafts could do all the work they could in making sure they hardened and strengthened themselves. The tiny, non-invasive implants wouldn't be removed with the cast, and they had told her that they'd simply deteriorate over the course of the next few weeks, leaving nothing behind. *Atlantis's* medical facilities were cutting edge, and one would be hard pressed to find a hospital better equipped anywhere else in the world. The medical staff had the capability of dealing with anything from minor scratches through to massive head trauma that required the most invasive of neurosurgery.

She liked the Navy doctors who worked there. They were generally very helpful, and would happily treat any ailment, however minor. But “kindness” had its limits, and if the doctors, nurses and interns had one flaw, it was paranoia – they were by far the most *over protective* medical staff she'd ever had to deal with, insisting on running every possible test no matter how superfluous or pointless it may have been.

Roberts sat in the pilot's mess on F-Deck. Like most of the other facilities that were centred around *Atlantis's* Flight Operations Control centre just down the hall, it overlooked the busy hangar decks far below through a wide wall of thickly reinforced plexiglass windows. She could see the command center across the vast hangar protruding from the ceiling. She thought she'd seen Wing Commander Hitchcock standing there just moments before, but had looked up to find he'd disappeared.

Sitting on the table before her, a steaming bowl of Miso soup sat covered by a small, decorative lid. A plate of various, small servings of fish, tofu and rice sat beside the soup. It was a very traditional Japanese breakfast – one she enjoyed almost every morning. Most of the other Rapier pilots didn't quite understand her eating habits, the only exception being Tom Reynolds, who came across as something of a big brother, *despite* his American manners... Several weeks previously, Reynolds had taken her out to a Japanese Tepanyaki restaurant in Honolulu. It was a kind gesture, and she had been thankful for the sentiment... even if the food there was not quite what she expected, and had quite clearly been “adjusted” to suit a more local palette...

“*Itadakimasu,*” she said gratefully before picking up the bowl and removing the lid to sip the contents within. The chef was very kind to her, having learnt of her choice of traditional meals in an otherwise very-western menu offered by *Atlantis's* Galley. He showed much initiative for the diverse crew of the submarine, skilfully taking the time to learn how to cook different types of meals from across the nations of the UEO. As a result, *Atlantis* probably had the most extensive mess hall menu of any ship in the third fleet.

Drinking the soup quietly, she noticed a shadow fall over the table in front of her. Putting the bowl down, she looked up at Tom Reynolds who carried a tray of a far more ‘standard’ breakfast of eggs and pancakes. “Morning,” he said with a smile. “Mind if I sit down?”

Roberts smiled back, nodding to the chair opposite her on the table. “Sure, have a seat...”

He sat down with the tray, giving no second thought to the Miso soup in front of his friend. “So,” he said simply. “What's new?”

“Same as always,” replied Roberts carelessly. “Reading action reports...training schedules...” she paused, before eyeing him carefully and adding to her list with scathing emphasis; “...*clearing two-flight’s training debriefs...*”

“Oh,” said Reynolds, realising he may have asked the wrong question. Roberts was technically his superior officer, being the commander of Rapiet squadron’s second fighter wing of three. He was her wingman.

“Yeah. ‘Oh’,” she repeated. “Tom... Commander Hitchcock berated me pretty seriously after that Mac put a torpedo to my tail. But if you keep bringing back your Raptor from *training* missions with perforated cowlings and intakes, you’ll be scratched from the flight roster faster than you can imagine.”

Reynolds looked annoyed. The SF-37 Raptor was one of the most powerful subfighters ever built by the UEO, or any other Navy in the world. Its top speed of 330 knots was unheard of in submarine design, but came as a double edged sword. The Raptor was a third-generation design, built largely on theories of supercavitational hydrodynamics – a theory that had practical limitations. The Raptor was able to get to such speeds by bringing itself to the very edge of that particular physics barrier without actually crossing in to a full state of super cavitation – and its twin Rolls Royce engines were governed to ensure it wouldn’t happen, lest the fighter tear itself to pieces in seconds from such excessive cavitation. Reynolds had seemingly made a habit of somehow pushing the envelope just a few knots too far.

“Jane... I’m not happy about it either,” he countered apologetically. “It’s the fighter – the Raptor is overpowered. There is something... *wrong* about it as soon as I get to 300. Any faster, and it starts shaking like a rattle!”

Roberts regarded him coldly, being wholly unimpressed. “Tom, the last 5 sorties you’ve left on, on *three* of those times, your fighter came back with *serious* damage which the Chief tells me looks like the result of over-cavitation. The engines were governed for a reason, it’s a powerful fighter, but *you* are supposed to fly *it*. Not the other way around.”

“...Says the one who nearly wiped out a Lysander at 340,” he retorted.

Roberts shook her head, suddenly being drawn to her cast-ridden arm once more.

“Tom, we’ve made mistakes before, I won’t deny that, but this is becoming a habit with you. The ground crews have looked at your engines, and there is *nothing* wrong with them. Stop pushing it so hard or you’ll be flying the Spectre again before you know it.”

“So you keep reminding me... Ok, so I admit it’s my fault, but the Wing Commander is pushing us *hard* lately. I don’t think he ever put us through this kind of training when we were still at Cortez doing the Raptor course...”

“From what I’ve read, no, he hasn’t...” Roberts finished the soup she’d been nursing along with the last of the tofu and rice. “I just don’t understand what the Commander is thinking lately, he’s told us as little about this mission as Captain Ainsley has. Changing course for the Macronesian border? Bringing aboard “specialists” from Navy Special Forces... I don’t like it.”

Reynolds finished working his way through his own breakfast, and set his cutlery aside on the tray. “All done?”

Roberts allowed a small smile, setting her empty bowl down and nodding slightly. “*Gochisousamadeshita*,” she replied respectfully.

Reynolds smiled at his friend, craning his head towards the mess hall door. “Come on then, let’s go pester the boss and see what’s going on...”

~

Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock threw the control stick of his Raptor fighter hard to the right, snapping the tail around in a sharp turn before locking on to another target with his HUD. Easing out of the 4-G turn, his left hand effortlessly flew over the control surfaces of his weapons console, cycling through weapons menus and changing settings faster than he could even read what was displayed, working on pure motor-memory. The Lysander ahead of him wasn't as fast as he was, and depressing the trigger on the yolk, the twin “Hades” supercavitating gattling guns on either side of the cockpit roared to life, spewing hundreds upon hundreds of explosive Uranium slugs in a white hot trail of burning incendiary straight towards the Macronesian fighter.

Hitchcock's aim was flawless - the slugs ripped the broad wings of the fighter apart with horrendous force. By the time the pilot even had time to realise what had happened, the pressure of the ocean around his doomed fuselage took its toll, crushing the remains of the Lysander and its pilot instantly.

Acting off instinct, Hitchcock swung around again, having caught a glimpse of alarmingly accurate laser fire blaze past his port side. He felt nothing as the Raptor climbed in to a sharp inverted loop; a 6-G-turn which should have made him weigh nearly 6 times his normal mass of 182 pounds. He'd spent enough time in the confines of a cockpit to become used to the experience. Rocking his thumb back on the radio control on the flight yolk, he glanced at his sensor display to work out where his wingman was.

“Rapier Four... This is Leader. We've got a bandit that just broke the perimeter... He's making a hard run straight for the *Defiant*. Can you engage?”

His radio headset cracked in his ear. “Negative, Rapier One. I've got a pair of Lysanders on my tail that I'm trying to nail. Where is Three? Please advise.”

Hitchcock grimaced beneath his helmet mask. “Three is down, Four. Hold on... I'll chase this one down. Keep those other two pinned.”

“Wilco. Give them hell.”

Fully aware of the Lysander still trying to kill him from behind (and not having much luck in staying with his rapid, high-G turns,) Hitchcock threw his fighter in to a sharp dive, rapidly driving it past 300 knots, and to a depth of 10,000 feet. He pulled up at the last possible moment, narrowly missing the hard sea floor by just a few feet, sending a great pillar of silt and sand in to the water in his wake. The move brought him right down on to the tail of the Lysander that was headed for the downed UEO Cruiser *Defiant* just a few miles ahead. His presence didn't go unnoticed however, and the fighter broke upwards quickly, rolling away as quickly as his big fighter would allow. The nimble Raptor on his tail however didn't let up, and Hitchcock matched him step for step before his fire controls achieved another solid lock. Arming one of his ASF-7 Foxhound torpedoes, he flipped open the fire safety and depressed the trigger. “Rapier one: Fox two. Splash one bandit.”

Sure enough, Hitchcock's pre-emptive announcement proved accurate, and the tiny rocket-powered torpedo closed with the Lysander, guided by the sophisticated targeting systems of his Raptor, and exploded.

It was an indirect hit, but the force of the fiery plasma explosion was enough to throw the Lysander in to a hard flat spin while tossing it tail-over-nose for the sea floor. The Wing Commander couldn't tell if it was the sea floor, or his subsequent volley of Hades fire that killed the Lysander. Once again, his radio cracked in his ear;

“*Rapier One, this is command. All objectives have been met. Well done, sir.*”

Hitchcock shook his head nonchalantly. Once again, the exercise hadn't been much of a challenge for him. “Thank you, command. I think we're done here. Shutting it down.”

Opening his hand, Hitchcock let go of the flight yolk, and the canopy around him faded to black. The hum and rattle of his fighter turned to a slow whine that got softer as the cockpit stopped moving, and with a hiss, the canopy seal was broken, allowing light to spill in from outside.

Jane Roberts and Tom Reynolds stood on a catwalk several meters above *Atlantis's* simulator center, and watched the canopies of the many mock-up cockpit modules slide back to reveal the pilots inside. “Well that was quick,” said Reynolds, unsurprised.

“The Wing Commander probably kicked their ass again,” replied Roberts. “Think he broke any more time records?”

“Eh, if it was the *Defiant* scenario, then it wouldn't surprise me...” he paused before grinning mischievously as he noticed the pale white, shocked face of Frenchman Lieutenant (JG) Jacques Toussaint – Rapier 8. “Hey, Jane... check out Jack over there.”

Roberts followed Reynold's pointing finger to Toussaint's simulator module and smiled wickedly. The junior pilot looked like hell, probably having been given the beating of his life. “...Hell. Hitchcock must have rattled him good,” she observed. “That doesn't look like the Toussaint who killed 7 Lysanders for real last month...”

“Like I said, the Commander's been working us hard. We've been on call 24 hours a day for the last *week*,” countered Reynolds. “But just the same, Jack's had it coming for a while now. He's too cocky... about time someone smacked him up something fierce.”

“...That sounds like someone else who I know of in this Squadron,” came a familiar voice from behind. The two ‘Rapier’ pilots snapped around quickly, and found themselves face to face with Captain Mark Ainsley. The Captain had a habit of arriving unnoticed. Roberts wondered if this was deliberate in order to keep the crew on edge, or whether he simply didn't feel the need to announce his presence wherever he went.

“Good morning, sir,” she said, coming to attention and saluting sharply. Reynolds did the same.

“At ease,” replied Ainsley, returning the salute and then stepping up along side her, planting his hands on the catwalk barrier rail overlooking the simulator center below. “How's the arm, Lieutenant?” he asked casually. “Recovering?”

“Urm, yes sir,” she replied cautiously. “The grafts have held together, so the cast could come off at any time now.”

Ainsley nodded slowly. “Good to hear. Although I still have no idea how someone breaks their arm in the firing range. You'll have to explain that to me some day.”

Roberts exchanged a wary look with Reynolds beside her. “Urrm... Firing range, sir?”

“Well, yes,” clarified the Captain. “Commander Hitchcock told me how you were firing off a 9-millimeter up on D-deck when it happened.”

Roberts was shocked. She'd known that Hitchcock had spoken to the Captain in an effort to keep her from being grounded permanently, but she *hadn't* known that he'd deliberately covered for her. “Ur, yes sir,” she said, trying to play along. “I tripped on the door frame on my way out - Landed pretty heavily.”

Ainsley was smiling inwardly. It was a sceptical smile – and she knew that he didn’t believe a word of it. The officer of some 33-years experience wasn’t stupid, but just the same, Ainsley had faith in his crew – and the judgement of his ship’s Wing Commander especially. Whatever his reasons were, Hitchcock had enough belief in Roberts that he had gone to considerable lengths to cover for her well-documented mistake. It wasn’t his place to berate her. “Yes... I’m sure you did, Lieutenant. I don’t suppose the Commander is here, is he?”

“He just finished in the sims, sir,” replied Reynolds quickly, trying to take some of the heat off his friend. “We were about to head down and see what was going on.”

“Well, lead on, Lieutenant...”

...Hitchcock put the training helmet down inside the small cockpit of the Raptor simulator, pulled his gloves off and walked off to meet the 7 other Rapier pilots who had emerged from their own simulators. After flying subfighters for so long, Hitchcock knew the difference between an expensive hydraulic jack and real dogfight. The illusion of motion wasn’t the same as the real thing, and he would have preferred to run training missions in a real cockpit any day of the week, but maintenance schedules didn’t always allow for it.

“Well, that could have been better,” said Hitchcock as he approached his pilots, noticing that the four of them that had been flying “Lysanders” looked particularly worn out, having been beaten convincingly by those who had flown Raptors. “Toussaint, Rodriguez and Jackson – meet me in my office in 10 minutes. The rest of you, consider yourselves dismissed until 1130 hours, and then report to the squadron ready room.”

“Yessir.”

The pilots saluted their Commander, and then spun on their heels, marching away quickly.

Hitchcock sighed as he snapped his gloves in his hand with frustration. He didn’t notice the approach of Captain Ainsley, Roberts and Reynolds from the stairwell where the Rapiers had departed. Finally turning, he saluted the Captain and nodded respectfully to his two officers. “Captain, Lieutenant Roberts, Lieutenant Reynolds...”

“At ease, Commander,” said Ainsley. After a moment, the Captain turned to the two Lieutenants. “...Um, If you will excuse the Commander and me, this is a... privileged matter.”

“Oh,” replied Roberts with surprise, not realising she was intruding. “Sorry sir.”

Ainsley waited until the two Raptor pilots had disappeared, and then sighed. “Well Gabe, how are things in your end of the world?”

“Tiring, Captain,” replied Hitchcock flatly. “I think my pilots are about ready for mutiny. I’ve put them through a lot over the last week, and they know it.”

“How are they handling it?”

“They’re excellent pilots, Captain,” said Hitchcock with an approving nod. “The best I’ve ever flown with... almost without exception. And it’s not an exaggeration. But... they definitely have limits to how much they can take in such a short space of time.”

“Don’t be too hard on them, Gabriel,” said Ainsley firmly. “I’m going to need your pilots in the best possible shape soon.”

“So, we *are* going to Macronesia,” concluded Hitchcock, nodding grimly. The rumours about *Atlantis*’s change of orders had spread like wildfire since the previous afternoon.

“So rumours travel fast, then,” countered Ainsley, in a subtle acknowledgement of the Wing Commander’s suspicions. “I thought you knew better than to listen to rumours, Gabe?”

“Only those that aren’t true, sir,” said Hitchcock with a smile. “So what’s the mission?”

“400 miles behind enemy lines at a depth of about 20,000 feet just near the Phoenix Islands.”

“You’re kidding...” replied Hitchcock. “I had a very sickening feeling go down my spine when you mentioned the words “Phoenix Islands...” We’re going after *seaQuest* aren’t we...?”

Ainsley merely nodded grimly. “There isn’t much more I can say, but this is a risky assignment. Battlegroup or not, a lot is going to depend on what your pilots do out there.”

“Three squadrons of Raptors and two squadrons of Spectres against the entire Macronesian Second Fleet... That’s just...”

“Not fair?” pre-empted Ainsley.

“Yes sir... Perhaps we should let them know we’re coming?”

The Captain smiled knowingly. “Let’s not descend to treason just yet. That not withstanding, I want you to brief your pilots today and put together a combat roster and patrol plan by 1400. At our current speed, we’ll cross the border in a little over an hour, and after that... it’s open-season for *Atlantis* class DSVs.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

~

ANS Alexander Battlegroup. 150 nautical miles west of Tuvalu in the South Pacific. December 5th, 2040...

In bold contrast to Gabriel Hitchcock, Captain William Bishop was having a terrible week. There were limitations to how much boredom an officer could endure, and he had passed his several days ago. The ANS *Alexander* – flagship of the Macronesian 2nd Fleet’s 4th carrier squadron – was on deep patrol near the rear of the Alliance’s Marshall Islands line. She was a *Honorious*-class fleet carrier with over 6 squadrons of Lysander subfighters assigned to it, along with a battegroup of 2 *Tempest*-class heavy cruisers, 3 *Aleus*-class Escort Carriers (bringing the fleet’s total fighter forces to greater than 150) and 6 *Orion*-class SSNs. Neither the UEO nor Macronesia had risked committing such battlegroup-sized forces as these to battle at this early stage in the war. Most engagements around the frontline had been restricted to one-on-one skirmishes between medium-sized submarine cruisers and SSNs; hardly what one could call a “decisive” form of battle. Bishop’s only charge aboard *Alexander* was command of the 181st Squadron – better known in Macronesian waters as the “*Black Ravens*” – a Lysander-II squadron formed very specifically with the very best pilots from every nation of the Alliance. The Ravens were a new squadron; one that had attracted much attention from the UEO Navy’s intelligence divisions.

Bishop’s time over the last 24 hours hadn’t been spent in the cockpit of his Lysander, but rather behind his desk on the *Alexander*. Before him was an open file including photos, written reports and intelligence information on the VF-107

‘*Rapiers*’; by all rights, the United Earth Oceans Navy’s most elite fighter squadron... and one he was well acquainted with by reputation.

He was a moderate, as opposed to many of the hard-line agenda-pushers in the Macronesian High Command. He had no hatred for the UEO, nor did he see any need for the war that was now raging between the two coalitions. In his position, all he could do was carry out his orders in the hope that he was fighting the right war.

In front of his desk sat Commander Daniel Laney; his squadron XO, and long-time comrade of nearly 15 years all the way from the Alliance fighter academy to this current assignment. Laney held another file which he quietly read. “...Lieutenant Jane Keiko Roberts,” he said, reading its contents.

“American-Japanese born in Sendai, Japan – graduated Cape Cortez in 2036 before being assigned to *seaQuest*...”

“Only four years in the Navy and she’s assigned to the ‘*Rapiers*’?” asked Bishop with surprise. “Where the hell did Hitchcock find these people?”

“Oh that’s only the start of it. Get this... 2037, after serving on *seaQuest* for a year, awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action against Macronesian forces near the Carolines, simultaneously taking the title of “ace”. 2038, a year later, was part of the UEO’s vanguard force that assaulted Challenger Colony. 2039, disappears from fleet service to begin a seven month elite training course for transfer to the SF-37 Raptor.”

Bishop shook his head, tossing aside another file and picking up another. “That really doesn’t surprise me given what we know of the *Rapier*’s reputation over the last month. You’d think they were the UEO’s only fighter squadron...”

Laney took a mouthful of coffee from a mug that had been sitting on his side of the desk. “So... Will... Why the heck did ASIS send us these files?”

“I have absolutely no idea – Oh, now *here’s* an interesting character,” he said quickly as he read the first few lines of the next file – a file that was at least 5 times thicker than the previous one he’d been reading, and it was marked as ‘File 1 of 2.’ “Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock,” he started quite pointlessly. “I could go on all day about this guy without ever reading the file...” he tossed it aside as if making a point. “Decorated 2027, 2032, 2035, 2036, 2038... I’m not going to bother. Really.”

“They don’t really expect us to learn all this do they?” asked Laney again.

“I hope not... the message I got with the delivery was that we’d find them, I quote; “*Helpful*”.”

“As “light reading material?”” countered Laney, holding up Hitchcock’s hefty file from where Bishop had thrown it on the desk. “Because in all honesty, I think considering all we’re doing out here is twiddling our thumbs waiting for someone to cross the border – which they wouldn’t because it’s suicide – this kind of information is just a *little* pointless.”

Bishop smiled as he picked up the model *Lysander* that was sitting on his desk and started playing with it out of boredom. “Of course it’s pointless. That’s why *intelligence* sent it to us.”

“Touché...”

The two officers were interrupted as Bishop’s computer beeped loudly. The Captain raised a curious eyebrow as he looked at the screen suspiciously, and then hit the “enter” key on the keyboard. “Bishop here. Speak to me.”

“Captain? Lieutenant Webster here, sir. We just received a transmission from Fleet Command in Melbourne... it involves you, sir. Admiral Sark has asked for you on the bridge.”

“Very well,” replied Bishop. “I’ll be right there. Bishop out.”

The Captain ended the call and looked up at Laney with a measure of surprise. “Well. That’s interesting.”

Laney got up from his chair, following Bishop to the door of the office. “Time to get some answers...”

Admiral Valerie Sark rapped her fingers on the barrier rail of the upper deck in *Alexander’s* Combat Information Center (CIC) while staring intently at the large satellite map display on the wall before her. It showed the positions of various units of the Macronesian fourth fleet across an area of over 6,000 square miles in the Central Pacific Basin. The one thing on the entire display that held her undivided attention however was a red delta that was marked prominently near the Marshall Islands: the *Atlantis DSX*

“That ship...” she said, pointing at the screen accusingly, “...has been bothering me since it sank my *Orions* last month.”

“Admiral... perhaps *restraint* would be advise-“ ...Captain Nicholas Weyland, the *Alexander’s* commanding officer, didn’t get much of a chance to respond before the Admiral cut him off sharply.

“Don’t lecture me on “*restraint*,” Captain,” scolded Sark. “This ship was not built to be patrolling backwater trade routes. We have been at war nearly a month without so much as being ordered to escort a supply convoy. It’s intolerable!”

Weyland said nothing as Sark continued to stare intently at the map. Moments later, he turned around from the Conn. to see Captain William Bishop and his Executive officer, Commander Laney, descend the final few stairs in to the CIC. Both pilots saluted as they saw him, and he returned the gesture quickly, giving Bishop a cautious smile.

“Captain Bishop... Thank you for coming.”

“Not a problem, sir,” replied the pilot, giving not hints to the same frustration that he was feeling with the *Alexander’s* current lack of assignment. “You’ve met my executive officer, of course, Commander Daniel Laney...”

“Of course. Good morning, Commander.”

“Sir.”

Weyland nodded again, and then quietly ushered the two officers across the CIC to where Admiral Sark stood over a chart table; her attention having been moved from the main displays.

“Hello Admiral,” said Bishop, saluting sharply.

“Ah, Captain. We’ve just got something that concerns you...”

The fighter commander shared a wary exchange with Laney, and followed the Admiral to the front of the CIC and the *Alexander’s* master combat displays. He was looking at the same display that had held Sark’s attention for so long, but knew nothing of what it was about. The Admiral pointed at the red delta that was highlighted near the Marshall Islands. “*Atlantis*,” she said simply.

“What?”

“She’s coming here,” Sark explained. “We’ve been given orders to interdict her.”

Bishop’s jaw dropped – all of a sudden, the reason he’d been sent intelligence files on elite UEO pilots made perfect sense. “When?”

“Now,” clarified Captain Weyland. “From her course and speed, she will cross the border some time over the next hour. This was her last known position... We lost contact with her when she entered the Schjetman Rise. If Intel is correct,

Captain Ainsley will probably follow it all the way across the border in an effort to hide his approach.”

“Wow,” said Commander Laney flatly. “That’s... urm... quite the news.”

“Do we know what *Atlantis*’s objectives are?” asked Bishop.

“Not with absolute certainty, no. Right now our orders are open-ended... we have been instructed to take any action I deem necessary – if any – against the *Atlantis*. If possible, we’re to gather whatever intelligence we can and prevent the DSX from - shall we say - ‘operating without undue complications.’”

“...I see...” said Bishop, trying to read between the lines of what the Admiral was saying. “Where do I come in to this?”

The Admiral stepped closer to Bishop, cautiously looking out the corner of her eye to make sure the other staff in the CIC weren’t paying too much attention. “There was a special dispatch attached to these orders from General Adamson himself attributed to you and your squadron as something of a *recommendation*. As you are quite aware, the media takes a particular interest in your squadron’s activities. The bureaucracy of public relations has been stressed by General Adamson to be of importance in this mission...”

“I’m not sure I understand, ma’am...”

“The ‘Rapiers’, Captain. That is what General Adamson is concerned about. They are currently assigned to the *Atlantis*, or so Fleet Intelligence tells me. The President himself has stressed that any action the Black Ravens take on this mission must have a... “*decisive*” outcome.”

Bishop’s jaw became tight for a moment. He noticed Captain Weyland’s apprehension. “So... The President wants us to destroy the ‘Rapiers’, with a minimum of casualties, as quickly as possible.”

“I didn’t say that,” replied Sark.

“No, ma’am... you didn’t need to.”

“I’m glad we understand each other.”

~

III

GHOSTS AND SHADOWS

UEO Atlantis DSX 8100 Battlegroup. Schjetman Rise, Macronesian Waters. December 5th, 2040...

The smiling faces before him were distant now. Captain Ainsley his hand gently down the photograph in the photo album on his desk; his wife, Samantha, and his three children – each looking more and more like the parents every time he saw them. They were now over 12,000 miles away on the other side of the world in London, and he hadn't seen them in nearly six months. He probably wouldn't see them for another six if the war kept on crawling along at the rate that it was now. Ainsley was angry with himself for not having made the most of his time when he'd had the chance; he'd been promising to bring them to Hawaii for so long, and now with Pearl Harbour being so perilously close to the front line, he couldn't even do that. The last time he had seen his daughter Jessica was over 8 months ago when he'd walked her down the aisle and given her away to a cocky UEO fighter pilot who was now in the same position as he was.

War had a way of testing families. His family was one with long and steeped naval history that went back as far as Trafalgar; it was a history of bloodshed, and it ran thick through his veins.

The thick titanium door to his office echoed with the wrapping of someone's knuckles on the other side. He didn't look up from the album in his hands, and merely said “enter.”

The door swung open, and Commander Banick walked in to the room cautiously, approaching Ainsley's desk with an unsure step. “Sir,” he announced himself formally. “You asked to see me?”

Ainsley put the photo album aside on his desk, extending a hand to the seat that was just in front of Banick while he reclined in his own. “Yes I did. Thank you, Jim... Please take a seat.”

Banick was never one to refuse a suggestion or offer from Ainsley, and quickly sat down in front of the desk; his momentary glance at Ainsley's family album catching the Captain's eye, eliciting a small smile from the senior officer. “You know I've been away from them for about half a year,” he said, not needing to explain the comment. “I kept meaning to bring them to Hawaii before this war with Macronesia started... But things just kept getting in the way.”

“How are they, sir?” his XO asked curiously.

Ainsley smiled. “As well as can be expected, I think. Samantha is holding out well considering what's happening down here lately. And Jess...”

“Ah,” said Banick with a mischievous smile. “Yes... the impressionable young English daughter who ran off to marry an American subfighter pilot.”

Ainsley glared at the Commander accusingly. “Careful, Jim... She *is* married... Just remember that.”

Banick held up his hands defensively, but his smile didn't recede. “Hey, I'm just sayin'...”

“Yes. You frequently do. Besides... The last I'd heard, you still had your hands full with Commander Canebride.”

If Banick's smug grin wasn't going to be quashed by Ainsley's gentle warning, then his current observation certainly was. Banick's defensiveness became

all the more obvious. “I... urm... *we* weren’t aware that it was such common knowledge, sir,” managed Banick cautiously.

It was now Ainsley’s turn to smile, but it was a quiet one which did not betray many of the Captain’s inner thoughts. “Just remember Commander, this may be a *big* submarine, but she *is* still a submarine. Decent scuttlebutt down here is rare, and what little there is travels like wildfire. You don’t survive long in this service without learning how to keep things quiet. That said... yes, people *are* talking about your relationship with Natalie, and while the details of that relationship are none of my business, I would firmly recommend you keep it to yourselves, as the professional manners of officers under my command *are* my responsibility. The crew respects you, Commander. Make sure it remains thus.”

“Absolutely, sir,” said Banick firmly. “...But if you’ll forgive me for saying... I don’t think you called me in here to talk about family and social relationships...”

Ainsley smirked, nodding quietly. “Correct, Commander. I didn’t call you in here for that. In fact, I think it’s time I told you exactly what is going on.”

Banick looked at his Captain blankly; expectantly. Ainsley didn’t keep him waiting. “...Fleet intelligence wants to know how *seaQuest* was captured. While they have theories, they’ve got no proof. Our job is to *get* that proof.”

“I’m not following, Captain.”

“Admiral Hargeaves is convinced that the proof they need is onboard *seaQuest*. This mission is officially a salvage and recovery operation. We’re to find the wreck, board it, and scour whatever remains that have been left behind.”

Banick’s mouth became very dry. He had given the order to send *seaQuest* to the bottom, and that made this mission all the more personal. It didn’t take a genius to work out why Commander Voss – the officer from Naval Intel – had joined them.

“I see, sir... Captain, pardon my asking, but why didn’t you tell me this sooner? Asking the crew to travel 400 miles behind enemy lines to recover some kind of... ‘evidence’ on how *seaQuest* was captured is... not something I’ve come to expect from you. This ship is not ready for that kind of mission; we still have toilets that overflow when we dive past 10,000 feet, and the number three cargo hold has about a foot of reactor coolant on the floor which – Chief Stevens tells me – he can’t find the origin of.”

“Jim... I know there are *problems* that we have to work with out here. But command’s expectations of *Atlantis* and this crew are not going to get any easier-“

“-I’m well aware of that, sir,” said Banick quickly. “But I’d feel much more comfortable if I knew I wasn’t alone in my reservations.”

Ainsley smiled knowingly. “Believe me... you’re not. It’s been bothering me all day, but I can’t very well disobey orders without good reason – and these have come from the very top.”

Banick nodded slowly. “I understand, sir.

“I know you do, Commander. And that’s why I’ve told you. Commander Voss is going to need a liaison with this operation... and you’re it.”

Banick smiled lopsidedly, not sure whether to be thankful or concerned. “Sir... I... I’m not cut out for being a spook. All those reports... the...”

“-Paperwork?” completed Ainsley with a smile of his own.

“Well, no sir, I wasn’t going to say that... But I’m just not wired that way. I can’t think out complex problems like Voss can.”

“You’ll never know until you try, Commander. And I wasn’t aware I was giving you an *option* in this matter. Take note of Voss’s work – you may learn something useful...” Ainsley narrowed his eyes, pausing briefly to make sure he had

the Commander’s attention. “...In fact, I expect you may learn a thing or two which Commander Voss may well have *forgotten* to let me know...”

Banick stopped, as he began to fully realise what Captain Ainsley was asking of him. People in the Intelligence community were a paranoid lot – always obsessed with security classifications and clearance levels in information. It was not uncommon for officers in the Intelligence Command to ‘omit certain truths’ about the operations they ran. “I think I follow you, sir.”

“Good... I suggest you speak with the Commander at the earliest opportunity. It won’t be long before we reach the Phoenix Islands.”

Ainsley stood up from his desk, and hastily, Banick followed suit. “Aye, sir.”

“Very good. That is all, Commander.”

Banick saluted sharply, and Ainsley returned it, nodding curtly. “Dismissed.”

James Banick exhaled sharply as he stepped in to the B-deck corridor from Ainsley’s office, closing the hatch behind him. The marine who stood guard on the other side of the corridor stared blankly across the hall, his eyes locked on some unseen point, refusing to blink. While he didn’t say it openly, the contingent of UEO marines that were garrisoned on the *Atlantis* scared the hell out of him. They never said a thing unless spoken to, and never seemed to leave their garrison-base of operations that took up almost the entirety of D-deck unless on duty. An officer could tell a marine to stand on his head for 6 hours if he felt like it, and they would most likely do it. (Or at least try to.)

The *Atlantis* exec didn’t pay much attention to the marine, passing the soldier as he headed to the bridge about 10 meters down the corridor. He returned the salute of a pair of junior officers who were walking in the opposite direction, and then stepped through the clam-doors on to the rear of the command deck, spying Commander Voss at the side of the control deck below, working at an auxiliary station quietly by himself.

Banick frowned as he descended the stairs to the control deck and quietly approached the station. “Commander Voss... Is there anything I can help you with?”

The intelligence officer turned. “Ah, Commander Banick... Ahh... No, I’m quite ok, thank you.”

“Hmmm,” said Banick absent minded as he looked over the console which Voss had been working at. “Well, Captain Ainsley has instructed me to aid you in whatever capacity you may require, so if there is anything you need... come and speak to me.”

“Of course, Commander,” said Voss flatly, giving little second thought to the offer.

“Very well then,” replied Banick cautiously. “I’ll leave you to it...”

Banick had barely taken 2 steps when Voss turned on his heel sharply and called out suddenly. “-Commander?”

“Yes?”

“There *may* be something you can help me with... If you don’t mind, it could help me if I knew exactly what happened here the day when...”

“...When...?”

Voss had to stop himself for a moment, so as not to come across as being self absorbed or careless. “...The day *seaQuest* was lost.”

“You mean when the Alliance captured her? Or when *Atlantis* destroyed her?”

“We should probably start from the beginning...”

~

Three weeks earlier...

Banick was in awe at the sheer amount of activity around the command deck. Unlike her first engagement, *Atlantis* now had a full crew and things were a lot busier on the big boat. But the surprising fact was that everything was so amazingly coordinated between the various watch officers. Every officer on the bridge knew who to answer to, and it actually made for a very streamlined system of command. Returning to work, Banick got the final “all-clear” from tactical and EVA; *Atlantis* was fully ready for battle.

Banick looked up from his console to face *Atlantis*’s new Captain; Arnold Randbrough – a grizzled veteran who had replaced Captain Ainsley after a very short stint on the UEO flagship. For the duration they’d been at sea, the new Captain had proven himself to be a genuine pain in the back. “Captain, flight deck reports all pilots ready for launch on your orders. Tactical reports we have shooting solutions on the carriers as you asked.”

“Very good... sensors... what are those carriers doing?”

The sonar operator frowned and shook his head. “I don’t know sir. It’s like they don’t even know we’re here. They’re just... *sitting* there.”

“Very well... helm, move us in. Ahead two-thirds.”

