



EPISODE II
SHADOWS OF THE PHOENIX
- 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 Officers of the Nycarian Empire

Viceroy Narius Rhodes ~ *Commander, Imperial Expeditionary Fleet, Captain of the Narcissis*
First Captain Arthon Kallis ~ *Commander of the Neureon class cruiser "Nartuum"*

SHADOWS OF THE PHOENIX

I

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. 200 kilometres west of the Corner Sea Mounts, North Atlantic. January 3rd, 2041...

General Quarters klaxons rang throughout the corridors of the UEO flagship *Atlantis* and Captain Ainsley sat patiently on the command deck. Ever since the cold war with Macronesia went hot, these instances were not uncommon. Crew ran through the fast-closing clamshell doors on either side of the bridge and Ainsley tapped his fingers impatiently on the armrest of his command chair. In front of him, Commander James Banick was sitting watching the panicking crewmen with a little amusement as the crew stumbled down stairs and practically tripped over their own seats. The only ones who were seated in time were the more senior bridge crew who had done it all before.

Ainsley shook his head and looked down with a sigh. Once everyone had finally managed to pull them selves in to the seats, Banick looked down at his console and then turned to the Captain. "All stations report battle ready, sir."

Ainsley nodded and looked down again, hitting a tiny button on the stopwatch in his hand. He shook his head. "Two minutes, ten seconds. Too slow, Commander, had we really been in battle, we'd be dead by now."

Banick shook his head and rubbed his chin. "Yes sir," he turned to the crew on the bridge, who were visibly expecting a drilling from the boat's XO. "Not good enough. I want it under a minute-thirty next time. Resume your stations. Secure from General Quarters."

Ainsley nodded as the big clam shell doors behind him re-opened to the wail of bells and got up to head to the captain's chart 'table' to his left. The table was in fact a semi-spherical globe what was dotted with grid lines and representations of the Submarine's location in relation to everything around it. It was a lot smaller than the charts of 40 years previously, but did the same job. Banick got up and joined Ainsley at the table. Ainsley traced several lines with his finger and thought for a moment. His orders had the *Atlantis* on patrol up and down the mid-Atlantic ridge.

The UEO headquarters at Pearl Harbor was always at full alert. The Macronesian Alliance had pushed its borders to a mere 1000 kilometres from the Hawaiian Islands, and given the UEO's state of war with the Alliance, no chances were being taken. Even at that moment, preparations were being made to relocate the UEO Headquarters to New Cape Quest in Florida, but work would be slow, and all they could do during the long process of deliberation was keep their eyes and ears open. That was why the *Atlantis* was in the cold waters of the North Atlantic.

"Helm: Set our course for the Laurential Abyssal. We should be able to conduct deep water exercises there," Ainsley paused for a moment and looked to Banick who was regarding him questioningly. "I've had requests from the Flight group commanders asking if they could train on the ridge."

Banick raised an eyebrow. "Fighter squadrons? Which ones?"

“Bravo and Delta wings mainly. Several of the new pilots from Alpha group will be joining them as well. High-speed runs through ocean canyons seem to be their favourite form of ‘training’.” Ainsley said it with a smile. Ultimately, he did not mind what ulterior motives the pilots had. The practice would do them good.

Banick laughed slightly. “That doesn’t surprise me. But, I do agree. Those Mac Lysander pilots seem to know their stuff. It *would* do our pilots some good to brush up.”

Ainsley managed a smile to respond to the comment, but unfortunately, it was truer than he’d like to admit. Macronesia had thrown their best to the frontline in order to try and take the UEO’s pilots on a one-for-one strategy of attrition, but to make matters worse; the bulk of their strike wings outnumbered the UEO navy’s fighter strength by over 5 to 1.

At the communications station on the Bridge’s port side, Lieutenant Jack Phillips reported quickly. “Sir, I have UEO Command on the line.”

Ainsley turned from Banick to look at the communications station at the bridge’s port side. “What do they want?”

“Orders to head for the Rehobeth Seamount. We’re to assist with the repair of the base there. It’s been damaged heavily by unknown attacks over the past few days and needs assistance. Command says we’re the only ship suited to the task, sir.”

Ainsley grimaced. The orders would have the *Atlantis* in the potential position of combat, and technically, she wouldn’t finish sea trails for another month. The idea of putting the DSV in the line of fire before the crew were deemed combat-ready did not thrill him. What was more, he had two officers off-ship who were still to return...