Banick frowned deeply. He had absolutely no idea why Captain Randbrough had just given that order. Taking *Atlantis* in to the middle of the enemy fleet made *no* tactical sense at all. *Atlantis* had shooting solutions; and could simply stand off at long range without ever needing to put the ship in unnecessary danger at close-quarters, and what was more; the captain *knew* this. “Sir... I strongly advise against that. The Alliance fleet outguns us 3 to 1. We’re already in weapons range, sir.”

Randbrough said nothing, and it didn’t look like he was going to elaborate any time soon. “I know.” He repeated his order. “Helm... all engines ahead: *90 knots*.”

Madeline Hayes; sitting at navigation as the chief helmsman overheard the entire exchange and shook her head. “...Aye sir. Engines ahead 90 knots.”

Banick waited with growing anxiety as *Atlantis* closed the gap with the Alliance fleet. This was going to be either a turkey shoot... or a very bloody massacre for both sides. “Distance to the closest target?” asked the Captain.

“3 miles sir.”

“Launch the sea wing. Tell them to pick their targets at will.”

“Yes sir.”

Atlantis continued her advance on the enemy fleet, but still, not one of the Macronesian submarines moved... *Why?* Banick shook his head. This was too far. “Captain... it has to be a trap. What the hell is going on?”

Randbrough looked unfazed. “Commander Banick... This is *the* most heavily armed and defended ship in the fleet. They can hurt us... and closing the range to point-blank will give them no breathing room. We can suffocate them with their own sensors. This should be over before it even begins.”

James Banick rose to his feet, now determined to confront Randbrough... but didn’t get the chance to say anything before the sensor chief turned around in alarmed shock. “*Sir!* New contacts! Bearing one-eight-zero, pulling out of the trench directly behind us! It’s... it’s...”

Banick and Randbrough asked the same question at the same time. “It’s *what*, Lieutenant?”

The sensor chief was beyond words, and simply flipped a control that put what he was looking at on to the main bridge screen. It quickly resolved in to the image of a vessel that sent cold shivers of dread and shock down the spines of everyone on the bridge: In perfect repair after being missing at sea for over a week, and accompanied by a full strike wing of Macronesian *Orion* class attack submarines, was the former-UEO *seaQuest* DSV 4600. “Continue on present course and speed,” said Randbrough cautiously, as if he hadn’t even noticed “Take us directly in to the middle of their fleet.”

Banick could take no more of this. Enough was enough. “*Captain...*”

“-*Commander,*” interjected Randbrough, staring at Banick coldly. Every set of eyes was now resting squarely on the Captain and the XO; the few UEO marines at the rear of the Bridge were visibly tempted to raise their rifles. “You will resume your station...” continued the Captain softly, the implied threat nothing more than a whisper, “...or I will have you arrested.”

“Sir, permission to speak candidly?”

Randbrough was met only by the coldness of Banick’s stare. Neither man flinched. “Spit it out, Commander”

Banick was only too happy to oblige. “If you do not bely that order, I *will* relieve you of command. You have not done a thing to explain your actions in putting this ship obvious jeopardy, and so far, this crew has followed every order you have given without question. I think we are owed an explanation.”

Randbrough’s face was glowing with anger. Banick had just crossed the line, and either he, or the XO was going to be in the brig on charges in just a matter of seconds. “Commander...” he said coldly. “You are owed *nothing*. We have *our* orders, and the Alliance have *theirs*-“

Banick gave a sinister smile. Randbrough had just made his last mistake. He’d slipped, and now he would pay. “And what does *that* mean, *sir*?”

The Captain still did not flinch as he looked around the bridge, and then back to Banick. “Commander... your missile key... *now*.”

Banick simply stared. All those on the bridge were still in shock. No one could believe what was happening – first *seaQuest*, and now this. Without warning, Randbrough snapped around, pulling out his side arm and pointed it directly at James Banick. The Atlantis XO stared blankly at the gun and was suddenly aware that the two Marines had already levelled their M-31s on the insane captain.

“*Now!*” yelled the Captain, trembling with rage.

Banick nodded slowly and pulled out the key from under his white turtleneck shirt. He watched as Randbrough unfolded a piece of paper that had been in his pocket. He knew without even reading it what would be on it – the nine-digit arming code 20 *Triton IV* ballistic missiles held deep within the *Atlantis*. Known only to the Captain and the XO, the code was kept under lock and key in the ship’s safe. But Banick’s arming key would be useless to Randbrough. He couldn’t use it because of the key’s built-in DNA-coded safeguards. He tossed the key towards Randbrough and watched helplessly as he snatched it from the air.

Keeping his gaze on Banick, his aim unwavering, Randbrough walked toward the tactical station and then made an unexpected move; whipping around, he grabbed Lieutenant Commander Natalie Canebride and just as swiftly, moved the gun to her head, lodging it sharply beneath her jaw. “You two!” he yelled at the rifle-packing Marines. “Drop them, *now!* Or Commander Canebride will be the latest addition to the bridge paintwork!”

Banick’s stomach sank. “*No...*” he thought silently. He then turned to the soldiers and nodded cautiously. The troops nodded hesitantly and they slowly set the rifles down on the deck. Turning back, Banick watched the insane Captain pull out his own missile key and move quickly to the missile control console. “Captain, listen to me-“

“*Shut up, Banick!*” yelled Randbrough. Placing the keys in the control locks, he motioned to Banick as he jarred his weapon up in to Canebride’s jaw, prompting her to close her eyes painfully. “The key... you will turn it when I say... or she dies.”

Banick knew this could only end one way... Against so many officers on the bridge, Randbrough had already lost, but the manner in which he did so was going to be *his* choosing. Moving to the controls, he gingerly took the key between his fingers, and looked at Canebride with apologetic, yet reassuring eyes.

“Three,” said the Captain, beginning the count.

...Three seconds. That was the amount of time required to see if Captain Ainsley’s gamble had paid off.

“Two,”

....Two seconds until Natalie Canebride was little more than a tragic memory.

“One.”

A second of pure, unrivalled terror...

“*Mark.*”

Banick turned the key in perfect unison with Randbrough, and the command console lit up brightly, as one by one, the missile systems were brought online.

The Captain started working quickly by disengaging the safeties while still holding the Smith and Wesson to Canebride’s neck.

Master alarms began sounding, and one by one, the mentally unstable Captain began arming each of the 20 ballistic missiles held in *Atlantis’s silos*. The computer’s voice, so cold and inhuman now, asked for the final verification of the grim orders it had just been given. “Launch sequence initiated. Please provide strategic verification codes now.”

“Computer, authorise: Randbrough, Captain Arnold S; launch verification alpha, niner, three, seven, bravo, tango, delta, delta, one, zero.”

The bridge was bathed in blood red light as the battle lamps – designed to counter flash burn – replaced the gentle blue glow of the command deck’s normal lighting. “Authorization verified. Targeting telemetry uploading... Please provide final launch verification.”

Randbrough turned around from the console to look at Banick with fiery, angered eyes. They seemed tortured now... different from the reserved, stern man who had occupied the center chair just minutes before. “The UEO is dying, commander. It is a shattered dream... an *illusion*. It’s only a matter of time before it falls, whether the Alliance destroys it, or whether it collapses from its own corruption – it’s *inevitable*. Can you imagine the political and economic waste that would come from its collapse going unchecked? It would mean famine and depression on a *global scale* for *millions!* Look around you at this boat... it’s the manifestation of what the UEO has become; *fear*. What kind of regime considers this ship the answer to the world’s problems? Not even the Alliance is this bad... and now we can use *Atlantis* to *end* the UEO once and for all...”

“-And you seriously think that nuking several hundred million people is the way to do it? You’re insane.”

“Believe it or not, Commander, I am a patriot. How many more would die if the UEO collapsed slowly under the weight of this war? Or the subsequent depression?” asked Randbrough sincerely.

Banick nodded slowly as it all came together. “Captain Ainsley was right, wasn’t he? You and Secretary General Dallinsley have been playing games Bourne this whole time, haven’t you? That’s why you had him relieved of command; to give the world a face to blame for this war. You couldn’t have the UEO seen as being the benevolent force of goodwill that fought to the bitter end... you had to destroy the very core of everything it stood for first... And now *seaQuest*... What the hell are the Macs doing with it? How long has Bourne been playing you, Captain? Who’s the puppeteer? President Bourne? Secretary Dallinsley?”

Randbrough still held his grip still firm on Canebride’s throat. “Bourne was a means to an end - nothing more. This runs higher than you will ever know.”

Banick shook his head. Any sanity that remained in Randbrough was now long gone... He no longer felt anger towards him, only a cold, hollow pity. Randbrough was a puppet whose strings had been severed. He was alone... for whatever reason, something had changed in his plan... and now he had lost. “Captain... End this. You can’t win.”

“Alright, Commander... I *will*.”

Without another word, Randbrough disengaged the last safety, and hit the firing switch...

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The Present. UEO Atlantis DSX 8100 Battlegroup. Schjetman Rise, Macronesian Waters. December 5th, 2040...

“...The keys didn’t work,” said Banick, explaining quietly to Commander Voss with a sigh. “Captain Ainsley worked out everything before he was relieved of duty. He had informed Admiral Bridger before Randbrough took command, and the Admiral made sure that Captain Ainsley’s command codes were not removed from *Atlantis*’s computer... so, the ship realised that there was a key missing, and locked down missile control... along with most of our other systems...”

Commander Voss looked shocked. Many details of what Banick had just told him were not in the official report. Why, he did not know. “I see...” he said quietly, trying not to arouse suspicion. “I didn’t realise Captain Randbrough had... crossed the line so severely.”

“Yeah...” replied Banick slowly. “I’m not sure anyone in the UEO really appreciates how close we came to Armageddon. Had the Captain not worked out what was going on... well, I think it’s safe to say that you and I wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Why did you do it?” said Voss suddenly, as the scope of what had transpired just weeks before began to settle in his mind.

“Why did I do what?”

“Why were you so prepared to just let Randbrough ‘push the button’?”

Banick smirked. He didn’t appreciate the implications that came with the question; he wasn’t a coward, nor did he simply ‘let’ Randbrough do anything. “I trust Captain Ainsley with my life,” he replied. “Before he was relieved, he left... a note of sorts, telling me of what he suspected, and what he’d done to pre-empt it. You know his reputation just as well as I do.”

Voss allowed a small smile. It was true that Ainsley’s reputation in the fleet was one of near-infamy. His career was like something one would expect to see on a TV show as the story of a hero. But Voss wasn’t one to pay too much attention to hype; he knew Captain Ainsley was just a man like any other – mortal, and perfectly capable of error. It was his job to be sceptical. “Thank you, Commander,” he said simply as he got up from the chair he had been occupying. “There’s a lot you’ve told me I need to pass on to my superiors... This has raised... *a lot* of questions.”

“It wasn’t in the report?” countered Banick with a measure of surprise.

Voss gave Banick a worried frown, shaking his head helplessly. “No... and that’s what I’m worried about.”

As the Intelligence Officer left the bridge, Ryan Callaghan watched from his station at tactical with worry. He hadn’t heard the conversation which had transpired between Voss and Banick, but he could tell from their expressions that it wasn’t good. Banick noticed Callaghan’s apprehension, and walked over.

“Problems?” asked Callaghan quietly.

“I don’t know...” replied Banick.

“Our spook looks like he just saw a ghost. What did you tell him to bother him like that?”

“I have absolutely no idea...”

~

Kiribati Colony. 100 nautical miles south of Schjetman Rise, Macronesian Waters. December 6th, 2040...

Kiribati was one of just thousands of sub-surface colonies across the Pacific Ocean. It wasn’t one of the largest however, serving as little more than a small supply and trading post on the route between the Marshall Islands and Greater Macronesia with a population of just over 30,000. Sitting in café, Jeffrey Edmonds overlooked the port terminal of the small colony on the floor below. Above him, huge glass pressure domes sparkled with dappled light from the surface of the ocean barely a few hundred feet above. Below, the concourse of the arrivals terminal was bustling with activity. It wasn’t as clean or pristine as most UEO ports he’d been in and out of over the years. Instead of polished marble floors or carpet, the floors were largely made of steel grates – doing little to cover the myriad of electrical and plumbing pipes that ran through framework beneath. The atmosphere of the arrivals concourse was similar to something he’d expect to find aboard the average military warship. Macronesia’s outer colonies were not known for their hospitality. This backwater cesspool of ‘unsophistication’ was probably one of the worst assignments Edmonds had ever been given, and this café was about the only place he actually enjoyed to spend time at. For four months, he’d listened, watched and waited for something to happen that was worth reporting to his superiors at Division. Finally, he’d received new orders from his superiors, and now he watched the concourse below for a man who would apparently be carrying a blue satchel bag. He knew nothing more than that. Everything else he’d need to work out himself.

Waiting for nearly 45 minutes, he’d seen many people carrying a blue bag. But visibly, none of them appeared to have had the appropriate IQ to be the person he was looking for. Deep sea trawling farmers, miners and European businessmen wearing expensive Versace suits. No, these were not the people he was looking for. Shaking his head, he flipped the page of the newspaper he was reading in idle interest. The

headlines today ranged from boring to just plain hype. The one on this page however was actually interesting enough to keep his attention for more than 5 seconds; “*UEO bolsters Marshalls line: DSV deployment.*”

Reading through the first few lines of the article, which was wrapped around a large photo of the *Atlantis DSX* surfaced in the middle of Pearl Harbor, he wasn’t surprised to find more media speculation on the shady and secretive activities of the UEO submarine fleet. He was forced to wonder how much credibility the report had – *Atlantis* hadn’t visited Pearl Harbor for several weeks, and had been at sea on shakedown cruise since the ‘unfortunate’ incident involving the older *seaQuest DSV*... Its activities since then, his superiors told him, were largely unremarkable.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind the newspaper. He dropped it down, and saw a young woman standing there with a satchel bag over her shoulder – and it was blue. “Do you happen to have a lighter?” she continued with a thick Australian accent.

“Smoking is illegal,” replied Edmonds simply, trying not to pay too much attention.

“...Only in the UEO,” countered the woman with the blue bag, eyeing Edmonds’s briefcase carefully.

“Indeed...” said Edmonds carefully. The woman – *girl*, even – was attractive by most standards. She didn’t overly stand out from the other local inhabitants of Kiribati. She wore a simple business suit, casting her eyes over him cautiously with a sure smile.

“How about coffee?” she asked again.

“...I’d be delighted,” replied Edmonds quietly as she took a seat on the other side of the table opposite him.

“Come here often?” she asked politely, and for a moment, Edmonds thought he may have had the wrong person.

“Only when I’m supposed to be working,” he replied.

She smiled at the answer before leaning over the table and stopping not far in front of him. Sliding a hand out from under the table, she pushed a small note across to Edmonds and smiled. “Call me,” she said, before getting up – and without further explanation – briskly continuing on her way.

Frowning, Edmonds signed his bill and walked off in the opposite direction...

...Stepping around a corner down the long passageway of Kiribati’s arrivals concourse, out of sight from prying eyes, Edmonds pulled out his PAL (Personal Access Link) and, opening the small note he’d been given, typed in the number that had been neatly written on the piece of paper. The face of the woman he’d just met soon appeared on the PAL’s small screen.

“That was quick,” she said curtly; her false demeanour of flirtatiousness all but disappeared.

“I’ve been waiting nearly an hour,” replied Edmonds sourly. “What kept you?”

“I was... held up,” she said uneasily, not appearing to want to elaborate. “It’s nothing to worry about. I took care of the “problem” before anything could come of it. This line is secure, so you can speak freely.”

“Good. You’re “*Dakota*”?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll get straight to the point. The O.N.I. has taken a dangerous interest in our operations over the last month or so.

They are getting very close to things we really don't want falling in to anyone else's hands.”

“Such as?”

The woman who went by “Dakota” glared at him impatiently. “I don't think I need to answer that question and you know it. Division has just received word that *Atlantis* is being re-tasked to the Phoenix Islands, and our sources inside O.N.I. suggest that things are too quiet in Admiral Hargreaves' department. We think they are going after *seaQuest* herself.”

“Pointless,” said Edmonds dismissively. “They wouldn't be able to find anything from that mess even if they want to. The hull has been completely destroyed – she's beyond salvage.”

“Not completely,” said the woman. “In all likelihood... *seaQuest*'s forward decks have survived the sinking. O.N.I. suspects this, and our own engineers have confirmed that it's possible.”

“Ok, so they have access to the bridge... aside from a bunch of rotting Macronesian bodies, what are they going to find?”

“Dakota” – presumably a codename – looked worried as she glanced off-screen several times. “...I can't say any more. This channel won't remain secure for much longer; the satellite is almost out of range. I will be leaving this colony within the next 24 hours... I suggest you do the same. But before you do, all the information and papers you need on this assignment can be found at the Mag-Lev station near your current location. Locker C-34, reserved under the name “McDowell.” Your current ID papers will get you access to it. Don't wait long.”

“Alright... thank you,” replied Edmonds.

“I don't expect we'll meet again any time soon, Captain... so good luck, and don't try and find me – I don't need the attention, and neither do you.”

“Of course.”

Without another word, the video feed ended, and Edmonds folded his PAL up and pocketed it, before heading further down the dark alley; a shortcut to the Mag-Lev train station at the colony's central port authority.

The walk was short and before long, Edmonds found himself in the lobby of Kiribati's port authority. It was fairly busy, with lines of people queuing at customs desks, and various civil security personnel keeping a watchful eye over everyone that came in and out of the complex. In truth, those ‘civil’ forces were not local; the telling red, black and gold eagle banner that hung high over the lobby – the avatar of the Macronesian Alliance – betrayed who they really worked for. One mistake by anyone in the room, and it was quite possible they would be dragged off by military police for a long and ‘tiring’ session of “Q&A”.

Casually, Edmonds walked up to the service desk and smiled at the secretary behind it. “Ah, good morning... I've got a locker booked under the name “McDowell.” I'd like to pick up the keys, thank you.”

“...Yes, certainly sir. May I see your I.D.?”

“Of course...” Reaching in to his pocket, he retrieved his wallet, and had to think twice before pulling out his I.D. – he had at least 6. Carefully picking out the appropriate one, he presented it to the secretary who quickly slipped it through a scanner which beeped quietly.

“Ah, yes... here we are...” said the Secretary, handing the I.D. card back and reaching under the desk to retrieve a key card from a drawer. “Have a good day, sir.”

“You too,” he replied pleasantly, taking the access card.

Rows of small post office-sized safe boxes met Edmonds when he entered the locker room. Seeking out box number C-34, Edmonds checked to make sure he was alone, and swiped the access card through the lock, and opened the box.

The papers inside the locker included false IDs, passports and a PDA. Turning on the palm-PC, he found a single file. It had no name. Opening it, he found something more substantial than the typical false documentations provided for intelligence operations. It contained details of a bank account in the Chaodai Confederation with over two million UEO credits deposited in his false name, and personnel file taken straight from UEO Naval Intelligence.

“Commander Jacob Voss...” whispered Edmonds. “I’m not surprised...”

~

ANS Alexander Battlegroup. 30 nautical miles west of Tuvalu in the South Pacific. December 6th, 2040...

“*Atteen-SHUN!*” snapped Lieutenant Commander Josselyn Sheridan, ‘Black Raven Three’ under Captain William Bishop’s elite 181st tactical fighter wing. 10 pairs of boots thundered with a sharp crack in the *Alexander’s* briefing room as Captain Bishop and squadron XO Commander Laney entered through a pair of double doors.

“At ease, ladies and gentlemen,” said Bishop casually as approached the dais, Laney close in tow.

Bishop quickly became aware of muttering between two of his pilots in the second row of his officers. He glared at the young Lieutenant who sat there with a smug grin on his face, and cleared his throat. “...Of course, *Lieutenant Bourne*, by all means... when you are ready?”

Lieutenant Joshua Bourne looked around to Captain Bishop, raising an eyebrow curiously as if nothing had been said. “...I’m sorry... sir?”

Before Bishop had a chance to berate the officer further, Laney did it for him through gritted teeth. “*Lieutenant...* the Captain just gave you an *order*, but perhaps you didn’t understand it, so let me put it in less subtle terms for you – **Shut. Up.**”

“Yes sir,” replied Bourne, promptly sitting back in his chair and folding his arms without another word.

Bishop repressed a wry smile. Laney always had a way with words, and he liked that; it kept pilots on their toes... although for one certain pilot in the squadron, they never seemed to get the point. Joshua Bourne – the son of a certain high-ranking politician – was a hard case in Bishop’s command. He had not entered the squadron in the same manner as all his other wingmen; they had been hand picked, evaluated and then trained by Bishop... Bourne however had been *assigned* to the squadron. It didn’t take a genius to work out who had authorized the orders, and unfortunately, Bishop was not in a position to say otherwise. Short of seeing the man killed in combat, there was very little he could do to get him out of his squadron. Bishop exchanged a knowing smile with Laney and then turned back to his pilots. “Right... on to more pressing matters... our assignment as a training squadron in this battlegroup has been officially terminated by Pacific Command,” he said. “Orders signed by General Henry Adamson himself have deployed the *Alexander* and the rest of this battlegroup on a ‘counter-patrol’ to the Phoenix islands via Tuvalu and Tokelau. As something of a... *personal request* from the General, we are now the line squadron of the *Alexander*.”

Lieutenant Commander Jiang Sakai – a national of the Chaodai confederation – stood up from his seat. “Sir. What does command mean by “counter-patrol”?”

Sakai was one of the most experienced aces in the Chaodai Confederation. Under the Black Ravens, he was fourth in command behind Josselyn Sheridan – a New Zealander – and Commander Laney; an Australian. Sakai was also one of the sternest and some might say coldest of the pilots in the squadron. It was no light joke that the man carried a Katana in the cockpit of his Lysander.

“Eager to get wet, are we Commander?” asked Bishop, lightly poking at the man in jest. “...It’s a fair question. Command has placed high priority on this mission. As of 0830 hours yesterday, a... “*carrier task force*” of the UEO third fleet crossed the Marshalls border on a direct course for the Phoenix Islands. This battlegroup’s job is to interdict that task force.”

“You mean destroy it?”

“No, I do not mean destroy it,” clarified Bishop. “Destroying the UEO battlegroup would be difficult at best. Shortly after it crossed the border, the carrier’s escorts broke off in to separate directions across the Marshalls DMZ. They’ve spread themselves over an area of nearly 1000 square nautical miles, operating independently in a manner we assume to be covert. Alliance Intelligence does not believe that the UEO’s mission is combat oriented, and separated as their ships are, they do not pose a serious threat individually to any major fleet base between here and Port Moresby. Our task is to find and shadow their carrier, and try to determine their objectives. These orders are inflexible. We will *not* engage their carrier without the explicit orders of command.”

Sheridan was frowning. These had to be some of the most bizarre orders she’d ever heard. “Commander... this... doesn’t make any sense. Using a *carrier* for an intelligence mission? And we’re *not* allowed to engage it? There is something you’re not telling us...”

Bishop regarded her sternly. “Yes, Lieutenant Commander, there *is* something I’m not telling you, and I’m not at liberty to divulge it either... What I *can* tell you is that Command fears that this mission could become a public spectacle – Intelligence suggests that one – and quite possibly more – *elite* UEO squadrons are operating from that carrier, and have said that any casualties that come as a result of engaging those squadrons would be politically unacceptable. I don’t like the situation either... I did not form this squadron to act as the playboy cover-girl of every issue of Defence Weekly, but that’s the way it’s going to be.”

“Permission to speak freely, Captain?” asked Sheridan.

“It’s never stopped you in the past, Lieutenant Commander – Speak your mind.”

“This is *bullshit*, sir. No one in this squadron signed up to be paraded around the Alliance like some kind of sideshow. The UEO is probably just as scared of losing their own pilots, but that hasn’t stopped them from putting them in harm’s way. Can you at least tell us *why* we’re being kept in the dark? And which squadrons these ‘elite’ wings are supposed to be?”

Bishop lied. “I don’t know. At this point I don’t know much more than you do. But I’m not about to put anyone here in a situation which is potentially hostile without first finding out what the hell is going on. Our immediate priority hasn’t changed – we will continue our training and fleet combat patrols, but I’m sure you’ll all be happy to know there won’t be any more simulators; we’ll be in the water more than any other squadron on this ship, so get rested... “

Bishop paused... Telling them a little more couldn't hurt, could it? He looked each of his pilots in the eye with a soft, more understanding gaze – even Bourne, and then added slowly; “...And while you didn't hear it from me... I suggest you all get your affairs in order. Record messages for your families if you feel the need. You can bring them to me, and I will put them in the dispatches with my own. Fleet command can tell us what it likes to... but mark my words – we *will* be going in to harms way. You know as well as I that no amount of red tape is going to stop that.”

Sheridan's steely gaze softened at that. “Thank you, for your candour, sir,” she said.

Bishop nodded, but wasn't prepared to say any more. “Black Ravens you are dismissed. Duty rosters and flight details will be posted by 1500. You may consider yourselves at liberty until then.”

The pilots vacated their seats quickly, some lingering behind as they started talking with each other about what they'd just been told. Bourne however didn't waste much time in heading for the door. Laney looked at Bishop expectantly from beside the dais, and the squadron commander nodded in unspoken agreement “-Lieutenant Bourne... Will you remain, please?”

Bourne stopped as he reached the door, gritting his teeth as his fellow pilots passed him, a few of them slapping him on the shoulder. As the door swung shut, he turned around and marched back towards the dais where Bishop was gathering his papers. He silently stood at attention, faintly aware of Commander Laney examining him with a prying, interrogating eye. Bishop finally looked up, and sighed. “Lieutenant... You've been in this squadron for 6 months-”

“-May I stand at ease, sir?”

“No, you may not,” replied Bishop sharply, not caring for Bourne's lack of respect earlier. “You are in this squadron because you are fortunate enough to be the President's *son*. Not because you are an outstanding pilot or officer. The least you can do is to show some *respect* for your squadron mates, Commander Laney, and myself. In fact, if I were in *your* position, Lieutenant, I'd be doing my damned hardest to set a fine example to those around me. But as it is, your attitude, your performance and your behaviour as an officer I find completely *unacceptable*. And frankly, I'm sure even your father would be interested to hear that considering this squadron's respected reputation within the subfighter corps. If you screw up over the course of this mission, I promise you, it will take far more than a letter from the President to save your career, and you will find yourself riding a desk at a seaweed farming colony on the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Captain, sir.”

“I hope so, Lieutenant,” whispered Bishop. “You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Bourne swivelled around on his heel, and marched out of the auditorium quickly. Commander Laney stroked his chin, giving Bishop a quizzical smile. “You weren't serious, were you?” he asked.

“About sending him to the Marianas? Did I sound like I was joking?”

“Well it's always hard to tell... But his attitude problems aside, he *is* a good pilot... Don't you think you were a little harsh?”

Bishop finished the last of his coffee and sat the mug down on the dais to forget about it. One of the *Alexander's* janitors would take care of it. “Dan, there are over ten thousand pilots in the subfighter corps. Anyone can be replaced, and there are more than enough people out there who would want his job given the opportunity.”

“I didn’t say there weren’t, Will... But maybe you should take a step back and think about this for a bit. You can be pretty... *passionate* about what you believe at times. Are you sure you’re not just taking it out on him because of who he is...?”

The Captain glared at his friend and colleague accusingly... but only for a moment. He knew Laney well enough to know he would never intentionally try to be disrespectful, and merely said it how it was. “...Just because he’s the President’s son doesn’t mean I have to like him. I’m not pining for promotion... and if I was, I wouldn’t stoop so low as to kiss his arse to get it.”

“You’d rather have someone else in his place?” asked Laney

“I can think of dozens of pilots I’d rather have than him... Lee Harwell, Richard Stanning... Hell, even Sobieski... *if he was still alive.*”

“Wow,” said Laney incredulously. “Now there’s a name I’ve not heard in a while... how long’s it been... seven years?”

“Eight,” corrected Bishop. “He was shot down somewhere near the Marianas with the rest of his squadron. We never did find the Spectre group that did it... We arrived to reinforce him and they’d long gone; disappeared like ghosts. All we found was wreckage.”

“Yeah, I recall reading it...” Laney paused for a moment, and then regarded the Captain with a concerned and troubled frown. “...Do you really think it’s wise not telling the squadron about what we’re doing out here? They have to find out sooner or later...”

“I’m just following orders,” replied Bishop. “I know they’ll find out we’re chasing the Rapiers sooner or later... but for whatever reason, our orders are to keep this quiet as long as possible.”

“But why all the deception?”

“I couldn’t get any straight answers out of the Admiral... But sufficed to say this mission goes high in Intelligence. Someone’s got a lot riding on us out here.”

“How high?” asked Laney curiously.

“High enough they don’t want to acknowledge it... possibly even in to the ranks of UEO intelligence.”

“Now there’s a scary thought...”

~

IV “Q & A”

UEO Atlantis DSX 8100. Somewhere north of the Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...

Alarms rang throughout every hall of the *Atlantis DSX* as crew secured general quarters and readied her for battle. The submarine was well behind the lines now; separated from any support or reinforcement – a lone wolf. Her accompanying escorts had broken formation and scattered themselves across the Fijian Basin many hours ago, and were now prowling the ocean depths for trouble; they were the eyes and ears of *Atlantis* in a place where they had no friends, no allies, and no help.

Captain Mark Ainsley stood on the *Atlantis's* upper command deck, his arms folded as he watched his bridge crew go through the many status reports that were coming in from over the ship; relaying orders to different departments, and making sure the DSV would be ready for any trouble at the drop of a hat. From now until the completion of her mission, *Atlantis* would run at condition two – all her crew would be on standby even when off duty, and weapons systems would remain online. Most noticeably for the bridge crew, a pair of UEO Marines now stood guard at each bridge entrance; each of them holding M35 carbines – a shortened, folding-stock version of the larger M31 used in the field, and seldom used aboard ship unless internal security was considered a priority. Despite all his years serving aboard carriers, Ainsley still hadn't decided if he was comforted or disturbed by the prospect of those soldiers needing such heavy firepower on his own bridge.

“Something wrong, Captain?” asked Commander Banick from beside him.

“Hmm? Oh... No, nothing's wrong... aside from being nearly 400 miles behind enemy lines with really no clue about what the hell is going on.”

“Point taken.”

Ainsley nodded slowly as he took a deep breath. “Ok. Let's get this show on the road. Have all senior officers meet me in the briefing room in five minutes – and that includes Commander Voss. I think it's about time he explained a few things to the rest of the crew.”

“Will do, sir.”

Ainsley sat with his back to the briefing room window, overlooking the sea outside, and the aft hull of the *Atlantis* below the observation level of the submarine's forward command decks; everything from the arrow-head bow's two canards to the missile tubes beyond, and the midship navigational fins along the dorsal hull. It was a big ship, and appeared especially impressive from this room. Two flags flanked the long set of observation windows; one bearing the ship's delta, surrounded by a wreath of laurel leaves, and the other bore the gold trident crest of the UEO. Ainsley's chair sat right in the middle of the two flags. Whoever had designed the room certainly had ‘grandeur’ in mind... Ainsley didn't overly approve of the “self indulging” position he now sat in, even if whoever believed it was appropriate did. In his opinion, there should have been no ‘exclusiveness’ amongst officers. Especially on this ship; a vessel that was supposed to represent the very best of the UEO.

The computer in front of him had a long briefing which Ainsley had spent nearly 3 hours preparing earlier that morning. Finally, the door to the briefing room

opened and James Banick entered, leading a line of officers – Callaghan, Canebride, Hayes, Cortez, Hitchcock and Voss – who did not look too pleased.

“Ah, please have a seat,” said Ainsley, looking up from the computer. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice... I know that with the ship secured at condition two, things are unusually chaotic around here, so we’ll try to make this brief.”

The officers sat down, and Ainsley eyed Voss and Banick slowly and deliberately. “I’ve called this briefing to make sure you are *all* informed of what is going on,” he began slowly, eliciting a series of curious and suspicious expressions from the other officers. “As you are all undoubtedly aware, Commander Jacob Voss has joined us for the duration of this mission to facilitate a liaison to UEO Naval Intelligence. What you do not know is *why*.”

“We have our... *suspicions*, sir,” confirmed Canebride with a slight smile.

“Yes, I’m sure you do. That’s why Commander Voss here is going to tell you everything he knows regarding our mission.”

All eyes locked on the intelligence officer, and Voss looked pensive. He had seen this coming, but at least knew professional courtesy when it was called for. There would be no easy way to get out of this without annoying his so-far gracious hosts beyond reason. “Captain Ainsley... while I would be happy to inform your officers of the situation... I’m afraid I’ve not had the chance to prepare any notes...”

Ainsley smirked slightly, turning the computer screen around to reveal the briefing notes he’d been reviewing. “Not to worry, Commander... I took the liberty of doing that for you.”

...Lieutenant Jane Roberts twirled around quickly, her long black hair whipping up and shining in the dim lighting of the *Atlantis’s* empty gymnasium. The sword she held in her hands gleamed brightly as it came down and cut through the air repeatedly with rapid and accurate blows against nothing but her mind. The sword was a Katana – a very old Japanese blade which had been in her family for well over 200 years. It was in near perfect condition; the lace-bound *tsuka* (or hilt) made up the original handle of the sword; complete with ivory carvings, bronze *tsuba* and bamboo bracings. Putting one foot in front of the other, she struck again, this time lower as she spun on her heel and changed direction, breathing with slow, controlled breaths. Swinging around again, she brought the blade down once more... and stopped mere inches from Lieutenant Thomas Reynold’s chest. She blinked once or twice, her stance unmoving; too shocked to even lift the blade away.

If Roberts was shocked, then Reynolds was terrified as he moved one of his upheld hands down and gingerly pinched the sword with his thumb and index finger before pushing it away slowly. “Wow,” he said with held breath, casting a weary eye over her; she was stripped to the waist, wearing merely a tight black singlet and jumpsuit trousers. Her hair was down. “That’s sexy,” he said, doing his best to repress a grin.

“Shut the hell up,” she snapped, bringing the sword down.

“You know I’m a big Tarantino fan,” said Reynolds, no longer able to hide his smile.

“Let me guess... you like Japanese girls who play with Samurai swords... Just another bloody American you are.”

“I resent that, Jane,” he said, feigning hurt.

She held out the sword. “Here. Make yourself useful and hold this... assuming you’re not holding one *already*.”

“Sure...” he said, taking the Katana gently by the hilt and examining its length. It was a beautiful blade; the waved pattern of the *hamon* - or tang - was genuine – which was impressive by any standard. It was the mark of a well-made sword; he was holding the real thing – it was no showroom piece; this blade was made by someone who intended it be used as a weapon. “Beautiful...” he remarked, trying to divert his eyes from Roberts as she changed back in to her uniform in the corner of the room. He gripped the handle firmly with both hands, following through with several quick cuts, eyeing the length of the blade as he did. “Gorgeous balance... Wonderful lines.” He smiled wryly, having picked his words very deliberately.

Roberts however either pretended she didn’t hear, or brushed it aside as she zipped up her uniform jacket half way, and started rolling up the sleeves. “It was my great grandfather’s,” she said, taking the sword from Reynolds, checking the blade carefully before wiping over where he had handled it, leaving fingerprints on its otherwise unmarked and gleaming surface. Returning it to its sheath, she looked up at him blankly. “What are you doing here? You seem to be running in to me a lot lately.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” he answered.

“No, of course not,” she replied, heading for the door. He followed quickly to keep up. “How did you find me, anyway?”

“I figured after they removed your cast that you’d be down here to loosen up a bit.”

“Lucky guess,” she said, working her arm slightly. “It almost feels weird without the thing now.”

“Yeah,” said Reynolds flatly. “...I noticed you weren’t at the squadron briefing this morning.”

“Ah,” she realised with a smile. “So that’s why you’re down here. Don’t worry about it; Commander Hitchcock forwarded me everything on the briefing last night.”

“He knew you wouldn’t be there?”

“Yeah - was checking in with Doc Reed getting that cast removed. There wasn’t much in the briefing that I didn’t already figure out. Same old stuff really... *Atlantis* does its business and we fly recon to keep the Macs busy. Easy.”

Reynolds looked at her sceptically. “Funny. You weren’t there to see the Spectre pilot’s faces – they looked like they were about to shit themselves when the Wing Commander told them. You make it sound easy.”

“...It *is* easy,” she repeated, sounding bored. “Well... at least I *think* it will be easy...”

Reynolds grinned. “What? You’re not the goddess in the cockpit you thought you were?”

With little warning, Robert’s left fist came up and hit Reynolds in the shoulder hard, causing him to jump back slightly in shock. “Ouch,” he said. “Touchy today, aren’t we?”

Roberts stopped in the middle of the hallway, turning quickly to lock her eyes on his. It took her a minute to gather herself, and she had to look down, as if ashamed by something she hadn’t mentioned. “...I’m...”

Reynolds frowned, realising something was wrong, and dropped his hard shell to let her in. “Jane... What’s wrong?”

She finally looked at him. “I’ve been removed from the duty roster. Doctor Reed... he failed me on my medical. I’m being transferred as soon as we get back to Pearl.”

“What?” whispered Reynolds with shock; they couldn’t do this... Roberts was the best pilot on *Atlantis*. Her past mistakes aside, Reynolds could not think of a single person he’d rather have flying his wing. “... You can’t be serious...”

Broken up, Roberts reached in to her jumpsuit’s pocket and retrieved a folded sheet of paper. Opening it, she handed it to Reynolds, not looking at it.

Frowning, he took the sheet and read it. It was a signed, hard copy of the medical exam she’d been given that morning. It was a perfect report in almost every respect... except for when he read Doctor Reed’s comments on her injuries. “*In his professional opinion*”, she no longer had the physical strength or self control to discharge her duties as a fighter pilot. He had detailed in full the circumstances (the *real* circumstances) in which she’d gotten the injuries, and had cited them as part of his reasons for recommending she be relieved of duty. This wouldn’t just end her career as a fighter pilot - it would effectively end her career in the Navy.

“I’m... not sure who’s going to take my place,” she said, “But I’m sorry I won’t be flying your wing out there, Tom... I just don’t know what I’m going to do any more.”

“Jane...” he said slowly, shaking his head, lost for words. “I just... don’t understand how this happened. Commander Hitchcock, Captain Ainsley... they both-“

“-I know... they both knew the truth. But Doctor Reed is the ship’s physician. His judgement on this overrides both the Wing Commander *and* the Captain. I don’t know what to do...”

“Does the Commander know?”

Roberts shook her head. “Not yet... The truth is, I went down to the gym as soon as I left sickbay. I just needed to blow off steam...”

Reynolds smiled weakly. “Well trying to run me through with a sword is certainly a good way of doing that...”

Roberts returned the smile, shaking her head, and then turned away helplessly, leaving Reynolds with the report, and a lot of unanswered questions. Walking down the hall, she stopped after a few steps, and turned to face him again. “...Chrysanthemums” she said after a moment.

“What?”

“Chrysanthemum...” she repeated. “Japanese flower. I like them. They remind me of home. Next time you want to try and ask me out for dinner... You might like to bring some.”

She smiled slightly as she turned and walked away, the Katana still hanging from her side. Reynolds shook his head. She was the most fascinating person he’d ever met, and definitely one of the most striking.

“... I’ll remember that.”

~

Unknown Location, Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...

Jeff Edmonds tapped away at his keyboard in his small, cramped quarters aboard the fast corvette raider which he’d chartered from Tuvalu Colony. It had not been cheap; the owner – a regular intelligence contact - asking nearly a million UEO credits for Edmond’s use of the submarine. Finishing his report, he logged on to an encrypted server, and sent the file on its way; lost in a network of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of secured, untraceable “black” servers across the globe.

Switching off the computer, he closed it and then walked out of the cabin to the cockpit where his intelligence contact sat behind the controls nervously. Ahead of him, past the glass of the Raider’s canopy, in the dark waters beyond, was the ominous, black silhouette of a Macronesian *Honorious*-class Carrier.

“Are you sure they won’t detect us?” asked the officer.

“I’m certain,” replied Edmonds as he straightened his black Macronesian officer’s uniform. It had Intelligence officer’s insignia on it to the rank of Captain, high enough that it would get him access to most locations in the Alliance without much question, and low enough so that it wouldn’t draw unwanted attention. “The modifications I made will keep us virtually invisible to their sensors at this speed. Just make sure you keep us in their wake.”

“And what about the Lysander patrols?”

“They won’t be a problem.”

“How can you be sure?”

Edmonds shook his head with growing impatience. “Because I know how Lysander patrols operate, and we are no where near their fleet defence perimeter.”

“I don’t understand... Why the cloak and dagger? Why can’t we just tell them we’re approaching and request permission to board? You told me you had all the appropriate authorizations.”

“We do,” he answered quietly. “And it shouldn’t be any of your concern, either. Stop asking questions and start paying attention to driving this piece of crap.”

“It should be my concern...” complained the pilot under his breath. “It’s not just your life on the line...”

Edmonds stared at the pilot icily. “...Do I need to remind you who you work for, and what they could easily do to you?”

“...No, you don’t...” replied the pilot meekly.

Edmonds turned to the computer console beside him and pulled up a detailed schematic of the carrier ahead. The *Honorious* class was 260 meters long, had a wingspan of 120 meters, and displaced just over 40,000 tonnes. It was one of the largest submarines in full scale production anywhere in the world... and also one of the most dangerous. The schematics showed 8 auto-loading torpedo tubes, 4 heavy “Minotaur” Subduction Cannons (Weapons capable of reducing the heaviest of hulls to molecular slag in seconds) and highlighted flight bay airlocks which had the capacity to disgorge over 70 Lysander class fighters. Any wise mercenary or smuggler would do well to steer clear of Macronesia’s flagship carrier class, and this one – the *Alexander* – even more so; arrayed in formation around the ship were nearly a dozen other warships; attack submarines, cruisers, frigates and even lighter carriers. Edmonds wouldn’t admit it, but he was very nervous about what they were about to do.

“The ventral hull of the carrier...” he directed to the pilot. “About 50 feet forward of the rudders, there is a maintenance airlock. Bring us in there.”

“They will detect us if we get that close... And we’ll have Marines all over us if we try and dock.”

“Let me deal with that,” said Edmonds, walking aft towards the small raider’s airlock. “Just get us under that carrier.”

...Five minutes later, and Edmonds was geared up in a high pressure water-tight diving suit. It would protect him to a depth no greater than 600 feet, but the oxygen supply would be a problem. The compressed helium tank on his back was only small, and would be good for only about 10 minutes at most at this depth.

Breathing helium certainly wasn't the brightest of ideas for one's health over extended periods, so he'd have to make his trip short. “Radio check,” he said in to his helmet microphone. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I can hear you. Are you in the airlock?”

“Yes... Have you got us under the carrier's hull?”

“...Believe me when I tell you this is as close as I ever want to get to an *Honorious* class carrier,” came the unhappy reply.

Edmonds gritted his teeth. His “companion” was testing his patience. “That wasn't the question.”

“...Yes, we're under the *Alexander's* hull. The maintenance hatch is about 30 feet above your head.”

“Fine. We've only got a very small window before that subfighter squadron makes another pass. You have exactly 4 minutes to get clear from now. I'll contact you once I've finished the job.”

“Yes sir... Good luck.”

Edmonds gritted his teeth again, grudgingly grateful for the man's sentiment. “...Thanks.”

Taking one final breath of the oxygenated atmosphere in the airlock of the corvette, Edmonds turned on the flow valve of the helium tank and switched on his suit systems - starting with the voice regulator. Then, checking the seal on the door below him, he began equalizing the pressure to the sea outside. It would take about 2 minutes for the airlock to compress to the 270-psi pressure of the sea outside. Any faster, and his body would begin haemorrhaging from every orifice, resulting in death from a very extreme case of the bends not long after. He worked his jaw slowly, causing his ears to ‘pop’ several times as the pressure increased.

Finally, the airlock began to fill with water. He had just two minutes now. The suit was made of carbon nano-tube material, and had about 4 or 5 layers of weatherproofing to keep him warm and dry. The suit alone cost a fortune, and the people at Optec who had put it together for him had stressed that they wanted it back in one piece. When the external airlock hatch finally opened, Edmonds had to take a moment to calm himself as he stared out in to the murky darkness of the ocean outside. Both the corvette and the carrier above him were doing close to 40 knots – 70 kilometers per hour. Fastening the cable tether to the exterior handle of the airlock, he pushed himself up and floated out of the airlock, suddenly finding himself caught in the drag of the speed-induced currents outside. Slowly, he loosed the tether through his belt harness, and swam upwards letting the currents drag him back towards the airlock above. He mentally asked himself the question of what the hell he was doing more than once as he stared down the ominous, black length of the Macronesian subcarrier, surrounded by nothing but the abyss of the Pacific Ocean. Of course, aside from knocking on the hatch, he couldn't think of another way of getting aboard the ship that didn't involve being shot, torpedoed, or worse. Macronesians could be very imaginative people.

The current was strong; strong enough that Edmonds nearly overshot his target on the Macronesian ship's hull. Letting one gloved hand off the tether, he lashed a gloved hand out to snatch at the edge of the airlock, taking hold with a strained grasp. Pulling himself on to the airlock, he attached a second tether to the latch there, and then undid the tether that still tied him to his speeder below. “Ok... I'm on the outer hull... You have 47 seconds before those fighters pass again. Get out of here *now*.”

“Will do.”

Edmonds watched through his helmet visor as his transport dove in to the darkness below, leaving him alone, clinging to the underside of the 40,000-tonne carrier’s keel. Below his feet there was nothing but the Pacific. Quickly, he worked to get the hatch open via the override panel...

Alexander’s bridge was situation normal as far as the officer of the deck was concerned. The fleet was deployed looking for the UEO taskforce which had slipped through the frontlines. So far, they’d found nothing. The OOD put his head in his hand and he settled down in the command chair at the Conn. It had been a very long morning.

A small alarm from the security station prompted him to look up sceptically. “Mister Carlson... is there a problem?”

“Urm, possibly sir... We’ve got a ventral maintenance airlock on E-deck that was just opened.”

“What? Have we picked up anything on hypersonar?”

“No sir. Breach is local... no craft has docked, departed or approached for the last 30 minutes... unless you include our Lysanders.”

The OOD frowned. “I’ll wake the Captain. We should probably-“

“Sir? We *could* simply send security down there to check it out. It wouldn’t take more than 5 minutes. It’s probably just a malfunction.”

The OOD nodded slowly, thinking about it for a moment before making his decision. “Alright. Seal the hatch now and send down a few marines to check that area. You’re right, it’s probably a malfunction. But we’d better check to be sure.”

“Yes sir. I’ll get on it...”

Edmonds moved swiftly through the bowels of the Alliance carrier. He was literally walking on the inner pressure hull; this far down inside the ship, there was no ‘deck’, and systems in this area were limited mostly to utilitarian machinery – air conditioning, bilge, plumbing, water and gas; nothing essential to the ship’s combat systems. Tucked away inside an old janitor’s closet, he had hidden his EVA suit and was now carrying nothing more than ID papers and his PDA. He guessed that his forced entry of the airlock would have aroused some attention on the *Alexander’s* bridge, and he fully expected to be paid a visit by security shortly. While he could almost certainly use the labyrinth of maintenance systems to pick off and kill the team, he didn’t have that luxury this time. The ship had a crew of over 500, and he didn’t need to fight them all.

Flashlights ahead made him stop his advance, and quickly duck down a side corridor out of sight....

...The 4 Macronesian Marines rounded the corner down the hall with their weapons levelled, and torches fixed securely beneath the rifle muzzles. Each of them checked the alcoves they passed, fingers held lightly over the triggers. Coming to the airlock, they stopped, checking it for tampering, and running their lights around the compartment thoroughly. “Deader than Keith Richards ...” one of them observed.

“Yeah... Bloody hell you’d think they could at least run some ventilation systems through this part of the ship. It *stinks* down here...”

“No wonder the engineers hate the maintenance shifts here...”

“Keep it quiet,” reprimanded the Sergeant as he looked carefully down the access ways running from bow to stern. “I thought I heard something...”

“What?”

“I dunno...” said the Sergeant, approaching the alcove where Edmonds had disappeared, rifle levelled and at the ready. A maintenance hatch leading in to the pressure hull below was on the bulkhead in front of him. Signalling quickly to his men, he quietly edged forward, grabbed the handle... and wrenched it open.

The 3 other Marines shone their lights in to the hole, only to see a rat squeal as it ran out and disappeared under the submarine’s framework.

“Ah, shit,” said one of the troopers. “You wait till we tell the Chief we still haven’t gotten these fucking rats out of here. He’ll be pissed.”

“Great,” said the Sergeant, raising his rifle. “Rats and shadows. Let’s get back top-side. I’m frigging hungry.”

“Right, sir.”

Giving up, the Sergeant hit his radio. “Corporal Danes, this is Sergeant Franklin. We’ve cleared this area... What’s your status, over?”

“Danes here, sir. We’ve finished our sweep; it’s clean sir. If there was a boarding party down here, I think we would have found them by now.”

The Sergeant smiled to himself. “Right. We’re heading back upstairs. See you back at the shop, acknowledge.”

“Wilco, out.”

As the Marines clambered up the access ladder to E-deck above, Edmonds stepped out of an office on the same deck, finding himself face to face with the Sergeant who had just been looking for him. Edmonds – always the cool customer – glared at the Sergeant with his cold, hard eyes. His uniform; that of a Macronesian Intelligence officer; scared the Marine. The Alliance Security and Intelligence Service (ASIS) was not known to be forthcoming about its operations and even the internal ranks of Macronesia feared it. “Is there a problem, Sergeant?” asked Edmonds, as he looked down at the Marine who had nearly run in to him.

“Urm, no. I’m sorry, Captain...?”

“-You don’t need to know who I am, Sergeant,” snapped Edmonds as he handed him a PDA which had his cover papers on it. “Did you find anything?”

“No, sir,” replied the Sergeant briskly. “Just rats...”

“Hmm. Very well. Carry on.”

“Yes sir, thank you, sir.”

Edmonds returned the Sergeant’s salute and then carried on down the hall in the opposite direction to the Marines. He didn’t get far as one the Sergeant stopped, and turned around quickly. “...Captain!” he called.

Edmonds stopped, a sudden rush of adrenaline running through him. “...Yes, Sergeant?”

“Sir, how did you know we were looking for something?”

Edmonds’s deadpan expression betrayed nothing. “I make it my *business* to know the security arrangements on this ship, Sergeant. My line of work is highly sensitive, and any potential security breach *becomes* my business.”

The Sergeant nodded, suddenly becoming sorry that he’d even asked the question.

Few things could scare a soldier; especially a Marine. But staring in to the Intelligence Officer’s eyes, he knew what fear was. Edmonds turned on his heel, regarding the soldier coldly once more, and then walked away.

...Spies and espionage were the last things on Captain Bishop’s mind as he slid down the steep staircase to the hangar deck below and then made his way to the long line of 12 Lysanders that sat on the carrier’s aft flight deck. The cavernous

hangar bay ceilings were over 4 floors above him, the complex mass of gantries, gangways and reinforcing framework made discerning any sort of ‘structure’ to the flight bays nearly impossible. Strapping his helmet on as he approached the fighters and the gathered pilots who stood around them, he saluted and then put his gloves on.

“Ladies and Gentlemen... we have recon,” he announced. “The call just came in. Our job is to sweep the Hemmingway Trench and locate the *seaQuest DSV*.”

“*seaQuest*, sir?” asked Flight Officer Horowitz. “Why are we looking for a downed UEO submarine?”

“We’re not,” answered Bishop. “But we suspect the UEO *is*.”

“Our mystery UEO carrier, sir?”

“That’s the idea. We are to patrol the Hemmingway trench ahead of the *Alexander* and report any activity we find. This is a simple mission, people, and I stress that it is strictly *recon*. Our Lysanders have been armed accordingly, so should you encounter UEO forces, you are not to engage without clearance.”

“Standard ROE?” asked Commander Sheridan.

“Yes, for the most part. Are there any other questions?”

No one said a thing.

“Good. We deploy at twenty-hundred hours ship-standard. Dismissed.”

~

V
ENGAGEMENT

**UEO Atlantis DSX 8100. Somewhere north of the Phoenix Islands,
Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...**

Hell hath no fury like a fighter pilot scorned, and anyone watching Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock storm in to the Chief Medical Officer's office in *Atlantis's* ship's hospital would have thought that Armageddon itself was about to arrive. The piece of paper he held in his fist was wrinkled where his knuckles gripped it with rage. He felt betrayed, he felt undermined, and he even felt insulted. Doctor Reed had gone against his judgement, wishes and authority on one of his officers, and he would not stand for it.

He didn't bother knocking when he got to Doctor Michael Reed's office, instead just pushing open the door and walking in. "Doctor Reed... we need to have a word."

Michael Reed looked up from his desk and something he had been typing, and took a deep breath. He'd seen this coming. "Wing Commander... I'm sure I don't need to take too many guesses to find out why you feel the need to just barge in to my office."

"I'm going to be blunt with you, Doc. Screw pleasantries. I want to know why you felt the need to go over my head, ignore the Captain, and then screw over my best fighter squadron."

Reed shook his head. "I don't suppose you'd like to have a seat?"

"No, I'll stand."

"Fine. Then let me be equally forthcoming with you, Commander. Lieutenant Roberts put herself and her wingmen in danger when she pulled that stunt. Her injuries a couple of weeks ago were severe enough that I wasn't even sure she'd wake up again. Her actions were negligent, unprofessional and *stupid*. In my opinion as Chief Medical Officer, she is not fit to be sitting in the cockpit of a subfighter until a psychological exam has been carried out followed by an intensive review from her peers in command."

Hitchcock blinked several times in disbelief. "I'm sorry... did you just say psychological examination? Last I checked, my Lieutenant wasn't mentally unstable – she had a broken arm."

"-Which she injured in circumstances that I can only begin to describe as reprehensible!" argued the Doctor.

"She was reprimanded as I saw fit, Doctor. It is not *your* responsibility to deal with. Your *only* job is to see to it she gets back in that cockpit. And frankly, you seem to be do everything but!"

"Did you read my entire report, Commander?" protested the Doctor. "I cited *many* reasons for relieving her of duty. Her injuries were severe, she *failed* her physical examination."

Hitchcock laughed as he unfolded the sheet of paper and read over it. "What I read here, Doctor is a *concern* for the patient's mobility in the left forearm as a result of transverse spiral and comminuted fractures to the Ulna and Radius."

"Concern for a patient's mobility is perfectly legitimate grounds for failing a physical examination, Commander."

“Mobility... You know what’s funny, Doctor? Lieutenant Tom Reynolds told me that when he found Roberts in the gymnasium yesterday, she nearly cut him in half from head to toe with a Samurai sword. How is that for mobility?”

The Doctor looked at Hitchcock with unimpressed scepticism. “Commander... I am not going to rationalize my decisions for you. You have my report, and I stand by it.”

Hitchcock shook his head in disgust. “Mark my words doctor; you have not heard the end of this...”

Commander James Banick grinned stupidly at Natalie Canebride as she stepped backwards out of his door frame and smiled at him warmly. “So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Count on it,” she replied quietly. Then, waving at him, she turned and headed down the corridor. Banick didn’t look out after her as he closed the hatch to his quarters and sighed lightly.

Relationships didn’t bother him in the slightest, if his reputation spoke for anything. He hadn’t been able to keep a woman down for more than a month or two so far, but there was only so much one could do aboard a submarine before conversations began to devolve to awkward silence... Not that he ever *needed* to talk that much he reconsidered, as his smile turned wry. Banick made a mental note that as soon as *Atlantis* returned to Pearl Harbor, he would take Natalie to the most extravagant restaurant he could find. Until then, the Officer’s Mess was the best they had.

Walking to the small servery in the corner of the room, Banick pulled a glass from under the bench and filled it with water before sitting down on one of the two lounges his quarters had been furnished with. His night shift began in about 10 minutes, and with the DSV running on alert, he doubted that Captain Ainsley would want him to be late.

There was a rapping on his door. He smiled, half expecting to find Canebride back outside the hatch waiting for him. But opening it however, he was a little surprised to see Commander Jacob Voss, the Intel Officer, standing quietly in the hall.

“Commander Voss?” asked Banick in surprise. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Well, yes, Commander... there is.”

“Do you want to come in?”

Voss hesitated a moment, but thought the better of discussing potentially sensitive material in an open corridor of *Atlantis’s* officer’s country. “...Sure. Thanks.”

The XO nodded, stepping aside and allowing Voss to enter the room. Closing the door, he smiled at the otherwise humourless Intelligence officer and looked around. “Can I get you anything?”

“Urm, no... Thank you. I’d like to keep this as brief as possible.”

“Ah... You Intelligence types really are all work and no play, aren’t you? I don’t think I’ve seen you take a break once since you came aboard.”

Voss pulled his lips in to a tight line, and ignored the comment. “Captain Ainsley suggested that if there was anything I need, I approach you about it. I need access to *Atlantis’s* computer records.”

“Well... that shouldn’t be a problem,” said Banick simply. “I can probably arrange that as-“

“*Unrestricted* access,” clarified Voss quickly.

That stopped Banick. “Commander... *Atlantis’s* computer records include command codes for weapons, ship control, back-logged nuclear attack protocols and global fleet deployment reports. I can’t give you that kind of access, Commander. Not without violating about three dozen federal laws. Even I don’t have full access to the computer core’s central database. Only Captain Ainsley has that level of authority.”

“Then are you able to speak to him about it?”

Banick still looked shocked by the request. “Voss... I... Really don’t know if I can get this for you. I can ask the Captain, but I sincerely doubt he’s just about to give you full unrestricted access to the ship’s computer on a whim. It would help if I had a reason to give him...?”

“I can’t tell you that. I need to analyse the backlogged command protocols of this ship on the day you engaged and destroyed *seaQuest*. There may be something there that could...”

“That could what?”

“...That could indicate how *seaQuest* was captured. You know that Naval Intelligence suspects the Deadman codes were used to override command and control of the sub, but it’s only a suspicion. We don’t know for sure. There may be something deep within *Atlantis’s* command logs that could verify it.”

“Wait a minute...” said Banick as he worked out the logic of the suggestion in his head. “How is something in *our* computer going to tell you if Deadman codes were used on *seaQuest’s* systems?”

Voss looked nervous. “Commander, I need you to trust me. There is so much riding on this. I’ve already told you possibly more than I should have. Please speak to the Captain as soon as you can.”

Banick nodded as he swallowed the last of the water in his glass. “I’m due on the bridge in about 5 minutes. I’ll bring it to his attention, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Any time.”

Captain Ainsley sat on the bridge with a cup of coffee and a pile of department reports to work through on his PDA. It was now 2030 hours, and the night shift was about to begin. *Atlantis* was now operating at a depth of 12,000 feet, and was about 450 miles from the closest friendly line. Ahead of her lay the Phoenix Islands, and below them, a complex network of trenches, ridges and undersea canyons that hid their target – the *seaQuest DSV*.

In front of him, Commander Gabriel Hitchcock was still in a furore over the report which he’d just given to the Captain regarding Lieutenant Roberts’s imminent reassignment pending a Court Martial. Ainsley was disappointed by Doctor Reed’s report; a nagging annoyance in the back of his mind that he would go over his head to remove one of *Atlantis’s* best pilots from active duty at a time when he needed every fighter pilot he had.

“Alright, Commander,” said Ainsley, “I’m not in a position to overrule the Chief Medical Officer without putting his conduct in question, and I don’t exactly feel like losing my CMO right now, you understand,”

“Yes sir, I appreciate that... But even you must agree that by cutting pilots loose on the grounds of one mistake *here* and *now* is a very bad idea. The Doctor is not the most... *tactically minded* officer on this ship. I don’t expect him to understand why this is a mistake, but I hoped you would.”

“And I do,” clarified Ainsley matter-of-factly, putting the cup of coffee down beside him. “But I can’t overrule the Doctor’s decision on this... It *is* his prerogative to make these judgements. In the short term, there is little I can do. But when we get back to Pearl Harbor, I will do everything I can to get the Lieutenant reinstated. I know it doesn’t help *now*, but it’s the best I can do. I’m sorry.”

“-*If* we get back, sir,” corrected Hitchcock with a worried smile.

“Let’s not think about that just yet, Gabe.”

“Yes sir.”

“Right. Dismissed.”

On his way out of the bridge, Hitchcock brushed past Commander Banick, who stopped and turned quickly. “Oh, Wing Commander... I heard about Lieutenant Roberts... I was sorry to hear about Doctor Reed’s report.”

“Yeah,” said Hitchcock with displeasure. “So was I.”

Banick could see that the Wing Commander was understandably angry, and so, didn’t push the issue as he stormed out without a goodbye or thank you. He couldn’t blame the man for being annoyed.

Banick whistled as he approached Captain Ainsley on the command deck. “Wow, if I didn’t know any better, I’d swear someone was about to die by the look on Hitchcock’s face.”

“If looks could kill, is that right, Commander?”

“Yes sir.”

“I sympathise with his situation... Doctors have a habit of-“

Ainsley didn’t get a chance to finish as an alarm sounded over the bridge, and the cool, blue light that was cast over the walls and ceilings turned blood red; battlestations.

“General Quarters!” exclaimed Lieutenant Commander Ryan Callaghan from tactical.

Ainsley’s hands were working over his side console before Callaghan had even finished saying it. The tactical display was relayed to his station, and Ainsley stared at the image which had prompted the call to battlestations. “Your report, Commander?”

“Forward sensors just detected a squadron of Macronesian Lysander class subfighters at a range of 12 miles sir. They just broke out of a trench long enough for hypersonar to identify them. They’re closing fast.”

“How fast?”

“230 knots, sir.”

Banick quickly did the math in his head. “At that speed, sir, they will be here in just over 3 minutes. Should I scramble fighters?”

Ainsley didn’t need to think twice. “Get the ‘Rapiers’ in the water, *now*.”

...Wing Commander Hitchcock was already on the flight deck by the time the call came for the VF-107 ‘Rapiers’ to hit the water and scramble. The 12 gleaming teeth-nosed Raptor subfighters sat on their stands; the mechanics and ground crews clearing away the last of ammunition trolleys and fuel cell trucks so the pilots could get to their craft.

Throwing himself on the cockpit ladder and clambering up the side of the Raptor’s nose, Hitchcock didn’t need to look around to know that the other pilots of the squadron would be doing the same thing – they all understood where they had to be...

...*Except one.*

“*Commander!*” called a familiar voice from behind him. Hitchcock paused at the top of the ladder, and turned around to see Lieutenant Jane Roberts standing under him, her face both hopeful and anxious. He knew what she was going to ask before she opened her mouth.

“Not this time, Jane,” he replied. “We’ll discuss this when I get back... just sit tight, ok?”

Roberts knew better than to argue, and nodded. “Yes sir... Give them hell for me, ok?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Lieutenant,” Hitchcock saluted, strapped on his mask, and then nodded reassuringly as the cockpit canopy slid closed and sealed. Roberts returned the salute, and then stepped back, watching as the Raptor was lowered down in to a long drop-shaft to the hydrosphere and sea doors below. Seconds later, the heavy steel pressure doors either side of the shaft clamped shut, sealing the hangar deck from the sea below.

“Good luck,” said Roberts quietly. There was nothing more she could do.

“...Flight Ops, this is Rapier One, we’re in the water and proceeding to the target,” said Hitchcock in to his radio headset as his Rapier rapidly shot out of the *Atlantis’s* submerged docking bays and cleared in to the pitch black sea outside. Above his Canopy, the monolithic bow of the DSV flew by at nearly 300 knots, its floodlights being the only thing to bring light to the dark ocean. At this depth, there was no light from the surface, and the temperature outside was close to zero degrees Celsius. It was one of the most unforgiving environments on Earth, and many pilots now called it their grave.

“Rapier One, this is *Atlantis* control, Time to enemy intercept is now 1 minute and 47 seconds. Be advised you are weapons free and cleared to engage.”

“Understood, command. Wilco, out.” Hitchcock noticed the dark silhouettes of the other Rapier subfighters flying either side of his wing – eleven in total. With a flick of his thumb, he switched the radio over to the open-squadron frequency. Every word said by any pilot could be heard on this channel, and he was relieved to find that his pilots were not using it for chatter. “Rapiers, we are weapons free. Hostiles are inbound; you are cleared to engage on-sight. Let’s make this clean, boys and girls, we are on the clock.”

...Now less than 5 miles away, Captain William Bishop and the ‘Black Ravens’ Lysanders tore through the Hemmingway trench at alarming speed. They were oblivious to the oncoming Raptors ahead of them in the underwater valley, and it was pitch black outside. He couldn’t see 40 feet in front of his fighter without the aid of his Heads-Up-Display, which highlighted virtually the jagged canyon walls ahead, allowing him to guide his fighter through the twisting turns and embankments without trouble. His fighter’s hypersonar scanned the trench ahead, probing the depths for anything and everything that was not a natural geological formation. These kinds of conditions had Bishop running on instinct and feeling alone; one wrong slip and his fighter would careen in to the canyon walls, its titanium hull being reduced to a splintered metal smear across the rock face. That thought alone kept him alert enough to register the momentary blip on his hypersonar as his fighter briefly rounded in to a straight that gave him a good half mile of clear trench. Whatever it was disappeared a split-second later, but he knew better than to pass it off as a glitch, and instinctively

dove down lower in to the trench. “Ravens... I just picked up an unknown contact bearing zero-zero-zero dead ahead. Stay sharp...”

“Affirmative.”

ANS *Alexander*. 20 miles south of the Hemmingway Trench, Phoenix Islands. Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...

Standing in the Combat Information Center of the carrier *Alexander*, Admiral Sark listened to the radio chatter of the ‘Black Ravens’ as they tore through the Hemmingway trench at speed she was tempted to call ‘reckless’. Beside her, the Carrier’s commanding officer, Captain Weyland, appeared nervous. “Trouble?” he asked.

“I hope not,” replied the Admiral in a hushed voice, making sure no one else around her overheard. “If we’re going to find the *seaQuest* before *Atlantis* does, then “trouble” is the last thing we need.”

“Raven lead, this is five – I just picked it up as well. Range is 4 miles.”

“I see it... And they’ve probably seen us. All wings be advised; there is a break in the trench coming up. Break by flight numbers and split up – stay frosty and ID the target.”

The radio chatter continued, and Weyland let out a long breath which he’d been holding. “I don’t like this...” he said. “This has ‘trap’ written all over it.”

“Bishop is better than that,” replied Sark. “Give him a chance...”

All eyes in the CIC were glued to the tactical displays which showed the advance of the Lysanders up the long trench. The tension was thick enough that no one noticed the Intelligence Officer at the back of the CIC who was watching and recording the sortie from an auxiliary control station. Rapidly typing in commands to the station that covered his tracks in the *Alexander’s* computer, Jeff Edmonds paid close attention to every detail of sensor data that the vaunted “Black Ravens” sent back to the carrier. The Hemmingway trench, he knew, was a natural trench formation that ran along the sea floor as an extension of the Tongan trench just north of New Zealand, and stretched up along the 170th western meridian for over two thousand nautical miles, and was on average 5 miles deep. It had many hundreds of tributary canyons and valleys, and trying to navigate it was a challenge to the best of pilots.

Edmonds had little doubt in his mind that the ‘contact’ which the ‘Black Ravens’ had detected was – in all probability – the Raptor screen of the *Atlantis DSX*. He knew that by now, the big submarine would have to be somewhere nearby, likely hiding in one of the trench’s many cross-canyons. It annoyed him that these Raptors had decided to interfere *now* when Bishop’s Lysanders were so close to finding *seaQuest*. As soon as they’d done that, he could leave the *Alexander* and complete his mission.

Finding the 1000-foot-long submarine, however, was proving to be a problem. The only thing that both Macronesia and the UEO Navy knew was that she had foundered about 80 miles south of the Phoenix Islands in the Hemmingway trench after *Atlantis* had blown her to pieces less than 3 weeks earlier. Her final resting place was not known, and with so few resources at his disposal, it would have taken Edmonds weeks to comb the vast trench and find it, by which time the *Atlantis* would have most certainly found it, and secured whatever was left amongst ruins.

That left the *Alexander* – the only other ship within 300 nautical miles that had the tools and capability of finding the downed submarine within his restricted timeframe – and he had little choice but to ‘borrow’ those tools now...

The Hemmingway Trench...

“Time to intercept?” asked Hitchcock coolly as he continued to angle his Raptor down the trench.

“They’re right on top of you, Rapier One... What’s your status?”