Sighing, Ainsley shook his head. Orders were orders. “How long until Ryan and Madeline return?”

Banick shook his head. “Not for at least 12 hours sir.”

Ainsley nodded slowly. One of his senior Helm officers, Commander Madeline Hayes had joined the weapons officer, Ryan Callaghan, on a survey mission around the Oceanographer Fracture zones only a few hundred kilometres from the *Atlantis*’s current position. In only a shuttle, it would take them practically an entire day to get back to the *Atlantis*.

Ainsley again turned to Phillips at the comm. “Lieutenant, tell command that we can’t leave until we’ve retrieved commanders Hayes and Callaghan. Ask them for instructions.”

“Yes sir.”

Ainsley rubbed his stubbled chin and looked back at Banick. “Any way we can double back to pick them up? It would be easier than waiting for them to get here.”

“I don’t see why not. What takes them 12 hours in shuttle takes us about a quarter of that without even pushing her to trial-limits.”

Atlantis’s drive systems were a marvel of engineering. They allowed the massive 242,000 tonne-displacing submarine to accelerate to speeds of up to 200 knots. For its immense size, this was a major engineering achievement, and one which the designers of the submarine did *not* want to explain in detail. Ainsley turned to Phillips again and waited for him to report with his answer. The Lieutenant came around shortly after and took off the radio headset. “Captain, they don’t want it to take any longer than is absolutely necessary. If it’s going to take any longer than 10 hours, they want us to move out now.”

The Captain nodded gravely, expecting as much as that. In times of war, UEO command did not allow much leeway with orders. When they were given, it was

assumed they would be carried out immediately. Ainsley and his ship were an exception only because of their “privileged” position in the fleet... “Understood, Lieutenant. Helm; set a course for the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Take her to one-eight-zero knots.”

As he sat down, Lieutenant Commander Natalie Canebride’s questioning gaze seemed disturbed by the order. “Begging your pardon, sir... but the seamounts *are* in opposite directions.”

“I know where we are, Commander. I’m sure just a few hours won’t bother command *that* much...”

~

Atlantis Sea Launch Sierra-Delta-229. ‘Oceanographer’ Fracture Zone. 800 Kilometres East of the Corner Seamounts. January 3rd, 2041...

“...Yes sir. We’ll rendezvous in just over 2 hours. Sierra-delta-two-two-niner: Out.”

The image of Captain Ainsley disappeared from the small communications screen on the UEO sea launch and Lieutenant Commander Madeline Hayes sat back in her chair with a sigh. It had been a long two days cramped up in the small shuttle, but it was comfortable for its relatively small size. The launch was only about 20 meters long, but it still held facilities that included living quarters and a (small) galley. The launch was often used for long-range transport or survey missions, and had been a workhorse of the UEO for nearly 30 years.

Sitting in the chair gazing out at the dark waters of the Atlantic, Hayes slowly became aware that Ryan Callaghan was eyeing her from his seat on the right. She raised an eyebrow curiously. “What’s wrong?”

The tactical office smiled, caught off-guard, and looked away. “Nothing.”

She grinned mischievously and swivelled in her chair to look him in the eye. “I know that look, Commander.”

Ryan’s reply was far too innocent, but his expression betrayed thorough amusement. “Oh, I just got the distinct impression that you are getting *really* bored with this mission.”

She was tempted to throw her head back and laugh. Of course she was bored, any human being who spent more than 24 hours in a launch would be bored. Although only having been on the *Atlantis* a month or two at best, Hayes had fit in well with the crew. Even if she had joined the submarine a mere week later than the rest of the crew, it was considered an achievement on any boat for a crew to be so well adjusted in such a short time. Captain Ainsley’s policy of almost abolishing “privilege” between officers and enlisted had done a lot to accomplish this. “No, I’m just glad it’s ending. I think if I spend one more day in this tin can, I’m going to scream.”

“I’ll bet. Mind you, I think you’ll be asking for more of these assignments when the fighting in the Pacific turns hot. You won’t have much time for anything else...” Callaghan’s mood had suddenly turned serious, and Hayes hid her tension by turning back to the console and randomly bringing up several checklists. “What makes you so certain it will get worse?”

He shrugged as he looked out the window. “Call it instinct. It just seems like Bourne has-“

“-Whoa...”

Hayes’s surprise caught Callaghan off guard once more. “What’s going on?”

Her easy demeanour had radically changed to one as serious as Callaghan's as she tried to readjust the launch's sensors. "I don't know. That's why I'm worried. I could almost swear I briefly picked something up on sonar."