Hitchcock cycled through his sensor displays, and then looked around in vain to try and find the ghost fighters that were eluding him. He saw absolutely nothing. “Command... I can’t see a thing, if they’re on top of us, then they must be invisible.”

...On *Atlantis’s* bridge, Captain Ainsley stood over the main operations console looking at the SEWACS data that was being transmitted to the *Atlantis*. The incoming enemy fighters weren’t just on top of the ‘Rapiers’, they’d gone straight past them! “Rapier One, this is Captain Ainsley. Intercept failed – I repeat, intercept failed. They’ve gone right past you!”

Beside him, Banick was nervous. In 30 seconds, those Lysanders would be all over the *Atlantis*. “Captain... we’re out of time. I’m ordering a second squadron launched immediately.”

“There’s not going to be enough time...” said Ainsley under his breath. “But do it anyway.”

“Yes sir.”

No one knew what had happened. The trench the two squadrons were flying down was divided straight through the middle by a massive rock wall - and the Rapiers nor the ‘Black Ravens’ had even realised they had passed within 40 meters of each other. It was Hitchcock that realised what had happened first, and he cursed under his breath. “Damn it. All Rapier flights; pull out of this trench *now* and check your six O’clock low! They’ve passed us!”

In split-seconds of one another, the eleven Raptors broke upwards at incredible pace and burst out of the trench on to the abyssal plain. In that instant, every one of the Raptors was alerted to the 12 Lysander subfighters that zoomed away below them right towards *Atlantis*. Hitchcock turned hard and put his fighter in to a steep dive towards the fighters that were now being lit up on his HUD like Christmas lights and switched to his Hades guns – he was way too close for torpedoes. “Rapiers – engage targets at six o’clock low: *Break – break – break!*”

...Bishop was stunned by what his sensors told him; eleven SF-37 Raptors were now less than 700 meters behind him, all of them tracking his squadron with active sensors. “*So much for the covert approach,*” he thought to himself quietly. “Ravens, get out of this trench *now!* We’ve been made!”

“Roger that!”

In similar fashion to their UEO opponents, the Lysanders broke hard out of the trench, pulling upwards and heading towards shallower water where they could deny the Raptors their speed at great depth. Less than a second after they had left the trench, supercavitating gunfire from 11 Raptors illuminated the canyon they had just

occupied and obliterated the trench walls in a shower of heavy, explosive depleted uranium shells.

The Raptors matched their counterparts turn-for-turn as the two squadrons ducked and weaved around each other in the darkness, none of the pilots ever seeing the markings on their enemy’s fuselage. Bishop pushed the nose of his Lysander in to a steep, spiralling dive back towards the trench, faintly aware of a UEO subfighter that was tailing him not far behind, and doing his best to present his assailant with the thin profile of his tail. The Lysander’s design presented a massive profile from above or below thanks to its huge, delta wings, but from behind or the front, its profile was smaller than a large capital ship torpedo, and made an incredibly difficult target. The Raptor that was tailing him in comparison, was just half the size of his Lysander, was 60 knots faster, and had infinitely finer manoeuvrability. Accurate gunfire streaked by his cockpit, missing him by just a few feet. It came so close that Bishop could actually hear the whiz of the projectile as it flew past. Such fast accuracy came as a shock to him; no one was that good, and it only served to elicit another wild turn down in to the depths of the trench once more in an effort to throw the Raptor off. “Raven two, this is Raven one... I’ve caught a fish... I need it gutted... *now*.”

Not far away, Commander Daniel Laney was already a few steps ahead of his Captain as he angled the nose of his Lysander down, chasing after the black silhouette of the Raptor in his HUD crosshairs that was occasionally illuminated by bursts of Hades gunfire. The fire was alarmingly accurate, and Laney wagered a guess that had Bishop been any other pilot, he would have been dead already. “Way ahead of you, Snake Eyes,” he replied, using the Captain’s callsign...

...On *Atlantis’s* bridge, Lieutenant Jack Phillips strained to break the communications code of the Lysander squadron which the ‘Rapiers’ had just engaged. Most of it was garbled static, and he had to work fast to stay ahead of the constantly-changing frequency, trying to dig the embedded radio traffic out of its noise-covered encryption. For a moment, he came close to succeeding, and overhead what *could* have been radio chatter. Logging the file, he played it back and started boosting the gain and cleaning it up...

“-*En one... I need...*” Phillips bit his lip, applying a narrow band filter to the garbled audio. “...*you, Snake Eyes.*”

The Lieutenant’s eyes lit up. Had he just heard what he thought he did? He repeated the transmission, tweaking the wave even more until it was audible enough to make out what was being said. “Snake eyes...” he said quietly to himself. “Oh no... Oh *shit!*”

On the command deck, Captain Ainsley overheard the Lieutenant’s curse. “Mister Phillips?”

“Sir, we have a *serious* problem...”

...Commander Hitchcock snap-rolled his Raptor under a low bridge in the trench, firing off several more rounds that tore up the walls of the trench, sending plumes of sediment and rock flying through the water. His concentration had been distracted momentarily by what Captain Ainsley had just told him. “*Snake Eyes!?*” he repeated incredulously. “Son of a *bitch!* – All Rapier Flights, disengage *now!*”

“*What? Commander... we can’t.*”

Hitchcock’s left hand flew over the radio console, making sure he was broadcasting on a clear and unencrypted frequency. He *wanted* the Lysander pilots to

hear this. “Oh yes we can, *Rapier Three*. We’re fighting Black Ravens,” he said, deliberately accenting the radio call-sign of Tom Reynolds. “Disengage *now* and fall back to the *Atlantis*. That is an *order!*”

“Shit!” replied Reynolds, realising what the Rapiers had gotten themselves in to. “Wilco, lead! Flight 3 disengaging!”

...Bishop’s stomach ran cold, not just because of what he’d just heard, but because of how he heard it. No UEO pilot would broadcast unencrypted radio traffic unless they *wanted* to be heard by the enemy, but the message in this case was clear, if perhaps a little blunt. “Jesus Christ...” he whispered to himself under his breath. “Black Ravens, did you get that?”

“...Affirmative, lead. Shall we pursue?”

“*Negative!*” he snapped firmly. “All Black Raven flights *disengage immediately!*”

“Will comply, lead.”

Not one of the ‘Rapiers’ nor ‘Black Ravens’ were willing to disobey their respective commanders, and they broke off from combat almost at the exact same moment; the Lysanders and Raptors pulling out of the trench and evasively diving towards the sea floor. There was one exception however, and noticing this, Bishop felt a burning streak of rage turn his stomach...

...Lieutenant Joshua Bourne was not about to let this opportunity pass as he pushed his throttles to the stops and sent his Lysander tearing down the trench at full bore. The UEO Raptor ahead of him ducked and weaved its way through the jagged turns at blinding speed. His HUD tracked the Raptor with a steady beeping as the crosshairs tried to trace the fighter and lock on. In a few seconds, the Rapier pilot would be as good as dead. Bourne’s radio cracked loudly in his ear.

“*Lieutenant Bourne, this is Commander Laney. Disengage immediately! It was an order, not a request!*”

“I can’t read you, sir... your signal’s breaking up,” he lied coldly. “Please repeat your last transmission.”

“*Damn it, Bourne. You do this, and I’ll have your wings!*”

His lip curling, Bourne unplugged his radio and focused back on the Raptor in front of him. “Tagged and bagged...” he whispered to himself as his HUD gave him a solid firing tone. Lock on.

...Tom Reynolds cursed as the first bolt of subduction fire burned past his fighter, missing it by just a few feet. For whatever reason, this lone Lysander that was chasing him didn’t want to join his comrades and break off his engagement. Continuing to weave back and forth, He’d barely hit his radio when the next rounds of subduction fire clipped his wing and raked through his engines. Alarms blared as the cockpit shuddered violently. “This is Rapier three... I’m hit! Someone get this guy off me!”

“*Rapier three, where are you?*”

Reynolds didn’t have another chance to answer as the torpedo that he’d somehow missed in the diversion of subduction fire caught up with him. The rocket-powered missile didn’t hit as he jerked the fighter sideways, but its proximity-explosive EM warhead detonated hot on his heels, the blast racking the fighter heavily and overloading his systems. A split-second later, his engines failed, and the Raptor lurched forward sharply, going in to a steep dive further in to the depths of the trench.

Master alarms blared and warning lights lit up the cockpit as Reynolds struggled to get the Raptor back under control to little avail. Its heavy weight meant that the fighter needed its engines to remain positively buoyant at this depth, and without them, it would continue to plunge in to the trench until it reached a point where the pressure would crush its hull like an egg shell. With no power, his controls had gone dead-stick, the fly-by-wire flight yolk was now limp and gave no control over the fighter at all. Spiralling downward, Reynolds fought the strain of the G-forces that pressed him hard in to his seat, and reached out to reset everything to idle, and began a cold start. He watched his depth indicator climb increasingly rapidly... he was racing the clock.

Atlantis's flight ops center was understandably busy as the flight controllers tracked the Rapiers' movements. Reynolds's trouble hadn't escaped them as they watched the two squadrons break away, excepting the stubborn Lysander which had gunned the lone Raptor down.

“Where is he?” asked the deck officer urgently.

“Seventeen thousand feet and falling fast,” reported the controller overseeing the Rapiers.

Jane Roberts bit her bottom lip as she watched the drama nervously. If she had felt hopeless before this had started, then she felt completely useless now. Standing in Flight Ops in the corner, watching and worrying that her friends would die was not helping anyone at all. “*Come on Tom... bail out...*” she pleaded to herself silently. “What's going on?” she asked.

“Not now, Lieutenant...” replied the flight controller.

Roberts twitched angrily. “I asked you a question.”

The controller turned around to face her with annoyance. “Lieutenant Reynolds was just hit by an EM torpedo. He's got no power, his radio is out, and he's sinking fast.”

“Is he alive?”

“...Lieutenant, I mean no disrespect, and I know you feel like you'd rather be out there helping him... But as that's not going to happen, I suggest you help *us* by standing aside, and letting us do our jobs.”

...Reynolds continued to plunge deeper and deeper in to the Hemmingway trench. The darkness was unimaginable; he couldn't see a thing outside the fighter, and what little light the auxiliary controls offered was not really helping. Having reset everything, he tried starting the engines, and a steady whine from behind the cockpit brought a spark of hope to his otherwise doomed situation. “Come on...” he urged his fighter desperately. He looked at the depth indicator again. He was now at 18,000 feet, and was falling at nearly 100 feet every second. The whine turned to a sputter, and then silence once more. He slapped the dash in frustration and tried again, this time running a check on the engines. The small diagnostics display indicated that the entire port turbine had been torn to pieces, and what limited water flow there was in the intake was heavily cavitating and causing the working starboard engine to stall. Working quickly, Reynolds began to realise that the temperature in the cockpit was rising. Sweat was forming on his forehead, and a quick check of the environmental controls confirmed what he feared – the CO₂ in the cockpit was rising. He began to wonder what else had been damaged. Diverting the intake flow to the starboard engine, he tried starting it again. This time, the whine of the engine did not turn to a sputter of stalling turbine blades, but rumbled with a deep roar as the lone engine

strained back to life. One by one, the Raptor’s systems came back online, and he gripped the stick with white-knuckled tension, and eased it back. The Raptor shuddered at its current speed. As the Raptor passed 19,000 feet the sensors came back online, just in time to alert him to the massive wall of metal that was only a few hundred of yards in front of him and closing at dangerous speed...

ANS Alexander. 20 miles south of the Hemmingway Trench, Phoenix Islands. Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...

If Admiral Sark had been sitting down, the sensor data she was looking at now would have made her stand in amazement. The sensor data was a direct feed from one of the Lysanders of the ‘Black Ravens’; Lieutenant Joshua Bourne. It showed an object lying at a depth of 19,540 feet. It was over 1,000 foot long and made of titanium and steel. It was man made.

“My god...” said Captain Weyland beside her. “What the *hell* is that?” he asked.

“You know the answer to that question just as well as I do, Captain.” The Admiral looked back at the screens. “*That*,” she said accusingly. “Is the whole reason the UEO sent their flagship here. And we are going to do everything we can to deny it to them.”

“Should I call General Adamson, ma’am?”

“No, I will do that personally. I want you to see to it that Captain Bishop gets back here immediately. I want him and his pilots debriefed and this entire taskforce ready for battle within the day.”

“Ma’am?” asked Weyland curiously.

Sark looked at her second in command with steely eyes. “Do it, Captain. We’re going to kick *this* lion in the head.”

Weyland looked understandably confused. It was the kind of answer which he would expect from a Chaodai monk, not an Alliance Admiral. “Well... ehm... yes ma’am.”

Sark nodded in approval, and then walked away from the CIC with a confident, prowling step. She didn’t get far before she stopped, and turned on a delicate heel. “...Oh, and Captain? Give my thanks to Lieutenant Bourne when he returns.”

Neither Sark nor Weyland noticed the casual departure of the unknown Intelligence officer from the back of the CIC. They would not see him again.

~

UEO Atlantis DSX 8100. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 7th, 2040...

Lieutenant Roberts was running out of the FOC as soon as she saw that Reynolds had pulled out of his dive in one piece. But her hurry was not out of relief, but further concern for her friend’s well-being. What little information she’d overheard from flight controllers was calling for medical personnel to be waiting on the deck as soon as the Rapiers returned. Why, no one would tell her... But she would find out one way or the other. Her fast sprint down the corridors to the hangar deck below didn’t take her that long, and by the time she got there, she saw bustling

activity as ground crews prepared emergency crash nets across the deck. She waited nervously at the entrance to the hangar, doing her best to stay out of the ground crews ways as they cleared trolleys of ammunition, explosive ordnance and fuel from the deck. Finally, a dirty looking mechanic passed her in a hurry and she grabbed his arm, pulling him aside. “Hey! Petty Officer!” she said.

“What? Oh... Lieutenant. I really don't have time for-“

“-What's going on?” was all she asked.

The mechanic seemed impatient. “I don't know, ma'am. Word just came down that we've gotta' clear the deck and get ready for a rough arrival... Apparently one of yours is in trouble?”

“How *much* trouble?” she urged.

“I don't know ma'am...”

“Alright... Dismissed.”

Roberts continued to watch for several long minutes as the deck crew continued their work. Eventually the deck officer appeared, talking on a radio to someone unknown elsewhere on the ship. He was flustered as he checked the nets, and then ordered that the moon pool at the hangar's end be over-flooded. Roberts watched in troubled curiosity as the water level began to rise in the pool, and began to lap on to the deck grates until they were covered with no less than a foot of water. They wouldn't normally flood the deck unless they were expecting a possible fire, or worse an explosion. She noticed the medical crews preparing their equipment, and bit her lip...

Tom Reynolds consciously had to steady himself as he angled his stricken Raptor towards the gaping hangar doors on *Atlantis's* ventral hull. He felt light headed, and was gradually getting increasingly dizzy. The flooding throughout the back of his fighter was severe, and his lone over-gearred engine was the only thing that was keeping the Raptor from sinking straight to the bottom. He had to keep a speed of more than 80 knots to avoid losing buoyancy, and the carbon dioxide levels in the cockpit were now dangerously high. His radio was out, but beside him through the glass of his cockpit canopy, he could faintly make out the form of another Raptor close off his shattered port wing. He was sure it would be Commander Hitchcock. He had long since dumped whatever torpedoes he was carrying to try and cut some of the weight his fighter was hauling, and had even ejected the majority of his fuel cells. He knew it was bad; an emergency approach at 80 knots was dangerous to begin with, and the CO2 poisoning indicated that the fighter's environmental systems and internal oxygen supply had been damaged, destroyed, or filled full of holes. Either way, he had little doubt of the fact that what he was feeling was probably a very bad case of *the bends* – nitrogen narcosis.

He shook his head and blinked away sweat a few times as he straightened up his approach, and began praying that the DSV's deck crews had rolled out the ribbons for him...

...Not 10 meters off his port wing, Gabriel Hitchcock did his best to give a visual inspection of the badly damaged fighter. The port wing had been all but torn apart, leaving very little of the control surface intact, and the port engine damage was extensive; cavitation erratically streamed from the engine, the entire cowling having been ripped open, gutting the majority of the internal components. The damage didn't end there, as ugly scars accentuated holes that were buried deep in to the fighter's dorsal fuselage, no doubt damaging radio equipment, and – while he hoped this was

not the case – life support systems. “*Atlantis*, this is Rapier 1... I’ve got a visual on three. It’s bad.” He reported bluntly. “Are those deck crews and medical teams ready?”

“*Affirmative, Rapier One. We’ve got you at zero point one three miles. Ground crew is in position for recovery. You are ordered to holding pattern gamma three-six until the deck has been cleared. Please acknowledge.*”

“Orders are acknowledged; breaking off to assume holding position.”

...Reynolds didn’t notice Hitchcock’s Raptor nose-up and pull away from his win as he started his final approach. He was not a religious man, but for once in his life, found himself praying to whatever gods were listening. At least, he thought, with no radio his comrades in arms couldn’t make fun of him for it later. The downside to this, he consoled himself with morbid encouragement, was that no one would hear his witty last words if he screwed up.

Atlantis was close now; the hangar doors were open, and that – he would assume – was an invitation to bring it home. Putting his hand on the fighter’s throttle, he prepared to cut all power to his engine and hit the brakes. His timing would need to be exact – too early, and the fighter would slam in to the *Atlantis*’s hull (Which would probably not even register his impact...) and too late, and he would probably not be able to stop in time when the fighter broke the surface, creating any number of completely unenviable situations.

Through his delirious, light-headed deliriousness, he couldn’t help but laugh at the situation – his engines were barely working, his radio was gone, his fighter wanted to sink, and his oxygen supply was gone. It didn’t get any worse than that.

...And then his computer failed.

Reynolds watched in dismay as his displays and consoles went dark, leaving the fighter’s sensors, HUD and controls completely dead. He was now flying dead-stick, with no computer, and only his instincts to tell him where to point the wrecked Raptor.

“...This is going to hurt...”

Less than a minute later, Lieutenant Roberts watched as the stricken Raptor broke the surface of the moon pool and thundered across the deck with the loud, wrenching scream of metal-against-metal. Water sprayed high in to the air, washing up over the Raptor’s side as its ruined tail skidded around on the deck to crash through the recovery net. It came to a stop shortly after, its ruined hulk battered and scarred. Medical crews and engineers swarmed over the fighter’s nose, working to open the canopy quickly and pull the pilot to safety. The figure they pulled from the cockpit hung limp in the arms of medical crews – his oxygen mask dangling from his helmet loosely. Roberts instinctively took a breath as she looked on nervously, and then hurried down a small access ladder to run across the flight deck, her feet dragging heavily in the water that came up past her ankles, drenching her boots. The minor discomfort was not a priority in her mind as she rushed towards the medical team who were now hurrying a gurney away from the wrecked subfighter as fast as they could. She caught up with it, and found herself staring at the exhausted, worn face of Thomas Reynolds. He didn’t look good – his lips had a blue tinge to them, most likely being a symptom of either carbon dioxide poisoning, nitrogen narcosis, or both. “Oh god, Tom...” she said, leaning over his gurney.

“...Hey...” he rasped from under the respirator the medics had put over his face. “...not bad... for a dead-stick approach...” he wheezed.

“Alright, that’s enough,” said one of the medics as they hurried onwards. “Let’s get this man in to decompression, *now*.”

...Captain Ainsley stared open-mouthed at the hypersonar data on the display in front of him. It was a chasm; over 29,000 feet straight down at its deepest point. The walls of the chasm had no remarkable features. It was as if someone had plunged a giant wedge in to the sea floor and pulled it apart. You could bury the entirety of Mount Everest there and no one would find it. And lying as an insignificant mound at the at a depth of 20,000 feet, roughly three quarters of the way down on the side of an embankment, was a 1000-foot long, broken metal object. There was little doubt that it was man-made, and few things built by man that large could end up at the bottom of a 5-mile-deep Pacific trench. They’d found *seaQuest*.

“Phoenix abyssal,” said Commander Banick, the very thought of the place bringing a cold stab of dread through his spine. “I never wanted to come back here... How did we get this information?”

“A stroke of luck,” answered Ainsley quite honestly. “One of Raptors...*took a dive*, so to speak. Short of smashing himself in to a rock wall, he pulled up in time to find her on the embankment. Damn near ripped off his wing off in trying to avoid hitting the hull.”

“When did this happen?” asked Banick in amazement.

“About 10 minutes ago when the Rapiers were supposedly disengaging. You were busy at tactical at the time...”

Banick was looking around the bridge, searching for something, or someone. “...Where’s Voss? He’ll want to know about this, won’t he?”

“I’m here,” said the familiar voice from the back of the bridge. “I just heard from Commander Hitchcock in flight ops. How long until we can get in to position?”

Ainsley held up a cautious hand, smiling inwardly at Voss’s seemingly blind urgency. “Not so fast, Commander. Let’s take this one step at a time. You seem to be forgetting we were almost jumped by a squadron of Lysanders... By now they’ve probably reported back to their carrier.”

“You think we’ll have company?” asked Commander Hayes from the helm.

“I *know* we’ll have company, Commander Hayes. Commander Voss... My first duty is the safety of this ship, and I’m not about to sail in to what could easily become an ambush on a whim. You have *one hour* to put together a plan explaining to me *how* you want to get aboard that sub and get the information you need. After that, your mission becomes a secondary priority, and keeping this ship in piece becomes *my* priority. Are we clear?”

“Yes sir. I’ll have my proposal on your desk in thirty minutes.”

“I said you had an hour, Commander...”

Voss shrugged. “Yes sir. But I won’t need it. I’ve had long enough to think about it til now.”

Ainsley exchanged a sceptical look with Banick and then nodded. “So be it. Dismissed, Commander.”

“Aye sir.”

Voss walked off, and Ainsley then turned to his other officers; his façade of patience washing away to reveal someone who was far from amused. “Someone get me Wing Commander Hitchcock in my office *now*. I want to know what the *hell* happened out there!”

Ainsley was half way to the door by the time Banick replied. Ryan Callaghan let out a long, relieved breath, tapping his hand on his folded arm. “Wow... is it just me or did the Captain seem...”

“-Pissed off?” finished Natalie Canebride.

“I was going to say mildly irritated” corrected Callaghan with a smug grin. “I’m still not convinced we’ve seen the Captain when he’s “pissed off””

Banick shrugged. “Well, I don’t think the Chaodai had a word for “surrender” until they met the Captain... How *do* you say “we surrender” in Chinese anyway? Maybe I’ll ask Lieutenant Roberts next time I run in to her...”

Canebride rolled her eyes, and walked off the command deck back to her station at the helm. Callaghan worked his jaw, trying to hide the grin that still covered his features. “Jim... Roberts is from Japan... Not China.”

“I don’t think there will be a difference if this war keeps going the way it is,” said Banick unapologetically.

As Banick walked away, Callaghan’s smile faded completely. “...Good point.”

Ainsley was fuming as Commander Hitchcock entered his office, still in his flight suit. The Captain looked at him with annoyance. “Wing Commander... what the *hell* happened out there?” he asked demandingly.

“We disengaged, sir,” said the Commander calmly. “As soon as we learned that the Lysanders we were flying against were the Black Ravens, I made a judgement call and ordered the Rapiers to break off.”

“I know exactly what you did, Commander,” said Ainsley firmly. “What I *want* to know is *why* you did it. The whole reason you were scrambled, in case you hadn’t realised, was to intercept and *destroy* that squadron before they could alert their carrier that we were here. We’re at *war*, Commander. We don’t have the luxury of picking our battles anymore.”

Hitchcock straightened slightly, looking at Ainsley accusingly – dangerous, considering the Captain’s mood. “...Sir, am I to assume that I’m being... *reprimanded* for my decision not to engage the Black Ravens?”

Ainsley raised a hand, and opened his mouth to snap back, but stopped himself short of dressing the Wing Commander down any further. Hitchcock was easily the most decorated fighter pilot in the UEO, and certainly one of the most respected. Tearing the man apart without at least listening to him was foolish, and Ainsley felt irritated at himself for considering it. “Speak your mind, Commander,” said the Captain finally.

“Sir, the Black Ravens are the *Ace of Spades* on our deck right now. Cape Cortez Subfighter Command has had them flagged since before the war started – they are Macronesia’s *elite*; it was my opinion, sir, that given the circumstances of the situation, we could not have engaged that squadron at any favourable offset. It would have cost us dearly, and I’d rather deal with them later when we are ready, and better prepared, than taking that chance and throwing the lives of my pilots away in a bloodbath... and for the record, sir, I very nearly *did* lose one of my pilots out there.”

“Yes, you did. And I can’t help but wonder what the short burst of 5 second broad-band transmission had to do with that. Do you care to explain why you broadcasted on an unencrypted open frequency for the entire planet to hear?”

Hitchcock worked his jaw. “I know Captain Bishop, sir.”

“Funny,” interjected Ainsley. “I wasn’t aware you’d served together.”

“We haven’t, Captain. But we know his tactics and methods well enough to know that he is not one to jump in to a fight he can’t win. Bishop is an experienced commander, he knows when and where to pick his battles. *We* jumped *him*. It was *not* the other way around.”

“So you figured that... by advertising to half the Mid-Pacific that you were the “mighty and all-powerful” *VF-107 Rapiers*, he would simply... back off? Forgive me Commander, but that has to be one of the most... *illogical* and possibly *ridiculous* things I have ever heard you say.”

“...It did work, sir,” said Hitchcock flatly, feeling no need to defend himself. “No sooner had I finished that transmission, the Black Ravens *did* break off their engagement... That lone subfighter not withstanding...”

Ainsley nodded slowly, and then opened one of his desk drawers to pull out a sheet of paper that was lying on top of a pile of reports. “Commander, you’ve made a career out of staying ahead of the Alliance’s best, and I am going to trust that you are doing the same now.”

Hitchcock did not say anything, and continued to wait expectantly as Ainsley removed a pen from inside his jacket and signed the sheet of paper he’d removed from the drawer. “How is Lieutenant Reynolds?” the Captain asked.

“Doctor Reed said he will make a full recovery, although I’m not sure the flight mechanics can say the same for his Raptor...” Hitchcock thought silently for a moment, and then added “I am also not sure if I want to reprimand him or give him a medal, sir.”

“Yes...” said Ainsley absent-mindedly as he signed a couple of other letters. “I assume he has been taken off active duty?”

“Yes sir. He has.”

Ainsley nodded as he gathered the letters he’d signed and handed them to the Wing Commander. “Then you will probably need every pilot you have. These orders only require you to sign them at which point Lieutenant Roberts will be reinstated, effective immediately, as Executive Officer of the Rapiers.”

Hitchcock smirked. “What happened to Doctor’s orders, sir?”

Ainsley shrugged. “Extenuating circumstances.”

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VI TO WAKE THE DEAD

ANS Alexander. The Hemmingway Trench, Phoenix Islands. Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

Captain William Bishop sat at his desk going over a large personnel file. It belonged to Lieutenant Joshua Bourne, mediocre fighter pilot and son of the President of the Alliance of Macronesia. It was an impossible situation to be in. A knock on the office door made him raise his eyes to the door, looking out above the top of his glasses. “Come in,” he said, his gaze unshifting from the door.

The door clicked open, and Lieutenant Bourne marched in, and stood at attention in front of his desk. Bishop removed his glasses, tossing them on to the desk, and sat back in the chair shaking his head. “What am I going to do with you, Lieutenant?” he asked rhetorically to the pilot before him. “What does it take to get you to listen?”

Bourne shifted his gaze down slightly from their locked stare at the office wall. “May I stand at ease, sir?”

Bishop nodded, and the Lieutenant dropped his shoulders and folded his hands and uniform cap behind his back. “Your radio was fine,” said Bishop after a long and awkward silence. “I knew that when you first said it, and I wasn’t surprised when Chief Hatfield informed me not 10 minutes ago. So before I begin, let me make one thing very clear... If you *ever* lie to me again and put your squadron wingmen in danger by pulling the stunt you did today, you won’t need to worry about your career being threatened by unpleasant conversations like this... because I will shoot you down myself.”

Bourne didn’t say a thing. He never did.

“Well?” asked Bishop, staring at the man patiently.

“Well what, *sir*? I wasn’t aware it was a question.”

Bishop hit the desk with a closed fist and leaned forward in his chair. He wanted nothing more than to scream at Bourne. Further more, he wanted to slap the man across the face, rip off his rank insignia and flush it down the nearest head. While the later was probably within his power, Bishop was not a man to raise his voice in anger. He didn’t need to scream to be heard... and with Commander Laney as an executive officer, he certainly didn’t need to try. “It shouldn’t *have* to be, Bourne,” he replied as calmly as his ill-temper would allow. “Did what I say to you yesterday, or the many other times you’ve stood there, mean absolutely nothing to you? Are you so thick-skulled that nothing anyone says to you gets through? You are lucky you didn’t *die* out there today, Lieutenant.”

“By shooting down the enemy, sir?”

“What you did was disobey a direct order - two, in fact. From the very beginning, I said you were not to engage the enemy unless specifically ordered as it was a *recon* mission. At no point did I order your flight to engage the Rapiers, and then, when Commander Laney ordered you to *disengage*, you ignored that order too. So...what’s wrong, Lieutenant? Unhappy in this squadron? Don’t like me? Or do you simply make a hobby out of making my life a living hell?”

“You were wrong, sir,” replied Bourne bluntly.

Bishop blinked several times. The Lieutenant had done some stupid things, but singling out his commanding officer like this was something new. “I’m sorry? Do

you want to repeat that, Lieutenant?” asked Bishop, curiously raising an eyebrow as he mentally pulled a steel gauntlet over his fist.

“I said you were wrong, Captain. We were in a position to fully engage and destroy the Rapiers with minimal risk to ourselves or anyone else. Your order to disengage put us at risk. Had the Rapiers not disengaged, the situation could have easily been reversed.”

“Are you quite finished?”

“Yes sir.”

“Fine. Then there are three things you need to know, Lieutenant. Firstly... *you* are wrong – what we didn’t know when we ran in to Hitchcock’s squadron was that there was an entire *Atlantis*-class DSV not far behind them with an additional 5 squadrons of strike craft aboard. Second – if you *ever* go over a senior officer’s head again, I will have yours-“

“-But-“

“*Thirdly*”, strained Bishop. “Effective immediately, you are relieved of duty and reassigned to the 301st under Commander Shetland.”

Bourne visibly swallowed as he tried to straighten slightly, trying to stanch the pain to his wounded pride. “Yes sir,” said the Lieutenant.

“Dismissed.”

The Captain watched as a deflated Bourne spun on his heel and marched out of his office, letting the door fall shut behind him with a metallic ‘clang’. Lieutenant Bourne had been a pain in the ass for the entirety of his time in the ‘Black Ravens’. The young, inexperienced pilot was an unwelcome exception amongst his elite 181st; every other pilot – without exception – had earned their position in the squadron through careers which reflected skill and discipline. Bourne on the other hand... had been dumped in the squadron the day he left the academy. He’d washed many pilots out of his command throughout his career, but never had Bishop felt so relieved to be rid of an officer, and this concerned him. Had he washed Bourne out because his performance was wholly unsatisfactory? Or had there been more a more personal motivation to his decision?

Bishop had little chance to dwell on it as general quarters sounded over the *Alexander*’s IMC. “*All hands, man duty stations,*” came the report. “*Prepare for battle. Captain Bishop, Commander Farrand, please report to the CIC.*”

The Alliance Wing Commander sighed as he heard his name. Taking his time, he signed the transfer order for Joshua Bourne and put it on top of his dispatches. Getting out from behind the desk, he headed to the bridge...

Admiral Sark and Captain Weyland strode purposely down the corridors of the *Alexander*. Sark reviewed the sonar information gathered from the advance reconnaissance squadrons and narrowed her eyes. *Atlantis DSX 8100* was less than 70 miles away, and was making at slow, cautious speed for the location of the *seaQuest* wreck some 10,000 feet below them, and many miles ahead. She had her chance – it was now, or probably never. “How recent is this information?” she asked Weyland.

“Minutes, Admiral. It came in to the CIC only very shortly before you received it.”

“So... We found Ainsley. Has there been any word from Brisbane?”

“Not yet, Captain. I imagine they’ve only just got the report themselves. We’ll probably have their answer one way or the other within the hour.”

“That’s an hour too long,” she mused. “We’re not waiting. We’re moving on her *now*.”

“...Admiral... Is that wise? We weren’t expecting to be at the wreck site for at least another three hours. We haven’t finished our reconnaissance.”

“Captain, why is it every time someone gives an order on this ship, it’s questioned or ignored? We’ve waited too long as it is. We had no idea that *Atlantis* was this close, and had we known that, then we’d be there already. I am *not* going to let Ainsley get that wreck. I *want* *Atlantis*.”

Sark and Weyland entered *Alexander’s* red-lit CIC to see Captain Bishop and the ship’s XO, Commander Jared Farrand already standing over one of the tactical displays. “Ah, Captain, Commander... Thank you for coming so promptly.”

“Not at all, Admiral,” replied Farrand, saluting sharply. “All stations have reported General Quarters secured, ma’am. The CIC is yours.”

“Thank you, Commander. Captain Bishop?”

The fighter pilot raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Admiral?”

“I want the sea wing ready for combat deployment within the hour. I suggest you brief your pilots on what they will be up against.”

Bishop had seen the tactical display and knew what it was the Admiral referred to. *Atlantis* was the most heavily armed and powerful ship in the UEO Navy. He wasn’t sure how his pilots would react to the news. “Of course, Admiral, and with Captain Weyland’s permission, I’d like to have Lieutenant West put back on the duty rosters under my command in the 181st.”

Both Weyland and Sark frowned. “I’m not sure I understand, Captain,” pried the Admiral. “I thought you had a full squadron?”

“*Did*, ma’am. I relieved one of my pilots for insubordination.”

Captain Weyland was biting his lip. He knew what was coming, and felt the same way about Lieutenant Joshua Bourne as his Fighter Chief. “This wouldn’t have to do with Lieutenant Bourne, would it, Captain?”

“I’m afraid it does, sir,” he answered truthfully. “I signed orders transferring him to the 301st under Commander Shetland.”

“At whose authority?” demanded Sark.

“My own, Admiral.”

Sark stared at him silently for a moment. Unlike Bishop, her position meant she had to deal with political issues of military life as well as command issues. This assignment had more high level bureaucrats watching it than the entire New York Stock Exchange, and she didn’t need the heat from a potentially ‘embarrassing’ situation for the office of the President. “...Captain... as I understand it, transfer orders need to be authorized by the ship’s commanding officer before they take effect, am I correct?” she asked Weyland.

Captain Weyland looked uncomfortable. “Well, yes, Admiral, but Captain Bishop is well within—”

“—Then the orders are rescinded,” cut in Sark sharply. “Once this mission is over, you may deal with the Lieutenant however you see fit. Until then, have Bourne briefed and in the cockpit within one hour with the rest of your pilots. Understood?”

Bishop noticed the awkward scowl on Weyland’s face, and nodded once curtly. “...Yes, Admiral.”

“Good. Captain Weyland? Signal the fleet and relay orders of battle. We’re moving ahead of schedule.”

~

**UEO Atlantis DSX 8100. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters.
December 8th, 2040...**

Jane Roberts sat by the bedside of Lieutenant Tom Reynolds in a light doze. She'd hardly managed to get any sleep that night – a night spent worrying too much about her friend in the bed beside her. Reynolds had gotten off lightly as far as she could tell; the doctors had diagnosed him on arrival with cases of both Carbon Dioxide poisoning and nitrogen narcosis. He'd been on the verge of breathing hard CO₂ when his Raptor had hit the deck (literally) and it was amazing to most doctors on the ship that he'd been able to land at all. She became aware of a pair of tired eyes staring at her from the pillow. Opening her eyes, she smiled at Reynolds and turned to face him in the uncomfortable chair she'd been sitting in for the last 5 hours.

“Hey,” his rasped.

“Hey...” she replied as she leaned over the bedside. “How are you feeling?”

“...I've been better...” he managed with a slight smile.

Roberts faintly noticed the gaze of Doctor Michael Reed from the door in her peripheral vision. She paid not attention as the Doctor departed soon after. “You had me worried, Tom...” she said.

“Hey... *you* weren't the one doing an 80 knot final while breathing your own engine fumes through a rubber hose... What the hell were *you* worried about?”

She looked at him with disgust. “Well, *sorry* for showing concern... But next time, do me a favour; just eject and save me the trouble of your gloating.”

“And it could save me the paperwork...” came the familiar voice of Commander Hitchcock from the door. Both Reynolds and Roberts looked to their Commander in the doorway and smiled. “Doctor Reed told me you were awake,” he explained quickly.

Reynolds simply nodded as Hitchcock entered the room and approached slowly. “You know, you're something of a celebrity with the deck crew right now. From what I hear, you landed that fighter dead stick at 80 knots, and with no primary power... I've seen some impressive stunts, but that was about the most... *stupid* thing I've ever seen from a pilot in a squadron under my command, Lieutenant. Jane's right... You should have bailed out.”

Despite the light reprimand, Reynolds noticed the smirk on Hitchcock's face and couldn't help but smile. He became aware of Jane's hand gently gripping his, “So what's the bad news?” he asked.

“Doctor Reed's recommended that you rest for a couple of days,” replied Hitchcock. “I want you to know that I'm not going to countermand the order, and your fighter is going to need a lot more than just a couple of days in the workshop to get seaworthy again... So take it easy, alright?”

“Yes sir.”

Hitchcock looked at Roberts curiously and then remembered something. Reaching in to one of his jumpsuit pockets, he retrieved a folded letter and handed it to her. “Transfer orders rescinded,” he said simply with a smile.

“...Sir? I thought-“

“Yeah, I know. I spoke to the Doctor and the Captain... Don't ask me how, but I've managed to convince them to let me put you back on duty... The orders are effective immediately.”

From the bed, Reynolds managed a smile and squeezed Roberts' hand encouragingly. “Fair trade,” he managed hoarsely.

Hitchcock smirked. “Welcome back to the Rapiers, Lieutenant...”

~

“Damn,” muttered Ainsley as he looked at the report. “When did this come in?”

“Not 20 minutes ago, sir,” replied Commander Banick, standing a few feet away with his hands clasped behind his back almost too casually. “No doubt about it... they saw us.”

“So the Alliance knows we’re here...” said Ainsley, looking at the report again. A squadron of Lysanders had buzzed the trench that *Atlantis* occupied not long ago and withdrawn quickly. It was the second time in two days that they’d run in to trouble, but this time they hadn’t seen it coming, and they’d been caught with their pants down.

“If it was a patrol, sir, then we can probably break for open water before they can call in any serious guns...”

“I don’t think so, Commander,” mused Ainsley, tapping his fingers on the command deck railing slowly. “Yesterday Commander Hitchcock ran head on in to the 181st Black Ravens. Today we get buzzed by *another* patrol that doesn’t stop to engage... No, these aren’t standard patrols, Commander. I’m not much one for coincidence, especially where elite squadrons are concerned...” Ainsley cast his gaze down to the control deck below him and Ryan Callaghan who sat at the tactical station running diagnostics on the DSV’s massive torpedo armaments. “Ryan?”

“Sir?” responded the officer as he looked up to the Captain standing some distance above him.

“Do we have sonar coverage of the lower parts of the Hemmingway yet?”

“Still working on it, Captain. There’s a lot of breaks in the trench... if you wanted to hide something, this is definitely the best place to do it. I’ve had WSKRS covering an area of about 90 square miles for the last 10 hours, but we’ve still probably only swept about 20 to 30 percent of the trench network.”

“They could have a carrier group virtually right on top of us and we’d never know it,” snarled Ainsley unhappily. “And they probably do. If we’ve found *seaQuest*, then they almost certainly have as well. We couldn’t break from this trench without alerting half the Macronesian fleet in the Pacific... And I think they know that. Jim, what do we know about the Black Ravens?”

“We know that Macronesia touts them to be the “best” of their subfighter corps. Commanded by a man named William Bishop who has more confirmed Spectre kills than anyone else alive...”

“Too general,” said Ainsley. “I want details on their postings over the last 6 months... anything which might suggest which battlegroup they’re operating from.”

Callaghan was well on top of the information. “-Alliance 2nd fleet, 4th Carrier Squadron.” he interrupted.

Both Ainsley and Banick looked at the tactical officer blankly, wondering where he’d pulled the information from. “How do *you* know?”

Callaghan shrugged. “I just... remembered reading it from a fleet activity report, sir. If I’m right, the Black Ravens have been deployed for the last six weeks aboard the ANS *Alexander* based in Brisbane. *Honorious* class – standard escort consisting of everything from SSNs through to *Tempest* class CAs.”

Banick was shocked that the tactical officer knew all this off the top of his head. He was about to ask him to check it against Naval Intelligence’s records when the answer he wanted came from about 3 feet behind him. “What can I say? He’s

right,” said Jacob Voss. “*Alexander* is under the command of Vice Admiral Valerie Sark. She’s answering personally to Henry Adamson these days, or so they tell me.”

Captain Ainsley grimaced painfully. “*Oh why her...?*” he whispered.

Banick smiled knowingly as he recognised the name, and admired the irony of the situation. Callaghan and Voss however were both less informed, and looked at the Captain inquisitively. “Sir?”

“Valerie Sark,” he repeated. “We have a... *history*, you could say. Before Australia seceded from the UEO with the rest of Macronesia, she was my XO aboard the *Nautilus*... We didn’t exactly get along at times, and unfortunately she was also one of the more *resourceful* officers I’ve served with over the years. I see she’s moved up in the world.”

“Too bad it’s on the wrong side,” observed Voss innocently. “I hope she doesn’t hold a grudge.”

Ainsley cocked his head. “Oh, you clearly never played poker with her, Commander. The problem with her was that you could never tell when she was bluffing, and when she was out for blood...”

“Sir?”

“I think she’s trying to spook us, Commander...” thought Ainsley quietly. “...Either that or she’s only just discovered we’re here and is charging at flank speed down that trench to kick us in the head. Either way, we’re not going to give on this one. Commander Voss, do you have your team assembled?”

“Yes sir,” he replied. Ainsley had guessed the intelligence officer had made all the necessary preparations judging solely from the marine-standard utility jumpsuit he was now wearing. Interestingly, he noted, Voss’s uniform insignia were now the gold oak leaves of a Marine Major rather than the familiar blue and gold-striped delta of a Naval Commander. “If it’s alright with you, I’d like to bring Commander Banick with me on this mission... He is probably more familiar with a DSV’s computer systems than I am. I could use his help.”

Banick’s eyes lit up slightly in surprise. He hadn’t expected that invitation from Voss in the slightest, suspecting that the intelligence officer was more accustomed to taking charge of situations with as little help as possible. Ainsley shrugged and looked at his XO helplessly. “It’s your call, Jim,” he said to him.

“Sure,” said Banick after a moment’s hesitation. “When do we leave?”

“As soon as *Atlantis* is in range of the wreck. If Sark is out there, she’s going to be heading for *seaQuest*, not us. She’s smart enough to look at the bigger picture and will probably work out what we’re here for... assuming she hasn’t done so already,” replied Ainsley.

“Right... I’ll suit up and gather the marines then,” said Banick, looking to the Captain for his leave. “Sir?”

“Dismissed, Commander.”

“Aye sir.”

Banick began to leave the bridge, but didn’t get very far as an apprehensive Lieutenant Commander Canebride shot out of her chair and jogged down the length of the bridge after him. “Commander! Wait!...”

Banick smiled to himself before turning to face her at the bridge’s exit. She smiled worriedly, ignoring the suspicious looks from other bridge staff – Ainsley and Voss included – and whispered to him. “...Be careful, Jim.”

He noticed that she was holding his hand tightly, and smiled at her reassuringly. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her then and there, but the prying

eyes of the bridge crew made him think the best of it, and he stopped himself short. “...You know I will.”

“...Go,” she said finally, suddenly embarrassed by the many prying eyes around the bridge, and after hearing an awkward “ahem” from Captain Ainsley who was trying terribly hard to stop himself from smiling.

Banick nodded, and then turned around and continued on down the corridors, leaving Canebride to briskly walk back to her station, mentally hiding from the various grins and mischievous smiles around her...

As Banick left, Voss remained behind with Callaghan and Captain Ainsley for a few moments longer. The Intel officer looked at both of them, expecting that they weren't quite finished, and he was right. Ainsley let go of a deep breath and looked at Voss sadly. “I wish I was going down there with you, Commander. Oliver Hudson was a fine office... and a good friend. I feel I owe it to his family to find some closure on this. So I have a request...”

Callaghan bit his lip and excused himself politely. Ainsley smiled at this and shook his head. “...When you find what you're looking for in *seaQuest's* computer,” he continued, “I'd like you to try and recover the ship's log. I believe Captain Hudson and Commander Piccolo made a point of keeping a written one somewhere in his quarters. It might be good to look in to.”

Voss nodded with understanding, but betrayed nothing else. “I make no promises, sir. But if the opportunity presents itself, then I will try.”

“That's all I ask, Commander. Thank you.”

Voss left the bridge, and Ainsley turned and looked around the command deck again. He looked down at Callaghan who had returned to Tactical, and nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “Mister Callaghan...”

“Sir?”

“...Sound General Quarters.”

~

Commander Jacob Voss marched down the corridors outside *Atlantis's* hangars with a sure and purposeful step. The alert klaxons that sounded battlestations could be heard throughout the ship, their piercing howl accented by the thunder of boots as kevlar-clad heavily-armed Marines ran through corridors to secure the ship. Commander James Banick, *Atlantis's* XO walked apprehensively beside him; he was nervous, for whatever reason, and Voss smiled lopsidedly. “You don't do this often, do you, Commander?”

Banick shot him a look that seemed a mixture of annoyance and surprise at the suggestion. “I'm quite qualified to run a field operation, Commander Voss... Spend more than a few days on this ship and I guarantee you will appreciate that fact. But *forgive* me if I seem apprehensive about stomping over a military grave with little regard for the 242 people who died here not a month ago.”

“Ghosts and shadows, Commander... I promise you there is nothing down there that can possibly kill you.”

Rounding the final corner in the long network of corridors that lead to the hangars, Banick and Voss stepped on to the enormous four-storey-high flight deck that was bustling with activity. Raptors and Spectres were moved on launch racks to the huge drop-shaft elevators that led to the submerged sea doors below decks, ammunition was trolleyed around the deck and ground crews helped pilots climb in to their fighters as squadron leaders did last-minute walk-arounds of their craft. Voss

however was headed straight for a large assault speeder where a small group of marines had congregated and were checking equipment. Banick recognised the men as being troops from *Atlantis*'s Marine Force Recon team. Of the 250-odd marines which made up the company-sized detachment of marine forces, one platoon (about 40 men) were special forces trained, and excelled in infiltration, recon and advanced tactics. Only about 12 men were present around the speeder, one who Banick recognised as Major Devlin Cortez – the *Atlantis* marines company commander. Troublingly, he noticed that without exception, all 12 of the marines were very heavily armed with 7.62mm automatic pulse weaponry with grenade launcher, scope and integrated fire computer attachments; This came in addition to heavy flak vests, helmet-mounted Heads-Up Displays and both thermal and night vision goggles. Banick looked at the heavily-built SF troopers, in particular eyeing a morbidly large combat knife that one of them had sheathed at his thigh, and then looked back to Voss sceptically. “I thought you said there was nothing down there that could possibly kill me?”

“There’s not,” replied Voss truthfully enough. “At least not yet... Although it’s a fair bet the Alliance is going to want to try and board *seaQuest* before we can get what we’re looking for. So be thankful that I’ve asked Major Cortez’s troops to join us...”

“Great,” said Banick, wholly unconvinced. “Just what we needed: *Jarheads*.”

A few moments later, the twelve UEO marines – Major Cortez included – snapped to attention and saluted with remarkable precision (even for marines...)

“Commander Voss, sir; Bravo Squad reporting as ordered,” said Cortez almost too casually for his otherwise well-drilled formality.

“Well done, Major... You’ve briefed your men?”

“I have. They know what to do, sir.” Cortez shifted his gaze to Banick slightly, allowing a small smile. “...And don’t worry, Commander Banick. My... *Jarheads*... will make sure you get back here in one piece.”

Banick was caught off-guard by this, and decided to nod slowly. “...You heard that, huh?”

Cortez smirked as he tapped the side of his headset. “...270-degree parabolic laser mike, Commander. Your Naval Special Forces boys aren’t the only ones to have cool toys... Saddle up.”

~

Phoenix Abyssal. Depth: 20,000 feet. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

...The cold darkness of the Phoenix Abyssal was unfathomable. At a depth of 20,000 feet, any person to visit this unforgiving environment knew what being utterly alone felt like. Not even the infinite depths of space compared to the haunting, smothering blackness of the deep ocean... At this depth, the temperature of the sea was barely a couple of degrees above zero-celsius, there was no light, and even the quietest sound would echo for miles like thunder, bringing an eerie sense of reality to an otherwise alien world. Jeffrey Edmonds felt a shiver run down his spine as the small and sleek black-hulled infiltration sub he piloted neared closer to his objective; the *seaQuest DSV*. The wrecked sub was less than 80 meters ahead of him, the flood lamps mounted on his submarine’s nose piercing through the darkness to reach out towards the ghost ship. After a few moments, he began to see a familiar silhouette

forming ahead... or at least what *used* to be a familiar silhouette. The jagged, torn lines betrayed the horrible damage which had been dealt to the submarine in her final moments – the once sleek, flowing lines of her squid-inspired hull now mangled and broken beyond repair. Slowly, more detail began to reveal itself, and Edmonds recognised the spherical midships ‘hydrosphere’ of *seaQuest’s* docking bays. The heavy sea doors that once protected that interior were now splayed inwards; the hull around them having been ripped apart by a crushing implosion brought on by her demise at this great depth. Edmonds looked at the great wreck in total awe as the events of her final moments played back through his mind; *seaQuest DSV* – overwhelmed and under the control of Macronesian forces - had stood toe-to-toe with her successor; the *Atlantis DSX* – many thousands of feet above him in the Hemmingway trench’s shallower waters. The final barrage of torpedoes fired from *Atlantis* had ripped open her bow and fore quarters with tremendous force, breaching the pressure hull in multiple places, causing the outer hull to implode before she had finally made the final plunge to her icy grave here; 20,000 feet from daylight, on a forgotten and jagged canyon embankment.

Edmonds pulled himself together as his instruments indicated with a shrill beep that his sub was now less than 30 meters away, and he brought the nose up and angled it towards the broken cavity that was once sealed by the DSV’s big sea doors. He actually held his breath as his sub passed through the airlock and in to the broken interior. The flood lamps revealed the worn ‘DSV 4600’ registry which was painted along the interior wet-dock facility of the *seaQuest’s* hydrosphere, and for a moment he was amazed at how intact this section of the submarine was. The same could not be said for the exterior... Prepping the docking collar controls, he slowly brought the speeder in to the bulkhead, carefully watching his distance and speed. Finally, with a gentle “thump”, the speeder softly impacted with the bulkhead, and the pressure seal around the docking ring hissed as it created a vacuum between the speeder’s airlock and the bulkhead. The whine of the circular laser docking collar as it burnt through the bulkhead filled the cockpit as a gentle hum through the deck grates. Setting all the submarine’s controls to idle, Edmonds picked himself up out of the pilot’s seat, and headed below...

Picking up his equipment, he stood in front of the cold forward airlock for a moment, and realised that he would probably be the first person set foot on *seaQuest* since she’d been sent here to the icy depths of hell. He took a deep breath as the airlock’s pressure indicator showed that the area behind the heavy door was dry. Intelligence had been right; her inner decks and compartment were indeed intact. Pulling on a rebreather mask, he exhaled slowly, and opened the airlock...

~

ANS *Alexander*, the Hemmingway Trench, Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

About the same time as the *Atlantis* was about to deploy her fighter squadrons, Captain William Bishop was clambering down a ladder from an overheard gantry in to the flight deck of the *Alexander*. Pushing his helmet up further under his arm, he walked across the deck for several yards and stopped beside a Lysander where Lieutenant Joshua Bourne was doing a last minute walk around of the fighter. The Lieutenant visibly became awkward as he noticed Bishop’s approach, and ducked

under the fighter’s wing to meet his commander. He saluted hesitantly, and put his helmet down on a pile of ammunition crates beside him. “Sir?” he asked.

Bishop returned the salute sternly and took a step forward. “At ease, Lieutenant...”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I want you to understand one thing,” Bishop said, raising a gloved finger in warning. “This is the real thing; there will be no disengaging, no withdrawals... we’re going in to harm’s way, and believe me – your being here now is in no small part thanks to Admiral Sark. If I had my way, you wouldn’t be in that flight suit, so if you so much as sneeze out there without my permission, your career is over. Clear?”

“Yes sir.”

Bishop nodded thankfully, and allowed his demeanour to soften slightly. Despite his misgivings about the man, his curt bluntness was out of concern, not disdain. “...Don’t get yourself killed out there Lieutenant. And good hunting.”

A flicker of a smile appeared at the corner of Bourne’s lips, and he nodded again. “Thank you, sir... You too...”

Bishop thought the best of saying that luck was the one thing he wouldn’t need, as he realised that he wouldn’t just be flying against the usual crowd of UEO pilots in Spectres; he would be flying against some of the best men and women in the UEO fleet, and he had to consciously remind himself of that fact as he began walking to his own fighter across the way. The ground techs nodded respectfully to him as they continued to load the last of his fuel and ammunition supplies. The big, bat-winged fighter was showing the signs of its age... Its black hull now bore long, bleached stains from its panel joints, the well-worn control planes no longer having the same metallic shine to them that they once did. Along the nose, countless markings from a career of bloodshed denoted every life he’d taken without a shred of remorse at the time. He’d stopped counting how many there were along time ago, and the markings were now faded and worn... No one had taken the effort to repaint them in just as long as he’d stopped counting.

Clambering up the ladder, he vaulted over the cockpit ledge and landed in the seat, pulling on his helmet and tightening the straps before securing his oxygen mask... The deck officer approached quickly, signalling to him to standby for launch. Bishop pulled a lever, closing the thick canopy shut with a snap-hiss of the self-pressurizing seal. He gave a thumbs-up to the ground chief, and started his engines...

Several decks above, Captain Weyland was making the last preparations to have *Alexander* prepared for battle. Two thirds of his fighter squadrons were now in the water, and the last of the battlegroup were assembling on the carrier’s flanks. Weyland didn’t want to admit it, but he was extremely apprehensive about the coming engagement. The Alliance had little experience in dealing with the new UEO *Atlantis* class DSVs, and the two occasions they *had* engaged one, the losses had been incredibly severe, and they’d gained very little in return. He was not eager to make a repeat episode. Weyland looked at the antique stop-watch he kept in his uniform jacket, and saw that it was time.

“Commander Farrand, report?”

His XO, Commander David Farrand, nodded affirmatively. “Yes sir. All stations and sections report battlestations secured. The fleet has responded and reports similar conditions.”

“Very good,” Weyland unclipped a radio mike from the command console where he stood and raised it to his mouth. “Admiral Sark please report to the CIC.”

A few minutes passed before the Admiral stepped on to the Combat Information Center floor and took control of the Conn. from Weyland. She looked around the CIC with a careful, watchful eye and then nodded approvingly. The ship was not going to get any more ready for battle than it was at that moment, and time was not a luxury they had in great supply. “Captain Weyland, I have the Conn,” she ordered quietly.

“Aye, Admiral; you have the Conn. Fleet is ready and awaiting your orders.”

“Outstanding,” she replied as she peeled off a pair of black, leather gloves.

“Order the fleet to advance... Alert all commands that they have permission to engage the enemy on sight.”

“Yes, Admiral...”

Sark smiled inwardly as she thought back to the days when Australia had still been part of the UEO, and she’d served under a young Captain by the name of Mark Ainsley aboard a *Trident*-class SSN named “*Nautilus*”. She’d followed the man’s career since, although it had been hard not to considering his rise to fame in the 2030s. “*I wonder if you still play poker, Mark...*”

~

VII

SABRE DANCE

UEO Atlantis DSX 8100. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

Jane Roberts rolled her Raptor through a tight loop and grinned broadly as she felt the Gs press her hard in to her seat for the first time in weeks. The fighter handled well considering it had never been flown before in her hands, or anyone else's. Everything felt tighter than she was used to, but she was adapting quickly. With U2 blaring loudly in her ears, she pulled the nose of her fighter upwards, hugging the massive hull of the *Atlantis* as if she were on rails. The bow of the massive submarine shot by at great speed, and her sonar showed a formation of Raptors not far ahead that were holding just a few hundred yards ahead of the DSV.

“*Rapier two,*” said a familiar voice over her radio. She looked left and out beyond the cockpit canopy to see another Raptor flying beside hers; the familiar blue, grey and black paint scheme telling her that it was probably Commander Hitchcock. The “001” painted on the side of the nose confirmed it. “*If you're quite finished... orders are to fall in to three-diamonds formation on port and starboard flanks. Flight one will have lead off the bow. Understood?*”

Sighing, she killed the music and switched her radio back over to squadron frequencies. “Understood, Rapier One. Flight two is responding as ordered to assume starboard flank.”

The triangular pattern of Raptors that led the *Atlantis* broke apart with rapid precision, assuming a formation of “three diamonds” (three groups of four Raptors each) on the *Atlantis*'s port and starboard wings, with the first group pressing ahead to center itself between the other two in front of the carrier's bow to create a large triangle. Elsewhere, the other squadrons of Spectre and Raptor subfighters from the *Atlantis* were doing the same thing, and by the time it was done, a massive phalanx of nearly 80 subfighters had formed ahead of the ship creating a hugely powerful and very agile defensive screen.

High above them, cruising slowly beneath the surface of the waves, a modified sea speeder equipped with a plethora of long range sonar equipment known as a “SEWACS” (Seaborne Warning and Control System) scanned the vast length of the trench, providing the fighters and the *Atlantis* with sensor coverage in blind areas obscured by the trench they occupied. One of the sonar operators aboard this craft narrowed his eyes as something entered sensor range, and he began to track it in detail. Whatever it was, it was big, and there was more than one. Running the information through his computer, it didn't take long to confirm what he already expected. Hitting the relay button, he dispatched the report to the flight ops center of the *Atlantis*, and toggled his radio to a fleet-wide frequency. “...Fleet, this is Dolphin Eight-One-Zero-Dash-Two. Be advised; have detected enemy carrier battlegroup at range one-five miles closing from heading one-six-two. Confirm heavy enemy subfighter presence. Hostile ETA is three minutes.”

...*Atlantis*'s bridge was tense with the report from the SEWACS many thousands of feet above them. Captain Ainsley smiled to himself sceptically. He knew that this would be coming, but he had hoped it wasn't going to be so soon. The speeder carrying Commanders Banick and Voss had left *Atlantis* just minutes before,

and a fire fight with the entire sea wing of a Macronesian carrier group was the last thing he wanted to deal with.

“Commander Canebride,” he ordered to the helm. “Bring us as high as you can over the Phoenix Abyssal without leaving this trench. I want you to present every gun we have. Commander Callaghan? I want you to direct all your fire on whatever comes through that trench. Dispatch gamma squadron to escort Commander Voss’s speeder to *seaQuest* and make sure they understand that he is to get through at all costs. They will have a full fighter suppression barrage at their disposal whenever they require it.”

“Aye, sir. All batteries directed forward... ETA of Macronesian fighters is now two minutes and 26 seconds...”

Ainsley nodded as he did the math of the scenario. The maximum speed of a *Tempest* class heavy cruiser was thought to be about 90 knots. At that speed, *Atlantis* had less than 10 minutes before the rest of the Alliance battlegroup poured through the breach and started to deliver the heavy ordnance. Until that time, he was willing to bet that the subfighters sent ahead of the battlegroup wouldn’t risk taking *Atlantis* on without serious fire support. That gave him just 10 minutes to prepare a defence and keep the Lysanders away from his marines. “Commander Callaghan... can I have a moment?”

The tactical officer removed his headset and said something quietly to the ensign beside him before leaving the tactical station and ascending the staircase to the command deck above. “Sir?” he asked quietly in front of the Captain.

Ainsley let out a long, drawn breath and bit his lip. “Commander... *Alexander* would have at least two *Tempest* class cruisers and probably a squadron of *Orions* with her, yes?”

“...It’s likely, sir, yeah,” confirmed the tactical officer quietly. “I’ve yet to hear of an *Honourous* class carrier that operated without a substantial escort.”

“What are the chances of a successful engagement against a force of that size?” the Captain asked anxiously. Callaghan looked grim.

“...No one’s every tried, sir. Assuming a full fighter screen... any torpedo fire we can bring to bear probably won’t get through. It will be...”

“-A “knife fight in a phone booth”?” finished Ainsley.

“...Essentially so, sir. That assumes a frontal assault, which, in confines like this would be difficult to avoid.”

“So in ten minutes, this battle is going to right to hell...” concluded Ainsley grimly. Fighting in trenches was a dangerous affair; both sides were locked in canyon with the only way out being through the other’s fleet. There would be little room to manoeuvre, and the only alternative was to ascend out of the trench on to the abyssal plains of the Island shelf above where the only thing you would achieve would be to provide your enemy with an open-range target for stand-off weapons. Tactically, this was a poor situation, and all he could do was wait and hope that Voss could get to *seaQuest* before *Atlantis* was completely overwhelmed...

“Your orders, sir?” asked Callaghan expectantly.

“...We’ll hold our ground as long as we can,” answered Ainsley. “But tell engineering to prepare for some very serious damage control. We need to buy Voss time...”

“Aye sir,” Callaghan replied, sounding wholly unconvinced.

Ainsley did not, however, dismiss the tactical officer. He continued to star downward blankly as if he did not know what to do. Slowly, the Captain’s eyes narrowed, and he raised his gaze to meet the Commander. “...Ryan...” he thought

allowed, “...Admiral Sark is expecting us to just sit here and take this across the face.”

“Sir?”

Ainsley shook his head, his frown slowly turning in to an oddly confident smile. “She wouldn’t charge blindly down a trench unless she expected us to either break or hold this position to stand and fight.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” said Callaghan slowly, not quite seeing the pattern which Ainsley was following.

“What if we reversed this,” he said, his determination growing as he purposefully strode over to a tactical display which showed a map of the trench as provided by the SEWACS far above them. He pointed to the trench and ran a finger down the jagged line where the Lysanders were running. He had just over a minute and thirty seconds before they reached the end of the canyon and engaged his fighter screen. “Look at this. This trench is so jagged and winding that they probably can’t see 600 yards in front of their own sonars. They have no advance warning or SEWACS up, so they have absolutely no idea where we are, or what we are doing.”

“...Our Raptors,” said Callaghan, finally realising what the Captain was seeing.

The Captain was already headed back to the Conn. “Get a hold of Commander Hitchcock *now*.”

~

Macronesian Strike Group. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

He didn’t want to admit it to himself, but Captain William Bishop was the most nervous he had been throughout his entire career. His Lysander was moving down the Hemmingway Trench at close to 300 knots, and it took an inordinate amount of concentration to stay a few steps ahead of the fighter to avoid slamming in to the jagged rock walls of the canyon that shot by at blinding speed. Behind him, another 40 fighters had broken in to two groups to approach the target from two different trench lines. Ahead of him waited the *Atlantis DSV* and her entire sea wing of Raptor and Spectre subfighters. This was going to be bloody, and he was trying not to think of just how bad it could end up being for both sides if things went wrong. The distance was now less than 5 miles to the break in the trench that would open up in to a massive 6-mile-wide chasm that dropped off in to a vertical abyss for over 25,000 feet. Just 5 miles: it would take just 1 minute to cover the distance.

“Black Ravens, Hornets: form up,” he ordered sternly, and as calmly as his demeanour would allow. “Tigers and Roulettes, break is in 45 seconds. Your orders will be to head straight for *seaQuest* as soon as you have visual on the abyssal. Do you understand?”

“Affirmative, Raven Leader. Will comply.”

Whatever was left now was down to luck and, perhaps, fate. Switching his weapon controls to the two wing-mounted subduction rifles, he powered them up and did one final systems check on his fighter, and then levelled his wings and broke towards the canyon floor, using the terrain-following sonar to guide his fighter across the jagged, volcanic sea floor with ease and skill. The other Black Ravens behind him followed suit, although the other squadrons in the massive formation weren’t so

prepared to throw themselves to the deck so close to a solid wall of rock which didn't care what Lysanders were made out of. At the speed they were doing, it would take just the lightest clip of a wing to tear the entire fuselage to pieces. His controls began to light up with final warnings as he closed the distance of the last mile, and he eased his grip on the stick and took a deep breath. “All wings... break to engage the enemy on sight, but do *not*, I repeat – do *not* approach the *Atlantis* unless ordered.... Godspeed ladies and gentlemen, now let's Rock the house.”

He hadn't finished the sentence when his sonar proximity warning went berserk, and the first Lysander above him from the 160th “Hornets” exploded in to a ball of white fire, its pilot not even having an opportunity for so much as a cry of surprise. Instinctively, Bishop rolled his Lysander up on to its port wing and skimmed along the trench wall as the first of the UEO Raptors tore past at over 340 knots; its Hades guns blazing away from the nose of the fighter like fire from a dragon's snout. “*Christ!*” swore Bishop, rolling his fighter in to an inverted climb for the top of the trench. The UEO had called them; their ambush had turned in to a trap, and there was very little he could do to keep his order of battle intact. “All wings, this is Raven lead; it's a trap! Pull out of this trench *now* and engage those Raptors!”

The reply from Commander Jenkins of the Hornets was defiant. “*Negative, Raven Leader... If we break from this trench, our approach will be blown.*”

“Our approach *is* blown, Hornet One. You break now or I *swear* it won't be the *only* thing that's blown today! Black Ravens on my six! Get ***out*** of this ***trench!***”

The Lysanders which followed Bishop's lead broke upward sharply, pulling out of the trench at breakneck speed. Those who hesitated sealed their own fates as the UEO Raptors and Spectres continued to round the break in the trench ahead and obliterate everything in their path before breaking upwards to engage those who broke away in time...

~

ANS Alexander Battlegroup. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

Admiral Sark clenched a tight fist, her knuckles cracking loudly as she watched several Lysanders from the 160th disappear from the tactical display as a mass of Raptors overwhelmed their position. “So, Ainsley...” she said quietly. “You still haven't changed.”

“Admiral,” reported Captain Weyland. “The 181st, 179th and 122nd just pulled out of the trench. Their approach cover is gone... *Atlantis* knows we're here. We should recall-”

“-*No*,” said Sark quickly. “Captain Bishop may well have just saved those three squadrons by ordering them to pull out. Clear him to engage, and send in the reserves.”

“Yes Admiral,” confirmed Weyland, picking up the radio to the bridge.

Sark put a hand on his shoulder quickly, stopping him from making the call. “...And inform the fleet that we're getting out of this trench. If Ainsley knows we're here, then it's not doing us any more favours. Increase speed to flank, and get us to the Phoenix Abyssal.”

Weyland nodded and picked up the mike again to relay the orders as Sark went back to the tactical monitors and shook her head. The situation with her subfighters was deteriorating; and their only hope now was to engage *Atlantis* as soon

as possible, and try to ease the pressure the *Rapiers* and the other UEO fighter wings had put on. The trench was empty now, the Lysander wings having long since withdrawn and headed for open water to engage the UEO fighters. She looked at the trench for several moments carefully and began to realise it was no longer covered by any of the UEO fighter detachments. She pointed to a flight ops controller not far away and saw her chance. “Sub Lieutenant? Are our marines ready to deploy?”

“Yes Admiral, they are. Assault transports are on the deck and waiting for launch orders.”

“Then give the order, Lieutenant... Direct them down the Hemmingway and tell them to commence their assault on *seaQuest* immediately.”

“...Admiral?”

“Do not question me on my own bridge, Sub Lieutenant,” berated Sark sternly. “You have your orders... now carry them out.”

“Yes Admiral.”

Sark nodded in approval and then turned back to Weyland just as he was replacing the radio mike back to its cradle. He looked her in the eye, and nodded slowly. “It’s done.”

~

The Hemmingway Trench. The Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

...Commander Gabriel Hitchcock calmly switched from his Hades cannons to torpedo control and selected the nearest Lysander. There was something familiar about the craft, its black hull weaving back and forth under his crosshairs, doing what he could to evade the vengeful Raptor on its tail. Whoever he was, he was a skilled pilot, managing to keep up with everything he did, and Hitchcock was willing to bet his commission that he was a member of the elite “Black Ravens.”

Rolling hard, Hitchcock pulled back on the stick and climbed after the Lysander as it broke towards the surface above in an effort to cut some speed and force Hitchcock down once more. Hitchcock wouldn’t have it, and eased back intentionally harder than he needed to; just enough for his HUD to turn solid red and for his fighter to achieve a torpedo lock. Depressing the trigger, small doors on the underside of his fuselage folded away and a single rocket-propelled torpedo dropped out of its holding rack and ignited with a scream of burning plasma. The Black Raven pilot, no doubt being informed by a multitude of wailing alarms that he was about to die, plunged his fighter in to a steep dive once more and released noise making decoys in an attempt to evade, but this too Hitchcock had suspected, and he’d rolled the nose of his Raptor around in a tight spin and fired explosive rounds of Hades ammunition in to the Lysander’s path... “Rapier One: splash one bandit.”

... “*I can’t get rid of-*“

Static.

The radio was dead before the mayday was finished, and Bishop swore as he saw one of his wingmen disappear from his sonar. Black Raven Three - Lieutenant Commander Josselyn Sheridan – was dead. Kicking his port rudder as hard as he could and giving his fighter as much left stick as it would allow, he came about towards Sheridan’s last position, and one by one he cycled through the many targets in the area to try and determine what was happening. The majority of the UEO fighter

forces around him were older SF-2/C Spectres; craft which were at best only a match for Macronesian Lysanders. Eleven of the subfighters around him however were the much newer and considerably more lethal SF-37/E “*Raptor*” type which he had faced only a handful of times before. Eleven was an odd figure for the UEO; an organization that operated with squadron numbers only divisible by four. It didn’t take much for him to remember the near-disastrous day before when he’d been jumped by the Rapiers, which were at the time only flying with eleven pilots. It occurred to him in that moment that something must have happened to them, but more importantly – they were here and now, and were clearly not interested in putting their tail between their legs and running. “Black Ravens, we’ve got Rapiers.”

“*Affirmative, lead,*” replied Commander Laney. “*Are we cleared to engage?*”

Bishop cocked his head as he bracketed the nearest black-finned Raptor and rolled around to engage it. “Affirmative. All Black Raven wings are clear to engage...” the loss of Sheridan had hit him hard, but now was not the time to mourn the dead. “...Be advised Black Raven three is down. *Stay with your wingmen.* Engage only if position is favourable.”

“*Understood and will comply.*”

Not far away, Lieutenant Jane Roberts depressed the trigger on her Raptor’s yolk and turned another Lysander in to an expensive cloud of fragmented titanium; the 25mm slugs from her guns tearing the sub to pieces before the pressure of the deep sea took over and crushed the ruined hull like a tin can.

“*Rapier two; break right,*” ordered her wingman – Rapier four, Wilhelm Shraeder, who was stepping in for Lieutenant Reynolds. Obediently, she snap-rolled hard to starboard and dove downwards to the trench below, bolts of Lysander subduction fire lighting up her trail, narrowly missing the Raptor’s engines.

Lieutenant Shraeder took the Lysander pilot’s momentary distraction as a chance to place a well-aimed torpedo between the engines of Roberts’s would-be assailant. The dispatch was simple enough, and Roberts shrugged it off. Two kills for the Rapiers in just as many seconds. “Thanks for the save, four,” she replied as she began searching for another target. It wasn’t long before she saw one as a faint sonar echo on her sensors, moving rapidly down the trench which both sides had abandoned, or so she’d thought. Frowning, she switched her radio to a combat frequency shared by the SEWACS overhead. “Dolphin eight-one-zero-dash-two, this is Rapier two... Do we have any friendlies in the trench?”

“*Negative, Rapier Two. Our sonar shows two unknowns advancing on your position.*”

“Understood. Moving to engage.”

Roberts was not the only one beginning to deal with mystery sonar contacts. Aboard *Atlantis*, the sonar operator was growing increasingly concerned by the sudden mass of large contacts the ship’s WSKR satellites were detecting at a range of just less than 5 miles, pulling out of the sensor-shielding trench that was below them. “Captain, the *Alexander* just pulled out of the trench. Looks like she’s called us on the trap... She’s closing at 70 knots.”

Ainsley nodded. He’d expected this, and was glad that he’d be engaging the Alliance fleet on more even terms. “Very well... Miss Canebride, pull us out of this trench and bring us on to the plains. Tactical, relay tactical information from the WSKRS to weapons control and begin plotting firing solutions. I want a full torpedo spread the moment we clear the trench.”

“Aye, sir.”

Surging forward, *Atlantis* began her ascent from the safety of her lair in the trench. Torpedoes were rotated on their racks and locked in to the 24 batteries spread across the bows as targeting data was relayed from the small satellites tied to the ship’s sensors hovering above the open abyssal plains. “Captain, the unknown contact we had moving down the trench towards this position has been identified... Rapier two has a visual.”

Ainsley turned. “And?”

“Macronesian assault craft. They’re on a direct course for the *seaQuest*, sir. Lieutenant Roberts and her Raptor flight are requesting permission to break from engagement to pursue.”

Ainsley grimaced as he looked with hope towards Callaghan behind weapons control, his eyes seemingly pleading with him for another solution. “Ryan? Can you get a torpedo lock on those assault craft?”

Callaghan shook his head grimly. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Ainsley nodded, conceding defeat, and then looked back over to the communications station, having no other alternative. “Fine. Lieutenant Phillips; tell the Rapiers that they have permission to engage. Launch reserve fighters and maintain present course.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Far below, beyond the natural sunlight that filtered through the surface of the sea illuminating the battle raging overhead, Commander Voss was giving one last briefing to the *Atlantis* marines aboard the assault speeder. The troops were checking the magazines of their rifles while Major Cortez paced back and forth behind them. The Major carried himself effortlessly despite the heavy weight of his equipment. Commander Banick watched him quietly from the sidelines as he reassembled his own Smith and Wesson 309M2 .45 pistol. Snapping the chamber back in to place, he slapped in a new magazine and then holstered the gun at his hip. His PAL chirped from his belt loudly, making Voss and the Marines turn from their business to look at him in a mixture of surprise and annoyance. Banick bit his lip as he walked down the end of the cabin where it was quieter, and unclipped the device from his belt to open it. “Banick. Speak to me.”

It was the speeder’s pilot. “*Sir. Thought you should know that we’re about to have company. I just got word from ‘Annie’ that one of the Rapiers just detected a pair of Macronesian assault craft hightailing it for seaQuest. They’re doing what they can to intercept, but they’ve got a pretty big head-start on our pilots.*”

“Damn it...” said Banick quietly to himself. “Alright, Lieutenant. I’ll pass it on to Commander Voss. What’s our ETA?”

“*A little over two minutes, sir. I’ve got seaQuest on the scopes... And sir? I think you and Commander Voss had better get up here.*”

Banick frowned. “Why? What’s going on?”

“*There’s something you need to see, sir...*”

Banick let out a long breath and nodded despite the fact he knew the Lieutenant couldn’t see him. “Alright. I’ll be there in a moment. Hold on.”

Replacing the PAL at his belt, he rolled up the sleeves of his black jumpsuit and approached Voss, giving him a knowing look that said he needed to speak with him. The Intel officer nodded slowly and excused himself from Major Cortez’s MFR troops, meeting Banick at the side of the dimly-lit cabin. “Yeah?” he asked, his demeanour straight-forward, and perhaps a little apprehensive.

Banick shook his head. “Not good. I was just told that we’re going to have company in a few minutes. The Macs have got Marines headed our way... they’re probably going to try and secure *seaQuest* before we do.”

“I thought they might,” replied Voss. “That all?”

Banick shook his head again. “Apparently we’ve been asked for in the cockpit.”

“What for?”

“Dunno. He just said we needed to see something... And he seemed kind of tight lipped. Know anything about that?”

Voss’s face seemed awkward. Banick’s return expression of suspicion convinced him that denial wasn’t going to fly as an answer, and the normally-veiled officer nodded hesitantly. “...Yes,” he replied. “Come on... I don’t want to talk about it here.”

The *Atlantis* XO nodded in understanding and followed Voss up the small flight of stairs to the speeder’s cockpit. Stepping in to the cramped flight deck, the pilot turned briefly, acknowledging their entry. “Sirs... Commander Voss, you asked me to tell you if I... urm...”

“It’s alright, Lieutenant,” he assured. “You can explain it. Commander Banick has clearance.”

“Yes sir. We’ve detected a small craft docked with *seaQuest*’s hydrosphere. I missed it on my initial sweep of the wreck, but resonance returns lit the thing up like Times Square.”

“It’s not part of *seaQuest*’s EVA group?”

“No sir,” denied the pilot. “It’s... something else. It doesn’t match any subcraft in UEO service. The computer won’t even give me a return on its registry.”

Banick blinked a couple of times. “I don’t understand,” he said. “What does this mean?”

“*Damn* it,” whispered Voss under his breath. “It means that we’ve got more problems than just Macronesian troops to breathe down our neck. I suggest you grab something with a little more firepower than that pistol...”

“You have to be joking...”

Voss looked at Banick inquisitively. “Since when have you known me to have a sense of humour?”

~

Lieutenant Roberts chased after the Macronesian speeder as fast as her Raptor would take her. The cockpit shuddered as the subfighter barrelled in to the depths at 340 knots, (and accelerating...) beyond the engine’s capable speed of 320 knots, driven only by the weight of its ballast tanks. Ahead of her, the Alliance speeders slowly closed in range – her Raptor was considerably faster than the larger, less powerful transports, but they were so far ahead that she doubted it would be at all possible to catch them before they reached the *seaQuest*. She checked the FMC for the radio transponder codes of the UEO Assault Speeders further ahead, and switched radio frequencies. “Speeder Alpha-Sierra-Eight-One-Zero-Gamma, this is Rapier Two. I am inbound on your position. Please advise on-“

-Her transmission was cut short as the cockpit lurched heavily, the laser fire from the Lysander behind her jarring the Raptor to starboard heavily. Roberts cursed as she instinctively threw the flight stick to port, trying to recover from the lateral roll the glancing hit had put her in to. With a flick of a switch, she killed the wailing

master alarms, and pushed the fighter in to an inverted dive before pulling back hard to bring it back in to a rapid climb, the cockpit still shuddering under the strain of the cavitation that streamed from every control surface. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the black-hulled Lysander – tell-tale of the vaunted *Black Ravens* - that shot past her rapidly, and gritted her teeth angrily. “So...” she said quietly, her thoughts directed squarely on the Macronesian who wanted her dead. “...You want to play? Then let’s dance.”

...Joshua Bourne spat a curse as the Raptor he’d so very nearly claimed rolled away and disappeared in to the darkness. Pushing the Lysander on to its wing, he pulled the stick back hard to bring it in to a tight inside loop back after the Raptor. Completing the turn, the Raptor was no where to be seen. Bourne was not inexperienced, and knew what had happened with enough foresight to pull up hard again as Hades cannon fire ripped up his path. Raptors, he knew, had the unfortunate characteristic of being the first and only subfighter in the world to be able to out-climb, out-dive and out-manoeuvre a Lysander.

...Roberts half smiled beneath her oxygen mask as the rounds of 25mm cannon fire ripped up the water ahead of the Lysander. It was a snapshot, and one that she didn’t expect to do much good beyond giving the other pilot a good bowel movement; and it worked as she noticed with mild satisfaction how the Lysander rolled up on its wing and pulled away rapidly. She followed through, banking the Raptor around sharply at such force that the Gs pressed her hard in to the seat, making her control on the fighter sluggish. Further bursts of cannon fire from her wingman, Lieutenant Shraeder, convinced the Lysander pilot that this was no longer a ‘friendly’ bout, and he rotated and accelerated fast and hard for shallow water. “Nice work, four,” she said quickly to her wingman who diligently did his job with unwavering purpose. The two Raptors worked closely with each other now; Reynolds and Shraeder seemingly able to sense each others movement as they circled on the Lysander’s tail, gradually pulling tight a lethal pincer. But Roberts cursed again as a *second* fighter swooped low from behind to position himself right behind Rapier Four’s Raptor. Wingmen against Wingmen; Rapier against Raven, Roberts was convinced that this fur ball was going to get worse before it got better. “Rapier four, watch your six – you’ve got company.”

Commander Daniel Laney could not believe he was in the process of saving the life of Joshua Bourne; a man who he had very little time for professionally, and had utter contempt for personally. His ‘issues’ with the son of the President however were secondary to his duty to Captain Bishop and the other pilots of Black Ravens. He didn’t want to see any more dead pilots here today than anyone else did. “Black Raven nine,” he said tersely. “This is Black Raven two. I’ve got your wing... Break left and roll. I’ll see what I can do about these two Raptors.”

“*Understood, two,*” answered Bourne flatly. A second later, his Lysander rolled in a quick spin and pulled away from the leading Raptor. Laney wasn’t at all surprised when the two Rapiers opted to perform a split turn, with the leader continuing to pursue Bourne while his (In fact “her” – although Laney did not know which member of the UEO squadron he was dealing with) wingman broke off in the opposite direction, no doubt an attempt to loop back around behind. Laney didn’t stray however, and followed the lead Raptor in its turn, albeit at a sharper angle of attack to try and get above his tail - a perfect trap shot. Laney moved his thumb to the

trigger of the flight yolk, preparing to take the shot... He watched as the crosshairs on the HUD tracked the Raptor, moving to lock on to it. He failed to notice the UEO Spectre-II from another completely separate squadron that swooped down from the darkness above him, raking laser fire madly in a ballistic display of random strafing “aimed” at him. The shock of this purely random act was not something Laney was prepared for, and for the first time, he found himself in an unfamiliar position as his massive starboard wing was utterly disintegrated under the barrage, sending the fighter in to a hard spin, out of control, straight to the bottom. “Son of a bitch! I’m hit!” he yelled, his radio cracking loudly with feedback from the sudden cry.

“*Raven two – bail out!*” the order from Captain Bishop came. Laney was not about to argue the point, and he shook his head, furious with himself for losing his concentration for that split-second, and reached down to the yellow lever between his legs. He pulled it, causing the explosive bolts that held the cockpit module in place to detonate, and ignited the single rocket engine under the cockpit pod... His part in the battle came to an inglorious end...

~

A few thousand feet above, *Atlantis* was staring down the barrel of a gun. The Alliance battlegroup had cleared the trench, and had opened up with massive barrages of torpedo fire from extreme range. Captain Ainsley listened to Commander Callaghan calmly count down the seconds until the torpedoes aimed at his ship hit, and he looked at a stopwatch to time the travel of the missiles. He knew the speed of a Macronesian type-60 torpedo was good for about 250 knots, and his own intercepts could do about half that. Nervous eyes of junior officers watched Ainsley apprehensively as he stared intently at his watch, completely unfazed by the 20-odd torpedoes that were coming hard and fast towards the ship.

“10 seconds,” warned Callaghan. “Sir...?” he asked, his voice almost pleading with the Captain to take action.

Ainsley held up a hand, raising a single finger as he counted for a few seconds longer, and then nodded curtly. “...Fire intercepts,” he ordered.

A series of torpedoes screeched out of their tubes across the *Atlantis’s* bow, followed half a second later by a second salvo. The weapons pinged noisily, seeking out their targets. Some of the Macronesian weapons, guided by an automatic imperative to seek out the most conspicuous acoustic target ahead of them veered off towards the intercept torpedoes, the others were in turn sought out by the other intercepts guided by *Atlantis’s* extensive and advanced sonar arrays. One by one, the torpedoes were destroyed, the turbulent explosions of their premature detonations just hundreds of yards off the DSV’s bow rocking her forward decks.

The bridge rumbled slightly under the pressure of the exploding weapons, but Ainsley merely nodded confidently, despite the looks of horror on some of his crew’s faces. “Torpedoes destroyed,” reported Callaghan calmly. He didn’t allow his relief to come through with the announcement.

“Very well,” said Ainsley. “Match bearings with the lead Macronesian ships for batteries one through twelve: repeating salvos.”

“Yes sir...Sensor bearings matched with targets and hypersonar guidance is active. Batteries one-through-twelve show green.”

“Fire.”

In contrast to the intercept fire, *Atlantis’s* counter-strike was considerably more impressive. Dozens of torpedoes rippled from batteries across the bows, spitting

fury-incarnate in answer to those who would stand to threaten her. The Alliance fleet was now in a world of trouble...

~

The loss of Laney’s Lysander stung Will Bishop hard as he continued his chase another of the Rapiers. The fact that his XO had managed to eject safely before his doomed fighter careened in to the sea floor at 200 knots was a fact that relieved him, and hastened his chase of the Raptor in front of him...

...Lieutenant Trevor Valance – Rapier Six – didn’t see Bishop’s swift approach until it was too late. Laser fire tore up the engines of his Raptor before a following, rapid volley of subduction fire slagged his fuselage and cored the cockpit, not even giving the pilot a chance to eject. The subduction shots hit in such a way that particle deceleration along the fighter’s length caused the wings to collapse and tear away under the friction of the sea rushing past. It was a fast death for the pilot, but a far longer and more violent end for his fighter as it literally came apart at the seams. Bishop’s Lysander glided past the doomed, fighter as if nothing had even transpired. It was an easy kill, and he almost felt sorry for the UEO pilot.

Above him, torpedoes shot away from the hulking mass of the *Atlantis* which protected and shielded the abyssal stretching down to the ruined *seaQuest* far below. He knew that the battle between *Alexander* and the UEO DSV was about to get ugly, and he wasn’t sure how many more fighter losses either side could endure before someone would need to accept their losses and withdraw. “Black Ravens, status report?” he ordered over the radio.

“This is bravo wing. We’ve lost Black Raven 3, and Black Raven 4 was smoked and withdrew to base.”

“Charlie here... Black Raven 2 is down, but rescue and recovery is en-route. ETA is 3 minutes.”

Good enough, thought Bishop. “All squadrons, this is Black Raven One. Regroup on my position,” he ordered. “We need to break this fighter screen before *Alexander* arrives.”

“Captain, the Rapiers and UEO first-line squadrons have us pinned. We’re not making any ground on seaQuest and-“

“We don’t *have* to make any ground on that wreck!” stressed Bishop as he rolled his fighter around a rocky outcropping. “Keep the UEO fighters engaged and let the marines deal with the *seaQuest*. As soon as *Alexander* gets here, *then* we can take out the *seaQuest*!”

The pilots under his command might have done many things he didn’t approve of, but they knew better than to question orders twice in a row after having them explained. Finally, his acting XO after Laney’s loss confirmed the orders. “Yes sir. Forming on your wing.”

“Good... I have point. Focus on their Raptor squadrons – they are a much bigger threat than the Spectres.”

...The organized chaos of the subfighter battle above was so far away from *seaQuest* at that moment that the only sound to pierce the great depths of the abyss was the occasional, seismic ‘thump’ of an exploding torpedo that reverberated through the water. The inner decks of *seaQuest* were dark, cold... The echoing of dripping water filled the corridors as groans of tortured metal wrenched the air. The

steady ‘thump’ of the distant explosions against the hull brought eerie life to a place that was utterly dead.

The abandoned halls of the once great symbol of the UEO were disturbed by the high pitched whine of a cutting laser against one of the bulkheads. A glowing ring appeared on the polished metal bulkhead in the cold darkness before the glow turned to fire, and the circular panel of metal fell to the floor with a clattering staccato against the deck gratings. Smoke hung thick in the stale air of the breach and soldiers stepped through the mist, the darkness broken only by the light on the other side of the breach, and the green glow from the scopes of their night vision goggles.

Major Cortez was the first through the hole; his rifle raised high at his shoulder as he slowly cleared the entry in a tight circle. He noticed that the deck beneath him seemed to be on a fairly considerable incline from the ship’s precarious position on the abyssal slope. The only thing he could hear was the sound of his own heavy breathing through his oxygen mask. The darkness wasn’t so drowning with the aid of his goggles, which painted a light green picture of the artificial world around him. One boot in front of the other, he lightly stepped forward from the breach and lowered his rifle, the other marines just a few short steps behind him. “Clear,” he said calmly, his headset mike relaying the message to the other troops. Banick and Voss stepped through the breach a few moments after that, looking around the black, abandoned halls of the ruined *seaQuest*. The dull ‘thump’ of distant explosions that travelled through the sea to pound the wreck’s hull and echo through her corridors, creating a ominous groan sent a shiver down Banick’s spine. He pressed ahead down one of the side access paths that joined the corridor they occupied to the main hall heading for the bridge.

“Shit man,” said one of the Marines. “This place is dead...”

“Too dead,” observed Major Cortez from an alcove just down the way. Banick and Voss watched the Major reach for something in the alcove that was out of sight, and cringed as he raised a very dead looking arm from the floor. Banick noted that the cuff was not the standard turtleneck shirt which UEO crew wore, but rather then white shirt and red rank echelons of a Macronesian officer. “Asphyxiation,” explained Cortez. “This guy choked on his own breath. I suggest we leave our masks on.”

“No argument here,” replied Voss as he checked a small meter on his PAL. “Air pressure is practically 100% CO2. He probably died well after they hit the bottom.”

“Can you feel that?” asked Banick from the small side passage.

“Feel what?”

“The deck... There’s a slight vibration.”

Voss nodded, pleased that Banick had noted that. “Good... That means the Fusion Reactor is still online. Accessing the ship’s systems shouldn’t be too difficult then.”

“We should move on,” continued Banick. “The bridge is one deck above, and well forward of where we are now.”

“Where are we?” asked Voss, looking around for some sign that would give him an answer from the surroundings.

“D-deck. Mid-section; just forward of the hydrosphere. Everything below us is flooded or crushed... Same with everything above C deck.”

“How the hell do we get to the bridge?” asked Cortez, remembering just how elaborate *seaQuest*’s deck layout was.

Banick looked grim. “A lot of the compartments forward of us on this deck have been flooded. The damage we did was severe... Most of the bow was destroyed.

Pressure doors have kept most of the aft compartments accessible. We can probably still get there through the Mag-Lev shaft.”

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Voss ordered the Marines as he pushed ahead to move through in to the next corridor. “Remember we’re not alone down here.”

...The distance between *Atlantis* and the Alliance fleet was now one of spitting. *Orion* class SSNs moved to the flanks of the big UEO battleship while the phalanx of *Tempest* class cruisers that defended the *Alexander* and her small *Aleus* class carrier escorts surged forward inexorably towards her. Torpedo fire from the cruisers was sustained and powerful, and *Atlantis* was struggling to hold her ground as she responded with round after round of intercept fire. The powerful batteries of laser cannons that made up her short-ranged arsenal of weapons erupted like fire from their ports over the surface of the hull, blasting superheated holes through the hulls of the cruisers and tearing apart framework. One of the cruisers taking the brunt of the punishment had begun to take a severe list to starboard, and was gradually losing depth, sinking further and further towards the sea floor. Admiral Sark noticed this and grimly looked over her shoulder to the officer of the deck. “Commander... Order our cruisers back. They can’t possibly match *Atlantis* like this. Have the *Orions* open fire from the flanks. It might be sufficient to force her back.”

“Admiral... That will leave *Alexander* exposed. We will have no screen if we withdraw the cruisers,” protested Captain Weyland in a hushed whisper. Our cruisers not withstanding, *Alexander* doesn’t have the firepower to match *Atlantis*.”

“We don’t have to,” snapped Sark. “Deploy the reserve fighters... Send them towards *seaQuest*. Have them armed with SN-12s...”

Weyland responded to the order with little more than disbelief. “Admiral...” he rasped. “...If we use those, we’ll bring down the entire abyssal. You do realise that the last time such a submarine rift was formed this way... the ship that deployed it was overpowered by the pressure...”

“I’m well aware of that, Captain,” replied Sark as the deck rumbled from an explosion that was perhaps just a little too close for comfort. “Give them time to get through and lay down fighter suppression-“

...The Admiral didn’t have a chance to finish her sentence. No one on the *Alexander’s* bridge had noticed the lone torpedo that had slipped through the defence grid, homing in on the big carrier. The carnage of explosions, laser fire and the acoustic whine of subfighter engines completely masked the missile’s approach, and it slammed in to the *Alexander’s* dorsal hull, tearing open the pressure hull violently in a blast of superheated plasma.

The ship’s upper decks were racked violently. Bridge crew who were not seated flew across the CIC; Admiral Sark and Captain Weyland included. Weyland picked himself off the floor in a daze. Staggering to his feet, he instinctively called for a report. “Commander! Status!?”

“Direct hit to the dorsal hull sir. We’re taking on water! Emergency doors are closing... Still no word on casualties.”

Weyland nodded, still recovering from the shock of being thrown across the forward command deck. As reality began to return, he looked around, and noticed the fallen figure of Admiral Sark lying face-down next to the nearby bulkhead. She wasn’t moving. “Medical team to the bridge!” he ordered quickly, rushing to her side.

“Admiral?” he asked, taking a knee and placing a hand on her shoulder. There was no response, and he turned her over on to her back to see the blank gaze of her

eyes towards the ceiling, the shock still visible there. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of the Admiral’s mouth. She was dead.

“...Sir?” asked one of the officers around him.

“She’s dead, Commander...” replied Weyland.

The XO had already realised that the Admiral was dead judging solely from the awkward way she had come to rest against the wall. But it was not what he had meant by the question. “...Your orders, sir?” he clarified.

“Deploy the reserve fighters,” he barked, stepping away from the Admiral’s body to take command once more. “You heard the Admiral’s orders. So carry them out!”

“...Direct hit on the *Alexander*, sir,” reported Callaghan calmly as the bridge rocked around him once more. “Their cruiser line is withdrawing...”

Ainsley was standing commandingly over *Atlantis’s* chart table, watching the movement of the subfighter forces and Alliance fleet that surrounded his ship. “It’s not the cruisers that concern me right now, Commander,” he replied quietly, watching the SSNs that were creeping up on his flanks. The battle didn’t seem to be going anywhere quickly. The Alliance fleet had put itself in to a position where *Atlantis’s* torpedo fire was swatted from the sea by a constant barrage of laser fire and intercept torpedoes timed to detonate in a long line along the taskforce’s perimeter. He thought it odd that the Macronesians didn’t seem to be *trying* to tackle *Atlantis* head-on, but were instead opting to keep her pinned down. There was something he was missing... What was Sark doing? He looked again at the formations of Lysanders that swarmed over the battlefield, dogged by his Raptor and Spectre formations and visa versa. For now, Commander Hitchcock’s pilots had the upper hand in the senseless melee. But with the Alliance fleet in a constant state of changing posture, it could easily reverse should Admiral Sark decide to start concentrating her fire on the UEO fighters. He then noticed that the flight of Raptors led by Lieutenant Roberts that had been trying to intercept a group of Macronesian Marines had fallen back, and was fighting a pitched battle against a squadron that had been identified as the Black Ravens.

“Sir,” reported Callaghan. “The Macronesian assault craft have broken through the Rapiers. They’ll reach *seaQuest* within 60 seconds.”

The Captain slapped the chart table in frustration. “Can you get me Commander Banick?” asked Ainsley.

“Hold on, sir...”

Trudging down the broken halls of *seaQuest’s* inner-most decks, James Banick stopped as he looked down and realised his boots and socks were saturated, and that he was standing in about half a foot of water. Looking grimly down the corridor towards a sealed water-tight bulkhead that was half-submerged in water that had managed to seep through over time, he shook his head turned down another side corridor. His radio headset cracked noisily in his ear. “*Commander Banick, this is Ainsley.*”

“I read you sir,” he replied.

“*What’s your status?*”

“*We’re aboard seaQuest, sir... We’re trying to get to the bridge...*”

“*Make it fast, Commander... I’ve just been told the Macs broke through the Rapiers. Their assault craft will be at your position within the next minute.*”

The message, heard by every Marine around him who were using the same channel, was not received well by Commander Voss hurried ahead to find an alternate path to the Mag-Lev shafts. “Understood, sir,” replied Banick as he nervously noted the marines around him tighten their grip on their rifles to disengage the safeties.

“*Good luck, Commander... Atlantis Out.*”

Banick signalled for Cortez and his marines to follow him, and he hurried after Commander Voss.

...not far away, Jeffrey Edmonds stood on the dark, abandoned bridge of the *seaQuest DSV*, working at the command station to break through the many layers of security encryption that protected the system. The encryption was well coded; no doubt the last work of a member of the crew who had wanted to keep the most sensitive information within the computer out of Alliance hands. Not that it had done them much good... The Alliance had captured the submarine anyway. Edmonds didn't know exactly what had happened to the UEO crew after they'd captured the sub, but imagined given the involvement of... *certain organizations*... that measures were taken to ensure “permanent silence.”

The files within the computer which he *could* readily access were Macronesian, no doubt ending up in the system after the Alliance had seized control of the submarine. There were mission reports, orders issued from Alliance Military Command, and personnel rosters – all of which he found highly interesting. The Alliance had gone to great measures to cover their tracks in the operation, but perhaps not far enough to cover *every* detail. And his job was to make sure those details didn't fall in to the wrong hands.

One file archive flashed up before him for a moment as he navigated the log files, and he stopped. Going back, he sought out the file and opened it again.

“Rising thunder,” he whispered quietly, reading the file. “From the Director of the Office of...”

Edmonds swallowed a lump that suddenly rose in the back of his throat. For a long time, he had been told that UEO Intelligence had somehow been involved in the capture of the *seaQuest*, leaking information to the Alliance about its planned route, its combat capabilities, and deck schematics.

He couldn't believe how wrong he was. He was now reading proof that the conspiracy to take control of the *seaQuest DSV* went as high as the office of the former Secretary General, Arthur Dallinsley, and many of his senior staff. How could the UEO not have known this?! How had they been able to keep it secret?

The potential damage this would do if the information got out was staggering. It was enough to tear the UEO apart at its highest levels beyond repair. Quickly, he downloaded the information to his PDA, and uploaded the files he'd been left by “Dakota”, and the data became an unreadable mass of random figures – corrupted beyond recovery. Brushing the thoughts aside, he continued to sift through the mass of files within the “Rising thunder” dossier. The scope of the operation was staggering.

Edmonds had worked in this business for long enough to have seen and unravelled many conspiracies. In some cases, he was oddly amused at how close to the truth the Tabloid press who promoted civilian conspiracy theorists actually were. But nothing in his entire career matched what he saw now. He frowned over a few words and names that were dropped throughout the file. They were terms he didn't recognise. “*Nycarians*”, “*Adraeleus*”... Large amounts of the information made no

sense. Whatever information he needed to decipher the apparent riddle he was not going to find here.

Continuing to upload files, he progressively erased massive slabs of data randomly from the memory banks, taking great care to mask his tracks just enough so that the UEO troops who were headed there at that very moment wouldn't have time to discover the truth.

Finally, the decryption algorithm he was running on the memory core's deepest archives broke through the firewalls and a haunting image flashed up on to the screen. "Authorization granted: Oliver Hudson; Captain. DSV-4600"

Edmonds didn't know how his superiors had gotten Captain Hudson's access protocols, and he didn't really want to know. Opening up the ship's log files, Edmonds navigated his way to the rotating, encrypted protocols for the ship's command codes buried deep within the computer core. Somewhere within the constantly-changing code structure of the mainframe was the elusive deadman codes, all 7 of them having a very specific attached protocol which could identify who had access to them, and who made use of them.

It didn't take long to find the codes, and with unrestricted access to the computer, courtesy of the later Captain Hudson, it was very literally a case of pushing a button to alter the logs. Edmonds took one last look around the bridge of the *seaQuest*, and knew that it was the last time he would ever see it. Logging off from the command console, he left the bridge with a head full of questions... and very few answers.

Hitchcock broke hard to starboard, missing the solid titanium wall of the *Atlantis's* hull by bare meters. The force of the turn made him grunt audibly as he was forced in to the cockpit seat firmly. He concentrated hard through the rush of blood from his head to avoid hitting *Atlantis*, and keep his course running along the surface of the hull steady. At his speed, it took just a couple of short seconds to pass the 500-meter-long bulk of the submarine, the *Lysander* that was on his tail erratically swerved up and down, avoiding the lances of laser fire that shot out from ports along the ship's hull. His Raptor shuddered violently as he passed in to the turbulent wake of *Atlantis*, using the strong, artificial current of the ship's engines to kick the fighter in to a hard tail spin, bringing the subfighter around in a hard 180-degree tail-around-nose turn, leaving his nose pointed directly at the chasing *Lysander*. It was the perfect snapshot, and he unloaded with both Hades guns at near point-blank range.

The *Lysander* pilot didn't have time react. Between Hitchcock's sudden loss of speed, and his own barrelling rate of nearly 300 knots, the distance between them closed before he even saw the flashes of fire from the guns mounted on the Raptor's nose. The uranium slugs ripped through the *Lysander's* nose, and the entire fuselage disintegrated a split-second after that. Hitchcock felt nothing from the kill... *except maybe recoil*, he thought coldly. He didn't waste any time in selecting another target from the seemingly infinite mass of enemies around him. And adjusted his course to intercept...

...At the same moment that Hitchcock saw Bishop; Bishop saw Hitchcock. Except his sighting of the UEO Wing Commander was not by chance, as it was by recognition. Bishop had tagged each and every one of the *Rapiers* on his sonars at the offset of the engagement, and had been keeping track of the UEO squadron the moment he'd entered battle. Initially there had been eleven of the Raptors, now there

were only nine. Targeting Hitchcock’s Raptor as it closed in at great speed, he uttered a silent prayer and applied power to his throttle, rolling in a wide arc before shooting downward to the sea floor. *‘Run silent, run deep,’* he reminded himself. It had been the first thing they’d told him at the academy, and had held true for submariners for a century. Hitchcock wasted no time in getting down to business, and no sooner had he started his run; Bishop’s instruments began whining in protest of a torpedo lock. Two small contacts appeared on his sensors and began following him at increasingly fast speed.

“Damn it,” said Bishop with annoyance. Torpedoes he could handle... it’s what came after that bothered him. He fully expected that Hitchcock would use the distraction to close the range and get behind him, and *then* Bishop could afford to be worried.

Instead of continuing his dive to the sea floor, the Macronesian pilot pulled up, and headed straight for his challenger. Instead of preparing countermeasures, he switched to his subduction guns...

...Hitchcock watched his HUD in curiosity. The small numerals that constantly changed in his crosshairs that indicated his target’s range were getting progressively *smaller*. And they were doing so at a rate that experience told him meant the pilot was coming right towards him! *‘Balls of steel...’* thought Hitchcock quietly to himself. He had seen many ‘interesting’ manoeuvres from Macronesian pilots in the past, but taking on a Raptor and a pair of ASF-7 “Foxhound” torpedoes which had the capacity to actively seek out and destroy a target almost infallibly was probably the most ‘courageous’ act he had seen. *‘Your loss, pal...’*

Hitchcock opened up his throttles and switched back to his guns. Somehow, for some strange reason, he suspected he would need them...

Every possible alarm Bishop could think of, or even wanted to think of, was now screaming at him. The two red markers on his HUD showed the torpedoes that were closing at a rate of several hundred meters per second. He selected the first torpedo with his targeting reticle, silencing the alarms with a flick of a switch on the cockpit dash. The first missile seemed to close faster and faster as the last 2000 meters ticked by. Taking careful aim with his reticle, he held his breath for a moment, taking a gentle grip on the flight stick and lining up his sights. After a few moments, the reticle went red, and he fed the target information to his fire control computer before rapidly changing his target to the second torpedo. Again, he lined up the sights, fully aware that if he let excitement or anxiety take hold for even a moment, he would die. Slowly, he squeezed the trigger on his stick, and the subduction cannons on his wings erupted in volleys of blue fire, cutting through the water to strike the oncoming torpedo with brilliant accuracy. Instantly, the particle-decelerating energy reduced the missile to molecular slag. Nothing remained as the torpedo fell apart mid-travel before its engine careened out of control and exploded. While this happened, Bishop had hit his secondary trigger and sent a torpedo linked to the fire control computer’s tracking data off to seek out and destroy the first torpedo which he’d previously locked on to... Rapidly, the two torpedoes closed with one another... and Bishop pulled up quickly and bracketed the Raptor which was still closing with him...

...Hitchcock shook his head and cursed as he watched the two torpedoes he’d fired disappear in small flashes through the darkness, and vanish from his sensors just as quickly. But the Lysander kept coming in its high speed, death-defying run.

‘Bishop...’ -whispered Hitchcock. The display of marksmanship from the Macronesian convinced that trying to take the man head on was like playing Russian roulette. This wouldn’t be decided by skill, but by luck... And he was not a gambling man.

Pushing his stick down, he sent his Raptor in to a plummeting dive for the sea floor; the very same thought which had crossed Bishop’s mind now running through his own – ‘Run silent, run deep.’

...Lieutenant Roberts was once again in the right place at the right time to see the two new squadrons of Lysanders launch from the bellies of the pair of *Aleus* class carriers flanking the hulking *Alexander*. Without needing to ask, the two other remaining Raptors in her wing formed up in a loose delta on either side of her as they noticed the launch of the Alliance fighters. Lysanders presented a very unusual target depending on how they were handled by the pilot in question; they were very wide, with massive delta wings that fanned out from the nose-tipped cockpit, and angling back from halfway down the fuselage to two long, spine-like tails. But when viewed from the front, back or side, their profile disappeared to absolutely nothing – a feature provided by the ‘flying wing’ design. The only reason the Raptor presented an equally small sonar profile was simply because it was less than a third the size of the Lysander... and as a result, was relatively lightly armed. “Command, this is Rapier two... I just saw two squadrons of Lysanders launch from the rear of the Mac taskforce... Please advise.”

“...Command, this is Rapier two...” heard Captain Ainsley. “...I just saw two squadrons of Lysanders launch from the rear of the Mac taskforce. Please advise.”

The Captain snapped his fingers, pointing at Callaghan. The Tactical officer nodded knowingly and pulled up as much sensor coverage of the Alliance battlegroup’s rear guard as he could. “Confirmed, sir,” he said, seeing the two formations of subfighters making for the Hemmingway trench at high speed. He frowned as more detailed information came back from various sources throughout the fleet – WSKRS, SEWACS and the *Atlantis*’s own arrays. The readings were strange... acoustics of the fighters showing strange, distorted returns that would normally have implied sensor jamming, except the distortion was localised, and did not affect any other returns. Callaghan patched himself in to the Sea Wing’s Battlernet, and brought up an open hailing channel through to the Rapiers. “Stand by, Rapier two...” he ordered before muting the line, and then relaying all the sensor information through to Operations just near the Captain. He got up, and quickly jogged up the stairs to meet him on the command deck.

“Lieutenant Commander?” queried Ainsley, following his tactical officer to the operations console.

Callaghan didn’t say anything as his hands flew over the controls and brought up a summary of the sensor information from tactical. “Look at this,” he said. “These returns don’t make any sense... the ghosting, distortion...”

“I don’t understand”, replied the Captain. “It can’t be jamming... The rest of the imagery is too good.”

“I know sir. But it’s definitely coming from the Lysanders. Something they are carrying is causing this.”

“There are very few things that can corrupt a sonar acoustics return like that, Commander... I’ve only ever seen this kind of return from oceanographic surveys on seismic activity in deep ocean trenches.”

“Exactly sir,” said Callaghan succinctly. “...Except one other thing...” Callaghan cleared his throat. “Computer display UEO Intelligence files on Macronesian SN-12 Subduction weaponry.”

“*That information requires alpha-level clearance,*” replied the computer in a pleasant female voice.

“-Computer, this is Captain Mark Ainsley. Verify voice-print identification for alpha-level security clearance and display requested information.”

“*Hello Captain. Alpha-level clearance is recognised. Accessing file archives.*”

A second later, the ops station displayed files of known technical information on a Macronesian SN-12 Nuclear Subduction Torpedo. It didn’t take Ainsley long to put it together, and he gritted his teeth. “*Jesus Christ...*” hitting the auxiliary communications controls on the Ops station, he planted both hands on the console’s railing and leaned over. “Rapier two, this is Captain Ainsley – Permission granted to engage new hostiles. Be advised they are carrying *SN-12 Subduction warheads.*” – He stressed this. “Probable target is the Phoenix Abyssal. Understand this Lieutenant, if they succeed in delivering those weapons...”

Roberts gritted her teeth with dread. She knew what was at stake. “...We understand, sir. Recommend you advise insertion team to evacuate.”

“*Let us worry about that, Rapier two... Just deal with those fighters!*”

Roberts and her wing were already in the process of swinging about to chase after the Lysanders as she considered just how many of them there were... She had just three Raptors to do the job. “Urm, Command... Just how many SN-12s are these guys carrying?”

...Callaghan looked very grim as he shook his head negatively at Ainsley. There was no way three Raptors could take out that many Lysanders in time, and Robert’s wing of the Rapiers was the only one in range. Ainsley could be heard to hesitate as he gave his order. “...Take out as many as you can Lieutenant. Just buy us time.”

Banick, Voss, and the Atlantis Marines were running as quickly as they could through ankle-deep water down the long Mag-Lev transit tube through the *seaQuest’s* interior. The intra-ship rail system was inactive now, but not far behind them, a squad of Macronesian commandos were hot on their heels. Major Cortez and his troops were on edge like guard dogs that could smell danger, and they were now proceeding far more ruthlessly as they marched down the ruined length of the wreck. They would ‘leap frog’ over one another, one marine advancing while another turned to cover their tracks, carbines constantly levelled, with the safeties turned off.

Banick came to a stop and shone a torch up on a firmly sealed door to check its markings. It read “C-Deck. Bridge.” He turned to face Voss in the darkness, which was lit only dimly in green from the dozen pairs of night vision goggles that surrounded him. He started to regret not packing any for himself. “It’s your show now, Voss,” he said.

The Intelligence officer stepped forward to a small maintenance override panel and punched in an access code he’d obtained from Fleet Intel. A small red light began blinking green, and the doors above them cracked apart with a slight ‘snap’ and a ‘hiss.’ Two the marines pried them apart fully, and Major Cortez poked his head above the lip of the deck, checking back and forth in the bridge corridor with his rifle steadily in-hand. “Clear,” he announced as he placed his hands on the ledge and

vaulted himself up to the ledge, and stepped through the Mag-Lev doors. One by one, Banick, Voss and the other Marines followed suit.

In the dark hallway, Banick raised his torch to reveal the huge, metallic pressure doors of the heart of *seaQuest* – her bridge. He took a deep breath as he looked them over for long seconds, a renewed sense of revered awe and perhaps sadness sweeping over him. His boots falling on the deck grates echoed loudly through the vacant corridor behind him as he slowly took several steps towards the huge doors, and then turned to face Voss, nodding once slowly as he stepped back to join Cortez and the Marines (who were still all on edge...)

Voss swiped his override access card through the security console beside the doors, and they cracked open with a quiet hum. The usual warning bells that came with such heavy doors opening couldn't be heard. The 14 men found themselves standing on the edge of a black chasm; every light in the bride was dead. Not a single console was lit up, and not even emergency lighting was turned on. Banick raised his torch again, stepping through the arch on to the quarterdeck gingerly. “Alright,” he said. “...Let's get to work.”

Voss hurried over to the command station and began working as Cortez quietly stepped up beside Banick and sighed. “...This is wrong,” he said under his breath. “We shouldn't be here...”

The *Atlantis XO* nodded slowly. “I know the feeling... I never wanted to come back here... Not after what we did...”

“You and I both know we had no choice, Commander,” scolded Cortez lightly – always the soldier. “We couldn't allow this ship to fall in to the hands of the Macs then, and we can't let them have it now.”

As if on queue, their radios cracked slightly in their ears. It was one of the marines who stood guard outside. “*We have activity...*” they reported quietly. “*They're here.*”

“Shit,” said Cortez, pulling back the bolt on his carbine to feed the first round in to the chamber. “Help Voss... We'll handle this.”

Banick nodded and let out a long breath. “Good luck, Major.”

“Same to you.”

The two officers walked off in different directions; Banick towards the Command deck, and Cortez back towards the bridge doors to join his Recon Marines who had sought cover behind what little they could find in the outer corridor.

“*Ainsley to Banick,*” squawked the radio in the Commander's ear.

“Go ahead, sir.”

“*I hope you're nearly done down there Commander, because you have about 5 minutes before things go right to hell.*”

Banick shook his head helplessly as he watched Voss work away furiously on the command console which he'd brought back online. “I think you're a little late telling us that, sir,” he said just as the first staccato of automatic weapons fire filled the hall outside the bridge. “Things are already going to hell down here.”

Ainsley didn't share in the light but morbid humour of the statement. “*Commander, right now you have about 2 dozen Lysanders headed your way armed with SN-12s. They will be there in less than 5 minutes.*”

That stopped Banick. A stab of fear ran through him, and he closed his eyes. He was now 20,000 feet beneath the surface of the ocean on a submarine wreck that was under the stress of over 8,000 pounds per square inch of water pressure outside, with Macronesian Marines wanting to shoot him out in the corridor, and a wing of Lysanders armed with Subduction weaponry wanting to blow the entire canyon in to

the stone age. All said and done, it was a very grim outlook for the immediate future. “Ok,” he finally replied. “We’ll do what we can. Banick Out.”

Banick bit his lip as he heard more gunfire from the hall outside, and looked down at Voss. “Did you hear all that?”

“Yeah...” said the Intel Officer, strangely detached from the knowledge of just how bad the situation was. “...But the way I see it, spending time worrying about someone who is going to drop a nuke on you no matter what you do over the five remaining minutes of your life is probably quite counterproductive and perhaps pessimistic... So unless you know anything about neural optics base-ten encryption algorithms...”

“...Then I should probably shut up and help Cortez.”

“...You said it, Commander, not me.”

Commander Hitchcock rolled left and right as he tried to shake Black Raven Captain William Bishop off his tail, but staying ahead of Bishop’s fire was proving to be increasingly challenging. The Macronesian seemed hell-bent on sending him to a watery grave some time over the next few minutes, and Hitchcock was pushing himself to absurd limits in order to avoid that. In front of him, another of the Black Raven Lysanders strayed back and forth under his crosshairs erratically, partly because he was doing his best to evade, and partly because Hitchcock couldn’t hold a steady shot for long enough while dealing with ‘Black Raven One’ sitting so close on his tail.

Further ahead, he spied the ruined, slowly sinking hulk of a Macronesian *Orion* class SSN which had fallen victim to *Atlantis*’s fire. Remaining mindful of the Lysander ahead of him, he veered off to the left and put more power to his throttles, aiming carefully for the ruined submarine. Using the SSN as cover, he flew past, blinding Bishop’s line of fire for just long enough to steady his shot as he rounded the wreck and came out directly beneath the subfighter he chased. With a quick and accurate burst of Hades fire, he sheered off the Lysander’s wing, causing it to spin rapidly to the side to collide with the rocky sea floor, disappearing in a flash of bubbles and debris. Hitchcock let out a breath rapidly as he pushed the Raptor in to a sharp climb towards the top of the trench. He looked at the massive wall of suppression fire put up by a trio of Alliance heavy cruisers and the *Alexander*, and worked his jaw as he considered his options. Ahead of him, the Macronesian fleet was putting up so much laser and particle cannon fire that ‘running the gauntlet’ would prove merely suicidal. Behind him, a vengeful Alliance Captain was making every effort to fill his fighter full of holes. He suddenly found himself in the unfamiliar position of wishing that an old colleague, Wing Commander Corinn Roderick and her “Dark Angels” – known for their stiff rivalry with the Rapiers – was there to help. Looking up at the surface of the trench, Hitchcock got another idea, and put full power to his throttles...

...Captain Bishop was sweating from the degree of mental concentration he needed to apply to keep up with Hitchcock. For a moment, the thought occurred to him that perhaps he should let the man go... but watching another of his pilots – This time Black Raven 8; Lieutenant Lee Chan Seng - die as Rapier One gunned him down without remorse, convinced him otherwise. Hitchcock’s Raptor was flying vertical towards the surface of the trench line above them. Bishop prepared to level off and catch him as he tried to run along the plains of the Phoenix island shelf, but was

surprised when Hitchcock instead opted to continue on further, his Raptor still gaining speed... 300 knots... 305 knots... 310 knots...

It wasn't until the very last minute that he worked out what the UEO pilot was doing, and cursed...

...Gabriel Hitchcock's subfighter hit the surface of the Pacific at exactly 335 knots, and became very airborne. It was the first time he had ever seen the instruments of his fighter register a *negative* depth of 250 feet. The sudden glare of the sun in his face as the Raptor flew through the air made him squint painfully as he pushed his stick hard forward. The second the fighter broke the surface, the engines began screaming at him in protest of the sudden lack of water resistance, and a few moments later began to fall back towards the ocean that was being eerily lit up by the explosions beneath the surface...

...Bishop could only blink in slight disbelief of what he'd just seen, and broke away rapidly. A UEO Raptor might be able to survive such a bizarre manoeuvre like that, but his fragile, broad-winged Lysander would probably break its wings off the moment it hit the water again. He cursed again as he rolled away to starboard, just in time as the UEO fighter plunged back in to the sea and plummeted back towards the sea floor before executing a sharp turn and driving its way back to the surface in pursuit of Bishop's fighter.

The Alliance Captain had to admit it was the most novel method of evasion he'd ever seen. Resetting his target information, he sighed once more as he saw Hitchcock charging up behind him... This dogfight was beginning to get very long-winded.

Jane Roberts huffed as she sent another Lysander and its pilot to their graves with a lengthy burst of gunfire. There was no way she could keep up with the Alliance squadrons armed with the SN-12 Subduction torpedoes, and their escorts had immediately broken off to engage her as soon as they'd seen the Rapiers' Bravo-flight approach. “*Atlantis, this is Rapier two.*”

“*Rapier two, this is Atlantis. We read you, go ahead.*”

“Sir... we've lost the warheads. There is no way we can intercept them in time – their escorts have us pinned. Requesting permission to disengage from pursuit.”

The reply was not immediate. She knew that Captain Ainsley would be deciding his next moves very carefully, and it was no longer a matter of *if*, but *when* the Alliance fighters delivered their warheads. “...*Permission granted, Rapier two,*” came the reply finally. “*Orders are to cover Atlantis while we withdraw.*”

She twisted her mouth in to a wince as she thought about Commander Banick and the Marines who were over 10,000 feet below her aboard the wrecked *seaQuest*, at the mercy of the approaching Alliance fighters. “Sir... What about the insertion team?”

“*We've advised them of the situation, Lieutenant... There is nothing more you can do. Recommend you get out of that trench now.*”

“Understood... Rapier Bravo-flight disengaging.”

With her two wingmen close in tow, Roberts lifted the nose of the Raptor and headed back for shallower water... and the monstrous fighter battle that raged above.

While things for Roberts were just settling down, the situation for Major Cortez couldn't have been much more hectic. Squeezing the trigger of his carbine, he

opened up with a staccato of gunfire in to the Macronesian Marines who were storming down the corridor his troops were doing their best to defend. They'd set up at a cross junction a fair distance from the bridge doors, and were holding it as long as they could.

“I'm empty!” yelled one of the marines from his position across the hall, prompting another to take his place and provide covering fire as the soldier reloaded. Cortez jumped back instinctively as the soldier who was standing next to him was blown to his back, the audible “thump” of the bullet that struck him at least providing some comfort to the Major in the knowledge the hit probably hadn't broken his flak vest. “Man down!” he called. “Covering *fire!* Medic!” yelled Cortez.

On the opposite side of the hall, all the marines raised their rifles and fired in response, giving the team's medic time and cover to quickly run across the corridor to the downed marine who rasped heavily. The medic opened the man's torn jacket to find the shell lodged in the kevlar weave of the vest. He then noticed a *second* hit on the soldier's side... the red stain there and pool of blood that was forming under his back a telling sign. “We've got a bleeder!” announced the medic over the chattering of machine guns, withdrawing some equipment from his pack and setting his gun against the corridor wall. He looked around him, rapidly realising the meagre cover provided by the tiny hall outcropping wasn't sufficient for him to work unhindered. “Major, we've got to get him out of this hall!” yelled the Medic.

“How bad?!” yelled Cortez in reply.

“He's gonna bleed out if we don't!”

“... *God damn...*” rasped the downed marine. “*This really sucks...*”

“Shit!” said Cortez, throwing away an empty magazine as he reloaded once more. “*Alright!* Alpha, Bravo – fall back to the bridge!” he barked, opening fire once more, and noticing a spray of blood erupting from the head of the Macronesian soldier he'd just hit with grim satisfaction. “Sergeant Adock? Standby on those claymores!”

The marines fell back; the support troops laying down an unending hail of bullets in to the hallway as they retreated. Cortez and the team Medic dragged the wounded marine down the hall as Sergeant Adock briskly ducked behind another alcove and removed a detonator from his belt. Poking the scope of his carbine around the corner of the alcove, he watched through his helmet's HUD as the scope's tiny in built camera fed the video directly to him. Flicking open the safety of the detonator, he held down the arming trigger and held his thumb precariously over the tiny red button on its top side. He waited until the advancing Alliance troops had passed the alcove, and then pushed it.

A shattering ‘boom’ echoed down the length of the corridor, filling it with smoke and debris over the cries of shock from the Macronesian soldiers. Adock got up from his privileged perch, and rejoined Cortez at the entrance of *seaQuest's* bridge...

...Inside, Voss was working furiously to recover all the log data he could from the ship's computers. Banick shook his head as he walked back from the bridge doors, gun drawn. “Voss, we have *no* time!” he yelled, the gunfire outside once more building up.

“Just a few more seconds...”

“Oh, don't give me that!” complained Banick urgently. “Not to sound clichéd, but we don't *have* a few seconds!”

“-Fine!” snapped Voss, shutting his PDA and pocketing it before picking up his sub-machine gun and heading for the door. He didn't bother shutting down the computer system.

“Major! We are getting out of here!” yelled Voss.

“About time!” replied Cortez over the staccato of machine guns.

“Sir, the Macs have got the Mag-Lev shaft covered. We can’t get out that way!”

Banick kept low as he looked around and saw the second corridor veering off the left of the main bridge hall. He pointed at it. “That way,” he said. “Corridor C-5 will take us right through the science labs and out to the hydrosphere!”

“What guarantee do we have that it’s clear?” asked Voss, still staring down the scope of his carbine.

“None. But there are only three ways off the bridge – this corridor, the Mag-Lev, and corridor C-5. So unless you have a better idea...?”

Voss nodded. “Marines! Fall back!”

...A few miles away and in the darkness of the sea above them, the Alliance subfighters continued their plunge in to the trench. They were now less than 2 minutes away...

Atlantis opened fire once more, torpedoes spewing from her torpedo tubes in endless volleys. The Macronesian *Hydra*-class cruiser in front of her had strayed from the protective defensive wedge the rest of the Alliance taskforce had assumed, and now she was paying dearly. Her broadside exposed, and masking the overlapping intercept fire from her flagship – the *Alexander* – the torpedoes hit home with devastating accuracy; the UEO sonars guiding them in to specific targets across the hull. The first torpedoes ripped in to the engineering hull and conning tower, obliterating the command and control systems in blasts of superheated plasma. The second volley hit in a staggered pattern across the length of the entire hull, opening its port side to the ocean. The immediate and heavy list which the submarine assumed was telling of the sheer volume of water it was taking on, but it did not implode; the water was too shallow for that.

Captain Ainsley held up a hand as he watched the cruiser’s death throes. “Cease fire,” he ordered. There was no point in massacring a helpless crew; they were no longer a threat to him and war or not – their ship was beyond salvage, and it served more purpose to him intact than it did in pieces across the abyssal canyon. “Helm; engines aft one quarter. Commander Canebride, get us behind that *Hydra*. We’ll use it as cover until we can recover our EVA.”

“Aye, sir. Engines aft one quarter.”

Ainsley shook his head from the Conn, anxiously tapping his fingers on the barrier railing in front of him. “*Come on, Banick...*” he whispered to himself. “Tactical, how long until those Lysanders reach *seaQuest*?”

“One minute, 10 seconds, sir.”

“Signal the fleet for a general retreat,” the Captain ordered grimly as the deck thumped beneath his feet again – another torpedo hitting somewhere on his ship. “I am assuming the Macs are going to do the same.”

“Aye sir.”

Hitchcock heard the order to withdraw as he rounded the ruined hull of the *Hydra* class cruiser and dove towards the *Atlantis* hovering a few hundred meters below. It was an impressive sight; the huge, near-500 meter long submarine stretched off in to the distance, the stern disappearing in the haze of the sea far away. It appeared to rise up to his tiny fighter as he dove down and strapped the deck against

the curves of the hull. It was not a sight he had time to take in as he tried to remain focussed on Captain Bishop’s Lysander ahead of him. Both pilots were continuously chasing the other as they periodically destroyed another Raptor, Spectre or Lysander in the process of their pursuit. The bulk of the Black Ravens and Rapiers were now fighting each other in a high-stakes contest of very unforgiving proportions. Both squadrons had taken losses, although perhaps no where near as bad as some of their fellow fighter wings that battled around them.

It angered Hitchcock that the entirety of the *Atlantis’s* gamma-squadron of Spectres (The VF-51 “Stallions”) had been wiped out. It saddened him even more that members of his own squadron – the Rapiers – would be in the list of dead he would have to post in the ship’s notices. ‘*Assuming I survive...*’ he thought to himself.

Bishop weaved in and out of his sights as he ducked and dodged around the screen of defensive fire put up by *Atlantis’s* guns. This close to the ship, Hitchcock couldn’t risk a torpedo shot, and he was too far away for his Hades guns to be much use. Increasing power to his throttles, he tried gaining on the Lysander, but shook his head as Bishop rolled and headed right back around towards the Alliance fleet. A second later, Hitchcock saw a familiar shape fly out of the darkness below and open fire. The shooting was accurate, but it came from too far away to seriously bother the Lysander.

“*Rapier two to lead,*” cracked his radio. “*I’ve got your six, sir...*”

Roberts’ fighter settled in on his starboard wing and she wagged her tail slightly. He smiled at this, and began a long, inside loop. “Nice to have you with us, Lieutenant. Stay sharp.”

Bishop sighed as he saw the second Raptor fall in on Hitchcock’s side. He turned around long enough to see the new pilot wag their fighter’s tail and concluded that he couldn’t keep this up any longer. He smiled inwardly; resigning himself to the fact he’d lost this round. Using the rudder pedals, he waved his tail in reply – a polite if perhaps cheeky salute to an opponent worthy of respect. With that, he pulled up rapidly, and accelerated away from the battle. “Black Raven One to all fighter wings... *Atlantis* is pulling back – withdraw to the *Alexander* and provide cover. Acknowledge.”

“*Raven one, this is Panther two. Orders acknowledged.*”

Hitchcock and Roberts watched Bishop’s Lysander accelerate and pull away, headed straight towards the safety of the Macronesian carriers. They noticed the remaining Black Ravens around him doing the same. Roberts gently lifted her thumb of the trigger. “Rapier leader, shall we pursue?”

Hitchcock’s reply was delayed as he watched Bishop disappear in to the darkness. The constant explosions which had pounded the sea for miles had dropped to only an occasional rattling ‘boom’ of thunder. As far as the Alliance was concerned, the battle was over. “Negative, Rapier two... Let them go.”

...Banick led the marines down the corridor to the hydrosphere in a tired sprint. The Macronesian troops had since withdrawn their chase, presumably having given up on securing what they could from *seaQuest* with a renewed desire to get off the ship with their lives. Voss stopped suddenly and held up a hand. “Wait!”

“Voss we do *not* have time!” yelled Banick impatiently. “Keep moving!”

The Intel officer either hadn't heard, or ignored the order as he disappeared through a door on the side of the corridor...

Jacob Voss looked around the place he stood in, briefly spying the small blue model of the *seaQuest DSV* sitting on a coffee table in the center of the room. For just a moment, he let the anarchy of that time pass as he smiled inwardly. This was the last time he would ever see the *seaQuest*, and he was now standing in the quarters of Captain Oliver Hudson. He saw several familiar objects around the room; the Captain's Violin, and an open book upon a desk – “Red Badge of Courage”, known to be one of Hudson's personal favourites. The room said a lot about a man not known for being very personable... and Voss idly wondered just how many secrets he'd taken to his grave.

Banick burst in to the room in a fit of urgency. “Voss!?” he exclaimed. “What in the seven hells are you *doing!*?”

The Intel officer shook his head a moment and came back to reality, quietly leaning over and picking up a heavy, leather-bound book from the top of Hudson's desk. Adorning its cover was the delta bearing the hammerhead shark avatar of the *seaQuest DSV*.

It was the Captain's Log.

“Alright,” said Voss, purposefully striding out of the room. “I've got what I came for... Let's get out of here.”

Banick shook his head, disbelieving of Voss's apparent lack of concern for the gravity of their situation. He followed him out of the room, and closed the door, not even looking back...

...The Lysanders began to spread out and the squadron leader disengaged the safeties of his weapons, and relayed the same orders to the rest of his wingmen. Clear of any immediate danger from the UEO, the escort fighters broke off for the safety of shallow waters while the bomb-laden wing leaders continued on. The broken hull of *seaQuest* lit up their sensors like a giant crosshair for their SN-12 Subduction bombs. They were now less than 20 seconds away...

...the airlock door to the assault speeder clamped shut with a thump, and Banick shouted loudly at the pilot on the deck above him. “GO!”

The speeder was lurching heavily as the pilot wasted no time in reversing his engines to fall power and swinging the tail of the craft around hard to port. Banick and Cortez were nearly thrown from their feet by the sudden and rapid acceleration, and steadied themselves by grasping at each other's shoulders. Cortez realised what he'd done, and frowned as he quickly released Banick and cleared his throat, walking back to the cabin where his Marines were still catching their breath.

Banick looked across at Voss who sat quietly in the corner, the heavy leather book he'd taken from Captain Hudson's quarters sitting open in his lap. Banick sighed, walking over quietly, using the overhead railings to steady himself as the speeder continued to accelerate away from *seaQuest*. “So... What's with the book?” he asked, deciding against chewing him out for going off on a treasure hunt.

“It's Hudson's log...” replied Voss quietly as he turned the last page over. “He sounds so... *different* in his last entry...”

...The Lysanders continued downwards, and the wing leader watched the numbers on his HUD tick down.

Beneath him, the deadly SN-12 torpedo hummed quietly in its missile bay, the warhead beginning to arm...

“...He wrote it the very same day *seaQuest* disappeared on patrol. It’s like he somehow *knew* it was going to be the last mission he’d command. He keeps mentioning all of *seaQuest*’s senior officers...”

...The wing leader hit the trigger, and the weapons bays of the *Lysander* opened up before the magnetic locks that held the lone torpedo he carried in place disengaged, and dropped the weapon in to the sea. A fraction of a second later, the tiny plasma rocket engine at the rear of the torpedo ignited, and sent the missile screaming in to the darkness... One after another, the other *Lysanders* followed suit, and one after another, they pulled up and accelerated for the surface...

“Piccolo... Henderson... Wolenczak... O’Neill...”

The dozen torpedoes were all ballistic, their engines powering them downward, reaching faster speeds with every second that passed. Beneath them, the graceful, arrowhead bow of the *seaQuest DSV* hung proudly over the abyss below, defiant, and refusing to yield. This, her final battle, could not be won.

“Hudson was recommending all of them for promotions... it just... wasn’t meant to be...”

...The torpedoes slammed in to the rock floor of the Phoenix Abyssal; their heavy tungsten penetrators driving them deep in to the rock even further beneath the sea floor. Somewhere deep inside the electronics of each warhead, something said that time was up, and the trigger slipped...

Banick hung his head, closing his eyes. The painful memory of the order he gave to send the ship to its grave returning to him - the image of *Atlantis*’s torpedoes burying themselves in to the great ship’s hull to blow it apart in a final, shattering climax, denying Macronesia the chance to use her for their own ends. He thought about the officers that Voss had mentioned, and the promotions they never received and he realised why the Captain knew it was going to be his last command. “Hudson was going to retire...”

Somewhere far below them, another explosion ripped open the silence of the abyss. Massive energy shockwaves tore through the bottom of the Phoenix abyssal, simultaneously disintegrating the molecular bonds of the rock structure and liquefying the sea floor and everything around it. The detonation of the warheads caused massive seismic shock throughout the solid granite cliff faces that stretched for over 20,000 feet in height. And they shattered apart, falling down in to the deep, one after another.

...Aboard the speeder, Banick, Voss and the Marines felt the heavy, rumbling “thump” of the detonations, causing them both to look out the tiny porthole in the speeder’s cabin to watch the giant flashes of light from the depths below as the SN-12 warheads continued to explode, causing tremendous vacuums of pressure where the sea itself would cave in and annihilate everything around the point of detonation.

Far above, Captain Ainsley closed his eyes and bowed his head as he too felt the rumble that marked the final destruction of the *seaQuest DSV*.

“Conn; Sonar. Massive detonations, sir,” reported Lieutenant Jack Phillips completely unnecessarily. “The abyssal is collapsing...”

The Captain nodded slowly, his thoughts now resting solely on Commander Banick and his team far below. “Any word from the insertion team?” he asked, his voice nothing more than a quiet, saddened inquiry.

“...Yes Captain,” said Phillips with a hint of relief. “They’re safely away, and report mission accomplished, sir. They are requesting escort back to base, sir.”

“Understood... Send the Rapiers to bring them in... Tactical; what’s the status of the Alliance fleet?”

Callaghan cocked his head and exhaled slowly, like a giant weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. “*Alexander* and her escorts are in full withdrawal, sir. All fighters have disengaged from combat and are reporting in... Still no word on casualties.”

The Captain nodded, relieved that it was finally over. “Good... Recall all fighter wings and get me a damage assessment as soon as possible. Stand down from condition one...”

“Aye sir, standing down.”

The second battle for the Phoenix Islands was over, thought Ainsley. But whether it had been worth the cost remained to be seen...

...No one on either side of the aftermath noticed the small, stealthy black craft which slipped through the fleet’s sensors, and out of the trench towards the north....

VIII

PATHS UNSEEN

UEO *Atlantis* DSX-8100, the Hemmingway Trench, Phoenix Islands, Macronesian Waters. En-route to UEO Border. December 8th, 2040...

Captain Ainsley walked down the length of the *Atlantis* hangar some hours after the end of the battle, looking at the lines of subfighters arrayed along the sides of the flight deck, their noses pointed outwards, sitting high and proud like some kind of honour guard. Out of the 80-something which had sat on the deck in this manner that morning, fewer than 50 now remained here – many being repaired on the upper maintenance decks, and many others having not returned at all.

Atlantis had gotten off lightly, all things considered. Between the sea wing, the ship’s crew, and the marines, 29 people had lost their lives. The vast majority of the dead were fighter pilots, which Ainsley knew had hit Wing Commander Hitchcock quite hard.

Commander Jacob Voss walked beside him, looking again around the hangar where a few maintenance technicians were finishing up work on a pair of Spectre subfighters that were not quite seriously damaged enough to send up to the workshops. His eyes came to rest on the eight remaining subfighters of the VF-107 Rapiers. Including Lieutenant Reynolds’ fighter, which had been put out of commission the day before the engagement, the squadron had lost four subfighters in total over the last two days. Reynolds fighter was being repaired by the mechanics on the upper hangars, but two others belonging to Lieutenant Trevor Valance and Ensign Charles Buckley – Rapiers 6 and 10 – who had been killed, and the fourth belonged to Lieutenant Alexander Kosynski - Rapier 7 - who had safely ejected shortly before his doomed Raptor was blown to pieces.

Sadly, not every squadron had gotten off so lightly. One squadron holding bay - that of the VF-51 “Stallions” - was now completely empty. The squadron’s losses had been ‘complete’, with all twelve of their SF-2/C Spectre IIs being destroyed, and three quarters of their pilots killed. It was likely that the squadron would be rebuilt, but at this point it was simply too early to tell what would happen to the four remaining pilots of the squadron, although it was safe to assume that the grotesque degree of loss they’d endured would mean they’d be given a considerable amount of time to recuperate.

“I’ll be heading back to San Diego in an hour or so,” said Commander Jacob Voss. “I just wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done, sir. I’ll see that you get a copy of my report.”

Ainsley smiled slightly. “Thank you, Commander... But I’ll pass. I’m going to have enough reports to worry about after what we’ve been through today... I suspect that the intelligence game was never meant for me. I trust you got the information you needed from *seaQuest*’s command logs?”

Commander Voss nodded. “Yes sir. I didn’t find anything to suggest that *seaQuest*’s capture was a result of internal sabotage... But the presence of that... sub... whatever it was when we arrived did concern me. We found no one aboard, and the ship’s computer was secure, but the fact it escaped without anyone noticing means we don’t really have any leads to run off.”

“Any idea what they might have been after?”

“No, no idea at all. Like I said, the computer was secure, and there was no evidence that anyone had broken in to the command archives, so I’m guessing that whatever it was they wanted, it wasn’t information... They were possibly just smugglers or mercenaries trying to run salvage when we showed up. It would explain why they cleared out so quickly after that.”

Ainsley nodded slowly, stopping to look down at the leather-bound ship’s log of *seaQuest* that he held in his hands. “Well,” he said after a moment, “Unless they have the capacity to dig through several million cubic tonnes of granite, they won’t get another chance any time soon.”

“Yes sir,” replied Voss.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get the answers you were looking for, Commander,” consoled Ainsley.

“At least we know the Alliance won’t have a chance to dissect her. I suppose that counts for something after all this,” tried Voss. “Maybe after we’ve studied the logs in detail back at Intelligence, we’ll find something.”

Ainsley stopped, looking around the hangar of his ship, and up high in to the observation catwalks that were many storeys above. For a moment, he thought he saw someone there, but shook his head and looked back down at Voss, and extended his hand. Voss took it cautiously, and the Captain smiled. “Be careful what you wish for, Commander... It’s been a pleasure.”

~

James Banick sat across from Ryan Callaghan in *Atlantis’s* officer’s mess and recalled the expedition to the wreck of the *seaQuest*. It was getting fairly late, and most of the senior staff had settled in for dinner as their shifts started, or perhaps, in this case, ended. Callaghan listened with intent as Banick described what he’d seen aboard the wreck, but didn’t seem to be too surprised by much of what he heard about Major Cortez’s Marines.

“Then there was Voss...” explained Banick, “I’ve seen people handle pressure before, but he was just... well, let’s just say I’m not sure I want to be around to see what *would* get him excited.”

“That’s intelligence for you,” countered Callaghan, downing the last of a mug of coffee. “I worked with a couple of spooks back in about... ’31 or ’32 or thereabouts. I swear they must have been telepaths, because they never had to ask each other a damned thing to get a job done.”

“I could believe it... I don’t know Ryan... something about Voss just didn’t feel right. There was a hell of a lot he wasn’t telling us, and I for one don’t like running errands for people without knowing where the hell they stand. It’s why I joined the Navy...”

Callaghan hid a smirk that was slowly working its way on to his deceptively innocent face. It was a face which Banick knew better than to trust implicitly, as there was a lot about the man which didn’t meet the eye. “Oh really?” he asked. “And I thought you joined the Navy to see the world and meet lots of new and interesting women.”

“Are you kidding?” he replied rhetorically. “I wouldn’t have been through Annapolis if I wanted that... I would have gone to Cape Cortez.” Banick was grinning broadly as he raised the mug of coffee in front of him.

Callaghan blinked incoherently. “...Cape Cortez... Subfighters? You can’t be serious.”

“No, I’m very serious,” protested Banick indignantly. “Have you ever met Wing Commander Roderick?”

“...Huh?”

“Corinn Roderick? You know? Darkest of Angels? Queen of Aces...?”

“Ooh,” said Callaghan, his eyes widening slightly. “Yeah, right. Ok, dream on Jim.”

Two hands gently came down on Banick’s shoulders, and he felt the warmth of someone, perhaps two, behind him. He smiled slightly. “I don’t think I have to...” he said knowingly. Callaghan turned around again and looked up, seeing the mischievous smiles of Lieutenant Commanders Natalie Canebride and Madeline Hayes staring down at him. “I do have to admit though, joining the navy *did* have its advantages...”

Banick got up, concealing his smile before turning around, and faced the two Lieutenant Commanders. “Evening Natalie, Madeline... I was just finishing up,” he smiled pleasantly, letting nothing on what he’d been thinking of just a few short moments before.

“Commander,” said Hayes, nodding politely. “Mind if I sit down?”

“Sure, knock yourself out,” he said, pulling the chair out and extending a hand toward it. “I am absolutely certain that the charming Commander Callaghan here will be happy to have the company.”

Hayes looked at Banick suspiciously, and the Commander merely smiled back at her pleasantly before turning his gaze to Callaghan. “I think you might be right, Ryan... The Navy really ain’t so bad.”

Banick nodded at the two officers who sat at the table, and quietly followed Canebride out of the mess hall, taking her hand in his own. He looked back at Callaghan, winked, and continued walking...

Hayes just stared at the tactical officer for a few long moments, smiling sweetly at him. Callaghan looked back at her, and tilted his head to one side, and then had an odd feeling that he knew exactly what had happened. “...I’m going to kill that man,” he said through partially gritted teeth.

“Relax,” laughed Hayes, before settling in to a delicate yet interrogating gaze. “It wasn’t Banick’s idea... it was Natalie’s... So unless you’re a ‘lady-killer’ like him...”

That made Callaghan laugh; probably genuinely for the first time in quite a while. That alone seemed to make Hayes relax a little more. “Oh I dunno. But I’m told I do have my moments...”

~

...Jane Roberts strolled along the upper observation promenade of the flight deck, staring down at the rows of damaged or cannibalized Raptor and Spectre subfighters that lined the maintenance deck below. It had been good to get back in to the cockpit, although somehow it didn’t feel quite as she’d been hoping... the loss of so many pilots she called her friends so soon after she’d nearly watched Lieutenant Reynolds explode in to a ball of fire on the flight deck. Now, in just a few long hours at dawn, she would be forced to say goodbye to two more; Trevor Valance, and Charles Buckley – both pilots she had known for the course of the entire year. They were friends, and she’d gone to them on various occasions... And it was true that she owed much to Buckley for his ‘role’ in introducing her to Tom Reynolds.

She stopped at the end of the catwalk, and stared out over the hangar. She stood there quietly for several minutes, brooding in her solitude as she often did. At least this time, she thought with a smile, she wasn't trying to run Tom Reynolds through with a sword. After the battle that day, she was forced to wonder what the war might have had in store for her, and all those who were still around for her to care about. Would she end up dying in the cockpit like so many other pilots to that point? Or perhaps she would live to see the end of the conflict, and move on to raise a family and retire quietly somewhere back home in Japan. She didn't know what to expect... nor did she believe that anyone else did either. The fear of death had abandoned her long ago in the cockpit of some other battlefield. She didn't care. She only felt sorry for those who lived to endure its effects.

There was a soft clatter of boots on the catwalk behind her, and she turned slowly to meet the gaze of her friend, mentor and commander – Gabriel Hitchcock. His usually chiselled features seemed softer now, his guise exhausted. It had been a long day for both of them. With what strength she had left, she snapped to attention and saluted sharply. “Sir.”

His smile was soft, and he returned the salute fairly casually as he continued to approach. “It's ok, Lieutenant... As you were.”

“Thank you, sir...”

Hitchcock approached the end of the catwalk and placed his hands on the barrier railing to stare out over the hangar with her. “You're a hard person to find, you know,” he said. “I had to ask about a dozen engineers if they'd seen you before I was finally pointed up here.”

“I guess I just needed some time alone, sir,” she replied, not looking up from her empty gaze across the void, and not caring to elaborate.

“I suppose you've earned that much...” replied Hitchcock quietly. “It's been a pretty trying couple of days. You know I used to be just like you when I was younger... Perhaps not *as* young as you are, but I remember finding a quiet place where no one ever hung around, and just stayed there for... well, sometimes *hours* on end, and I'd just think about things. Let my mind wander.”

She was sceptical. “And... what changed?”

“What changed?” he asked with surprise and a slight chuckle. “I got promoted and given this thing called “responsibility”, whatever that is. Didn't have the luxury of keeping to myself. That's what changed.”

Roberts smiled a little. “Did it help?”

He smiled slightly in return, and then shook his head. “The only thing that helps this kind of thing is a hangover on the rocks.” Now Roberts laughed. “...I remember this time a couple of years ago when I'd just come back from a sortie with Commander Roderick. We felt pretty appalling when we hit the deck, like someone had just reached inside and... squeezed our stomachs with a vice. We lost a lot of good pilots that day, and we wound up getting *completely smashed* that night. We just forgot all the reports, all the duty rosters, and just drowned our sorrows in booze.”

Roberts was still smiling, and looked at him suspiciously. “And?”

“And? Well... The details of the night were kind of hazy...” admitted Hitchcock nonchalantly. “But, sufficed to say we woke up the next morning lying next to each other in the same bed with a pretty shattering headache.”

The young Lieutenant's eyes flared open, and her jaw dropped. “*What?*” she said with shock. “You and Commander Roderick....?”

Hitchcock grinned broadly, still chuckling. “Oh thank god, *no*. I'm married, remember? But the look on her face when she woke up was the most priceless thing

I’d seen in a very long time. As it turns out, apparently I’m something of a gentlemen when I’m off my face, and I’d carried her back to her quarters when she passed out in the pilot’s mess... and coincidentally collapsed on the same bed myself shortly after putting her down. But the resulting rumours... *My god*. The poor girl may as well have been pregnant a week later from the scuttlebutt that got around ship.”

“So, getting drunk didn’t really help things huh?” replied Roberts with a sly grin.

“Well, for me? Probably not... But as I understand it, *Tom* is going to be down at the Loose Cannon a bit later this evening with the rest of the squadron... Maybe *you* getting drunk wouldn’t be *such* a bad idea...?”

She looked at him speechlessly, and then smiled shyly, shaking her head. “Sir... It’s not like that between us, you know that. He’s my *wingman* – so of course we’re close, but... I couldn’t do that.”

Hitchcock held up his hands defensively. “Hey, I wasn’t suggesting that, although *admittedly* it *was* a pretty poor choice of words... But my point is that you really need to just *let go* for a bit. You can’t spend all this time alone trying to bury your problems inside, pushing them deeper by the second. As you said, he *is* your wingman, and as a squadron, we’re close that way. And you should use that to your advantage. Just talk about this stuff... it helps. I promise you.”

Roberts looked down again, partially out of guilt, and nodded quietly.

“Besides,” said Hitchcock. “It would be nice to be able to talk to my squadron XO once in a while without it having to be about which bad guy you want to bag next.”

She smiled once more, nodding again and looking up at the Commander. “I suppose I... *could* do with someone to talk to...”

He backed away from the railing slowly and nodded appreciatively with a slight smile. “...Jane? So could I.”

~

ANS *Alexander*, somewhere over the Tuvalu Plains, Macronesian Waters. December 8th, 2040...

Deep beneath the surface of the Pacific, the *Alexander* and her escorts limped home. The damage was superficial for the most part, excepting of course for the loss of a light cruiser and a few SSNs. Considering what they were fighting, the battle had gone better than most expected, but the losses in manpower had still be fairly heavy. For now, the *Alexander* was headed home.

Captain William Bishop stepped out of Fleet Captain Nicholas Weyland’s office on the command deck of the carrier, and sighed in relief, tucking his cap beneath his arm and walking down the corridor back towards the Flight Ops Center.

Sitting at the side of the corridor on a bench, Commander Daniel Laney – a nasty bruise above his left eye – got up from his seat and moved to catch up with his squadron commander. “Well, that didn’t take very long,” he remarked quietly.

“Yeah,” replied Bishop tiredly. “I get the impression that Weyland is a little preoccupied with other matters right now to hear much of what I had to say. Admiral Sark’s death has hit the fleet pretty hard, so he’s got his hands full.”

“Yeah, real bummer about that one, huh? I was kind of shocked to hear it when we landed.”

“The whole god damned engagement was a mistake,” snapped Bishop with annoyance. “We lost a lot of people today, Dan... too many; *three* in the Black Ravens alone. And I know I shouldn’t say it, but I am just so *fucking* annoyed that one of them wasn’t Bourne...”

Laney furrowed his brow with puzzlement. “...Huh?”

“I tried convincing Weyland to sign off on Lieutenant Bourne’s transfer papers to get him the hell out of this command. *Apparently*, the President is in no state of mind to hear that his son is a god damned idiot, so Weyland didn’t want any part in it.”

“So... in other words-“

“-We’re stuck with him,” said Bishop quickly. He stopped after a few more steps and rubbed his tired eyes. “Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on him. But we’ve just had... a really hard day, I suppose. And I’ve had enough.”

Laney stroked the bruise above his eye gently, and then removed his hand to see if he was bleeding. Whatever the doctor’s had put on it, it made it feel constantly *strange*, and there was no other word for it. “I think maybe you’re just upset about Joss,” he observed. The loss of Commander Josselyn Sheridan – the 181st’s third officer – had hit the bulk of the fighter wing hard; especially Bishop, who had known the woman for years.

“Of course I’m upset,” said Bishop, continuing on down the hall, snapping a quick and purpose under-handed salute to a pair of marines who snapped to attention as he and Laney passed. He sighed, and then admitted the truth to himself. “...And to be honest, I think I’m a little *distracted* by what we were doing with the Rapiers. It’s still sinking in, Dan... This fighter wing just went toe-to-toe with the UEO’s best pilots, and we ended up face-down in the mud. We lost *thirty four* pilots,” he stressed. “Thirty four. Everywhere in the Pacific, we’re marching over the UEO’s defences like the Germans in Poland, but the *instant* we fight one of their DSVs, they throw us in to the ground.”

“Don’t let it get you down, boss,” eased Laney – always the moral support. “We’ll just take it in our stride as we always do. We’ll walk away from this, rebuild, regroup, and then be better prepared for it.”

“Yes, I know,” sighed Bishop, turning in to his office and heading briskly for the desk. “But this job just never gets any easier.”

“Never does,” agreed Laney, pouring two cups of coffee from the small servery at the side of the office, and bringing them both back to the desk where Bishop sat down and kicked his feet up.

“Thanks,” he said, taking one of the mugs from his XO and then setting it beside him.

“So, what next?” asked Laney, sitting down in front of the desk, and leaning back to settle in to the comfortable leather chair.

Bishop huffed slightly at the question, and placed a file he’d been carrying on to the desk in front of him. “Apparently the UEO 2nd fleet is regrouping along the Carolines,” he said carelessly.

“Ah,” Laney said, picking up the file and opening it up. “Usual deal, I suppose.”

“Yep. We’re being reassigned... *again*, to the *Fremantle* and her Battlegroup along the Carolines DMZ.”

“Hmmm... That it?”

Bishop smiled inwardly. “Not quite... I believe there is a very nice surface colony on one of the islands near there. I’ve put us in for shore leave as soon as we

arrive. Command doubts the UEO is going to be on the move for a while, so hell, may as well work on the tan.”

Laney nodded, sipping his coffee as he read the assignment brief. “Just don’t tell anyone in Staff Admin that we’re taking the time off, yeah?”

Bishop raised his mug and smirked. “I hear that.”

~

Unknown location, somewhere in the Mid-Pacific. December 9th, 2040...

The air of the old World War Three munitions depot was rank with all sorts of foul odours as Jeff Edmonds walked with quiet step through the catacombs of the old, abandoned sea-floor facility. In his hand, a small PDA held all the information he had downloaded from the *seaQuest*’s computers pertaining to his assignment.

He came to a stop in a large room at the end of the hall, his footsteps echoing for a few moments longer in each direction around him. Reaching in to his jacket pocket, he retrieved a small metal cylinder, and from within that, removed a Cuban cigar – a rare commodity that had grown even harder to come across since the UEO put a global ban on smoking... Not that he cared.

Clipping off the ends of the long, rolled up leaf, he placed it between his teeth and lit it with a simple match, puffing on it with satisfaction. He stared up at the wall of the dark room he now stood in, and studied the faded emblem of the North Pacific Confederation; a great alliance of Pacific nations including the United States, Canada, Japan, and a handful of territories and holdings that had survived the third world war to become the founding members of the United Earth Oceans. The old NORPAC crest was derived from the coat of arms of the US Navy’s Pacific Command; a globe set on a large golden compass, straddled by an eagle, the names of each nation marked around the edge of the globe’s roundel.

Such superpowers were gone now, he reminded himself... replaced instead by sprawling, global bureaucracies like the UEO and Macronesian Alliance. The power those two organizations held over world affairs was nothing short of obscene, and both sides had faults too deep to correct through any ‘diplomatic’ means short of a war.

Funny, he thought, that a war was exactly what they had.

Footsteps echoed from one of the side corridors, and with a gloved hand, he removed the cigar from his mouth and turned to face the two figures that walked out of the shadows. “Sir,” he said respectfully, straightening slightly as an elder, more senior man approached. He noticed the second figure standing beside the man, and recognised her as being the same officer he’d met on Kirabati Colony just a few short days before. He nodded quietly to her, but didn’t say a word beyond it.

“So, Commander Edmonds,” said the man in his familiar and characteristic gravely voice. “It’s done?”

“It is,” he said, producing the PDA and handing to his superior.

“Hmmm...” he mused, taking the Data Assistant and plugging in a small memory card to its side to copy the information he was looking at. “I assume that Commander Voss never got a chance to see these files?”

“No sir, he did not,” assured Edmonds. “I purged the files from the system before they accessed the command logs, UEO Naval Intelligence will never know of our involvement in the incident.”

“Very good, Commander,” replied the man, finishing the data transfer and then purging the files from the PDA, and handing it back to Edmonds. He narrowed his eyes as he saw the last file on the list of those he’d just transferred, and stared at Edmonds carefully. “You know of Rising Thunder?”

“...Only what was apparent in the files I downloaded, sir. I was... *surprised* that such information could end up within *seaQuest*’s command logs like that. I made sure that information was erased too.”

“Indeed...” said the man, raising an eyebrow curiously. “Well then, it seems our job is done.”

The older officer turned around, walked away from Edmonds and nodded coldly to the young woman who had been standing behind him. An instant later, she had produced a silenced 309M2 pistol and had fired two rounds straight in to Edmonds’ chest. He looked down in shock at the blood that now covered him, and dropped to his knees, his jaw slack as he gazed up at the two figures in a silent question that begged the question of “Why?”

The elder man stepped forward again, shaking his head. “A victim of circumstance, Commander... I am sorry.”

The woman stepped forward again, taking several long strides up to Edmonds, and lowered the smoking pistol to his head. She didn’t hesitate, and fired one more round straight through his forehead. Jeffrey Edmonds’ lifeless body slumped to the floor, and the two figures walked away back in to the shadows, their foot steps once more echoing down the halls...

...The small and sleek craft that departed the old weapons depot a few minutes later had no registration, no markings, and no owner. It did not exist, just like those two people it carried, and it soon disappeared in to the darkness of the deep Pacific, not to be seen again. In the small submarine’s wake, the detonation of the old weapons facility vaporized the interior corridors of the base and everything (and everyone...) within them. The secondary explosive charge on the foundations of the facility, precisely timed to make the most of the first explosion, detonated a second later, demolishing the sturdy structure to nothing more than crumbled debris and shattered, twisted metal. So remote was the base that no one within 200 nautical miles had seen or heard the explosion, and it – just like a man named Jeffrey Edmonds – ceased to exist...

~

EPILOGUE

TRUTH

1 Month earlier...

UEO *seaQuest* DSV-4600, 75 nautical miles east of the Nintoku seamount, the North Pacific. November 7th, 2040...

“Mister Wolenczak! I need everything you can give me from those engines!” barked Oliver Hudson impatiently from the Conn. *seaQuest* was now making about 203 knots – over 20 knots faster than her sea trial-rated speed of an appreciable 180 knots, and it still wasn’t enough. 75 miles away, engaged in battle against 8 Macronesian Fast Attack Submarines, was the *Atlantis* DSV. Hudson had never felt so utterly useless.

“Captain!” said the sensor chief with alarm. “I’ve just picked up new contacts bearing zero-two-zero and three-four-zero dead ahead... Range... 20 miles.”

Hudson stopped at that. Twenty miles? *seaQuest* was capable of picking up other submarines that were over 10 times that distance away. How had they gotten so close? “Where the hell did *they* come from?”

“They were hiding in a rift valley sir,” explained the sonar technician. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear they were waiting for us.”

“Great...” said Hudson gruffly. “They’ve got us right where they want us... *Damn* it! Helm? Decrease speed to fifty knots and bring us in slowly. If we can avoid a fight, I want to.”

“Yes sir. Decreasing speed to fifty knots.”

“Commander O’Neill, give me everything you’ve got on our friends out there,” he instructed while walking to the chart dome in the center of the bridge’s lower deck.

Commander Tim O’Neill, *seaQuest*’s XO, had been on *seaQuest* for many years, and had replaced Commander Ford as the boat’s executive officer when Ford had elected to take a command elsewhere in the fleet. He nervously walked over from his station at Ops with a PDA in-hand to join Hudson at the Nav charts. “Two full attack wings of Lysander class subfighters, and 6 *Dragna*-class strike cruisers,” he read grimly. “That’s a lot of concentrated firepower to be coincidental, sir. They knew we were coming.”

It wasn’t possible, was it? A thousand questions raced through Hudson’s mind. Was this really a trap? “...Communications...” he said finally, following a long, hesitant pause. “Hail one of their cruisers. I don’t care which one; just do it.”

“I’ve been *trying* sir,” replied the Ensign in question. “They refuse to answer our challenges. They’ve ignored us three times already.”

“Then keep trying!” urged Hudson impatiently. He now had just two options; fight or flight. And given the stakes, he was hardly one to run from such a situation. If the Macs wanted a fight, he would be most happy to oblige them. “Mister Proudmoore, give me shooting solutions on their lead *Dragnas*.”

“Aye sir.”

Hudson looked at the virtual chart dome, watching as the Macronesian vessels quickly closed with the *seaQuest*. In just a few minutes, they would be virtually on top of him. What concerned him even more was the dauntingly large group of Lysander class Subfighters that were approaching at nearly 300 knots. Two full

squadrons – 24 fighters – were bearing down on him. And the *seaQuest* had less than a third of that number in Spectres. The six Spectres that were housed in the hydrosphere had almost no chance of holding them off, and yet he had little choice... Pulling out his PAL, he keyed in several orders and took a deep, hesitant breath. “Hudson to Lieutenant Commander Roderick...”

...Further aft aboard the DSV, Lieutenant Commander Patrick Roderick was already running in full flight gear to the sea deck. Irish by birth and descent, having grown up in Dublin, he had no real reason to fight the Macronesians. But then, he *was* Irish... what reason did he need? His family’s history was certainly not a military one. His father ran a quiet hotel south of Dublin, and his mother was a musician. Only he and his sister had joined the Navy, and it had been to the vehement objections of their parents. He and his sister were both fighter pilots... but her fortunes had been significantly more prosperous than his own, and while only a year older than he was, she had managed to rise to the rank of a full Wing Commander – the youngest pilot to ever achieve the lofty position. He had just finished pulling his gloves on when Captain Hudson’s voice came from his PAL. Unclipping the device, he didn’t pause to dwell on it too much. “Go ahead, Captain.”

“Commander, we need you and your pilots in the water... *now*.”

“I’m already on it, Captain,” said the Irishman, nodding curtly to a group of engineering technicians who were busily preparing the EVA decks for combat. “How bad is it, sir?” he asked Hudson, still not pausing.

“It’s bad. Two full squadrons of Lysanders supported by about half a dozen *Dragna* cruisers by current count.”

An icypick pierced Roderick’s gut as he stopped just short of the number 3 airlock which led to his Spectre in the moonpools below. He had a very bad feeling that that Spectre would soon become his tomb. “I understand, sir. ROE?”

“Fire only if fired upon first. We don’t want a war here, Commander... but likewise, we aren’t going to idly sit by as our backside is filled with holes.”

“Yes sir.”

“...And Commander? Good luck.”

Hesitation laced Hudson’s voice, and it served little more than to make Roderick nervous. He breathed deeply as he closed the PAL, turning to face the 5 other pilots who had gathered behind him. “Well, lads... Things are about to get dicey...”

...Hudson watched with gritted teeth as the *Dragna* cruisers and their escorts grew ever closer on the navigational displays. The *seaQuest* was heavily armed; much more so than any other line-ship in the UEO fleet, but even he doubted whether or not she could hold off half a dozen of Macronesia’s front-line cruisers. The only chance she had was a narrow, yet deep ravine just a few nautical miles ahead. Whether *seaQuest* could get there in time however was another matter. If she did, then the submarine could simply make a plunging crash-dive to the bottom of the valley, well beyond the reach of the Macronesian subs. But if not... then Hudson and his crew would have one hell of a fight on their hands. “Helm... Plot a course on heading two-nine-zero. Make your depth six-three-three-zero feet.”

“...Sir, that’s... eighty feet above bedrock,” remarked the chief helmsman with well-founded concern. “If there is something down there that we can’t-“

“Your objection is noted, Helm. Just do it. What’s the fastest you can get us in to the Ballard trench?”

“The Ballard trench sir? Well, at the depth you just asked... I’m not even going to try for faster than seventy knots, sir. Seven minutes.”

“Tactical; how long until those Dragnas have us?”

There was a moment of silence on the DSV’s bridge as Hudson asked the question, and everyone’s eyes locked on to the weapons officer. Nothing but the quiet pinging of hypersonic and sensor returns could be heard over the heavy silence. Hudson did not flinch, and asked the question again. “Lieutenant. *How long?*”

“...Four minutes, sir.”

“Then we’ll make this a running gun. Helm... Make for the trench. Tactical, do you have shooting solutions on the cruisers?”

“Aye. Tubes one through nine are loaded and firing solutions have been relayed.”

“Good. EVA? Get our Speeders in to the water to help out those Spectres.”

...Outside the *seaQuest*, half a dozen UEO SF-2/A Spectre Subfighters dived and rolled through to a wide delta formation in the cold darkness, illuminated only by their floodlights and navigating almost entirely on instinct. Ahead - speeding toward them at nearly 300 knots - were over three times their number in Macronesian Lysanders.

“*seaQuest*, this is Spectre one, we’ve got that trench of yours looking real sweet up here. Still can’t give you a visual on it, but there’s about two dozen Mac Lysanders that look like they’re going to cut you off... Captain, sir we *really* need clearance to engage...”

...Despite his growing urgency to take action, Captain Hudson hesitated. The Macronesians had not yet fired. Why? They had been in torpedo range for over 8 minutes, and the *seaQuest* – a submarine of a thousand feet long - was not exactly the most difficult target in the sea to hit. “Standby, Spectre one...”

Hudson walked back over to the chart dome, carefully but quickly assessing the approaching Macronesian cruisers again, looking for *anything* that would give him reason to act. “Tactical... can you give me *any thing at all* on those Dragnas besides their position, speed and formation?”

“No sir. They’ve had shooting solutions on us for 7 minutes and 13 seconds, but they still have *not* opened their doors.”

“To hell with it,” said Hudson, finally steeling himself. “I’m not about to give these bastards a chance to strike first. Spectre one, this is *seaQuest*... You are cleared to engage.”

“...Aye, aye!” said Roderick with a grim smile. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are weapons free. You are clear to engage!”

The Spectres broke out of their tight delta formation, rolling away to close directly on the Lysanders ahead. Outnumbered three to one, it was a gutsy – even stupid – move. But Roderick’s wing had no intention of fighting the Lysanders muzzle-to-muzzle, they only had to draw the Lysanders out and give the *seaQuest* enough time to escape in to the Ballard trench, and *that* could be arranged. “Spectre two, you’re on my wing. Form up and cover me. Let’s see if we can rattle them a little...”

“Aye sir.”

The tension on the bridge of the *seaQuest* exploded in an instant as a shrill alarm pierced the air from the tactical station. “Sir! Torpedoes in the water, bearing zero-three-zero!”

“Damn it!” exclaimed Hudson. “Who fired?”

“The lead *Dragna*, sir!”

“Get locks on those weapons and fire intercepts. Helm, get us in to that trench!”

“Contact in one minute, fifteen seconds, sir.”

As *seaQuest* drew nearer to the trench ahead, a screech of igniting plasma sounded the firing of half a dozen intercept torpedoes. Ahead of them; the Macronesian weapons continued at a daunting pace towards the much larger DSV. The *Dragna* cruisers themselves however had slowed to a crawl, and seemed to be uninterested in coming any closer.

Not far from this action, Commander Roderick was sitting close on the tail of an Alliance subfighter, his thumb gradually tightening its pressure on the yolk and the firing trigger. He watched his HUD go red and give him a solid tone as his Spectre’s pulse lasers locked on to the Lysander. The Macronesian, undoubtedly receiving fair warning from his own fighter’s computer tried to break away out of Roderick’s line of fire, but to no avail. The Spectre’s hypersonars kept their lock, and the UEO pilot’s fighter spewed bolts of laser cannon fire across the Lysander’s tail. Several of the hits landed squarely on the Lysander’s split-tail, several missed, lashing past it and leaving long, blackened grazes against its fuselage. But the last hits put the fighter out of its misery as it finally gave way under the bombardment, and the high pressure of the water around it. Black oil vomited from the fighter’s engines before they exploded, followed soon after by the nose, and the pilot within. Lieutenant Commander Patrick Roderick had just taken the first kill of the war. “Scratch one bandit,” he said quietly in to his radio. “All fighters, be advised... *seaQuest* is making for the trench. Cover her for as long as you can.”

“Understood, lead.”

The Spectres broke hard on to their sides, spiralling downward towards the sea floor far below. In their wake, Macronesian Lysanders met them pace-for-pace, raking the sea with a torrential rain of pulse laser and subduction cannon fire. One of the UEO fighters was hit dead-center by one of the pursuing Lysander’s subduction shots, and its fuselage broke apart like wet tissue as the molecular bonds of the alloys and composites that made up the hull broke down. The fighter’s sudden deceleration only made the Lysander’s fire more effective as a line of laser fire tore up the Spectre’s centreline and incinerated the cockpit. The pilot was killed instantly.

“Spectre three!” called Roderick over the radio frantically. “Spectre three, report.” It was a stupid question of course. The pilot hadn’t ejected, and Roderick had seen only too clearly how the Lysander’s guns had ripped through the nose of the fighter. “Damn it! All fighters, this is lead... take evasive action, watch each others backs out here!”

Captain Hudson watched with dismay as the Spectre disappeared from the tactical display. The inevitable, unforgiving math of fate that was stacked against the fighter squadron was beginning to play out in its lethal equation. At three-for-one odds he had to expect casualties. His only hope was that those few casualties would not turn in to a total slaughter. “*Damn...*” he whispered quietly. Another shrill alarm from the tactical station was enough to bring his attention around once again.

“Captain... We’ve got at least a dozen torpedoes in the water! The Dragnas have fired again!”

“Take evasive action, Mister Lewis. Are we over that trench yet?”

“Yes sir!”

“Then what the hell are you waiting for?” exclaimed Hudson with growing exasperation. “Commander O’neill... Sound crash dive!”

“Aye, Captain.”

Instinctively, Commander O’Neill reached for her command key, and slapped it in to his control station in one, swift move, turning it, and then releasing the safety on the master alarm. Bells began ringing throughout the ship and watertight doors began to close. “This is the XO... All decks rig for crash dive!”

Hudson made a point of sitting down as he watched the bridge secure around him. “Helm; full down on the bow planes. Open all ballast tanks and take us to the bottom.”

“Helm, aye.”

...The Macronesian torpedoes got closer as *seaQuest* plunged downward almost uncontrollably, air erupting from her ballast tanks all the way. The torpedoes did their best to keep up with the falling submarine, and detonated just a few dozen yards from her hull in big white novas of plasma fire and vaporized water. The DSV was rattled heavily by the detonations as it fell; the shockwaves beating against the titanium hull plating and organic bioskin.

Not far away, however, another of Roderick’s Spectres luck ran out as a Lysander delivered the final blow to the already-damaged fighter, and virtually cut it in half with its pulse lasers. Nature did the rest as the torn hull was blown asunder from the near 3000 pounds per square inch of pressure of the deep, dark sea beyond. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” yelled Roderick, watching the fiery death of another of his pilots. “All remaining fighters and speeders... pair up and try and break apart those Lysander squadrons.”

“Sir, if we take them head on, we’re as good as dead!” protested one of the other pilots.

“We’ll last longer than we will by running from the bastards! Now *do* it! Draw them in to the trench and take out as many of them as you can!”

The Commander decided that in this case, leading by example was probably the best way he could rally his pilots. He wasn’t prepared to lead his men in to a slaughter, and would not ask them to do anything that he would not. Perhaps it *was* suicide, but at least they wouldn’t be dying by running away. Snap-rolling his Spectre up on to its starboard side, he narrowly avoided a barrage of laser fire that vaporised the water in his wake and went straight down in to a cork-screw dive towards the trench and the *seaQuest* below. At a comfortable combat speed of 120 knots, his Spectre rapidly shot past the huge hull of the UEO flagship and plunged in to the darkness of the trench before him.

...But deep within the trench, unseen through the darkness and not stirring from its quiet and eerie lair, something *else* lay in wait. For a moment, its sharp and lethal form seemed to shimmer, blending in with the sea walls on either side.

Above it, *seaQuest* and her fighter escorts blindly continued their plunge in to the abyss, totally unaware of what was waiting for them; believing that they would find clemency and sanctuary in the cold depths of the trench. Roderick was one who held those hopes as his last chance to at the very least make a hasty escape from the

Macronesian fighters above. As his Spectre continued to dive in to the netherworlds of the sea, he allowed himself to relax as he watched the range between himself and the pursuing Lysanders grow to an ever increasing figure. 700 yards... 800 yards... 900 yards. He looked over his shoulder to watch the welcoming azure blue light from the surface above fade in to darkness, taking with it any hopes of the Macronesians finding him.

Satisfied with his effort, he looked back to the abyss before him, and blinked once in surprise; a single stunned and incomprehensible thought running through his mind. But that was *all* he had time to do as the angry, lashing bolts of subduction energy ripped through his fighter’s nose and fuselage. He did not know the bite of the icy sea outside, nor did he know any regret or anger; only a strange, eternal darkness, and the echoing, silent thunder of his last thought... Lieutenant Commander Patrick Roderick did not die alone, the thought of a single person’s warming smile bringing comfort to a bitter end. A sister whom he had loved so much, but would never know again;

This was no longer his war.

~

Atlantis DSV: “Atlantis”

Written by James Ward

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