Callaghan frowned as he turned to his own controls and followed Hayes's work. "What was it?"

"I don't know. From what I got on sensor return, I'd swear it was biological... But that doesn't match up with any of these the analysis results... Hang on, I'll try and reacquire on the stern--"

The cabin of the submarine shuddered violently and klaxons started sounding off in the cockpit. The shaking continued for a few seconds, but the sensor displays were going haywire for long afterwards. "What the hell was *that*!?"

Hayes's eyes were wide in shock as her hands raced over the control at inhuman speed. "We've been hit by weapons fire! I'm trying to determine the source."

The cockpit shuddered again and Ryan shook his head as he gripped the controls. This was no time for '*identifying*' anything. They were under attack, and that was enough information for him to do something about it. "Damn this! Strap yourself in *tight*. This is going to be a rough ride."

The launch veered off sharply from the unknown assailants and began to descend further to the depths of the rift valley. Hayes lurched heavily as she hadn't finished strapping herself in, and was taken aback when she finally identified the source of the weapons fire. It was like nothing she'd ever seen.

"What the hell is *that*?" The sub design she was looking at was nothing short of bizarre. Definitely not a UEO or Alliance design in origin, the computer only identified it as 'unknown.' The delicate lines of the submarine suggested a biological composition, but the sensor readings confirmed the hull was indeed metallic. Ryan gritted his teeth again and jerked the launch around as the strange subfighters came back around for another pass. "I don't know, but we're not going to hang around to find out!"

There was little Hayes could do except try and reason with their attackers... for all the good it would do, as they were clearly way beyond talking. "Unidentified craft, this is UEO sea launch Sierra Delta 229. Please cease your attack and identify yourself."

Nothing came back over the radio, and Hayes repeated herself. As stupid as it was to assume whoever they were might stop when asked, in a slow and defenceless shuttle, it was better than doing nothing. Smoke started to pour from a bulkhead behind her and she swore as she read that the radio antenna had been shot away. In all probability, the unknown fighters hadn't even heard her. "Damn it! I'll take the controls. You take weapons!"

Callaghan looked worriedly at Hayes. "What weapons?"

"Oh..." she said, remembering what they were flying. "...Right. Try and lose them in the rift!"

Throwing the yolk forward, Callaghan put the launch in to a steep dive that made the shuttle groan in protest. The fighters followed skilfully as they rolled in to the rift after the launch. Weapons fire tore out from the subs again and it streaked by dangerously close to the hull.

The cockpit shuddered and Callaghan fought to maintain his control of the craft. "That was way too close. Can you raise the *Atlantis* on any frequency?"

Hayes hit the console with frustration as she tried futilely to get the damaged communications systems back online. "It's no use. The comms were completely shot to hell. I've got sixty feet of aerial with no antenna!"

"What about the auxiliary!?"

"That's down too..."

Callaghan shook his head and adjusted a few controls as the shuttle shook violently with another round of impacts. "Damn it. If we take much more of this, we're as good as dead. See if you can get more power to the engines."

Hayes was about to start work but stopped as she had a thought. The cab rattled again as more bright blue weapons fire streaked past outside. "Wait...If we do that, we *are* as good as dead. If we cut the power *completely* however..."

Callaghan's tense concentration did not waver. "That's suicide! What if they don't buy it?"

"We can't outrun a subfighter, sweetheart. You got a better idea?"

Callaghan hesitated while the cockpit shook again and klaxons started wailing. The launch was on its last legs. "...We don't have much choice. Do it."

"It'll take me a few moments to override the safeties."

"Well make it *quick!*"

The shuttle swerved again as another round of shots zoomed past it. Callaghan's eyes felt like they were on fire as he didn't dare blink. The determination and concentration as he flew by instinct alone showed readily as beads of sweat on his forehead. Another quick round from the unknown fighters slammed in to the back of the Shuttle, rocking both officers forward in their restraints painfully. But this time, it was serious as the power began to fail throughout the submarine. The wailing of caution alarms had turned in to screeching master warnings and lights in the cabin started to flicker erratically. "Oh *shit.*"

Another fusillade from the attackers battered the launch and Callaghan frantically struggled with the controls. The shuttle was sluggish now, and it wouldn't be long before it was totally dead-stick. "I can't keep it up any longer. We're going down, *fast.*"

Hayes seemed to shrink. "Got any good news?"

Callaghan gritted his teeth as the launch accelerated in its fall towards the ocean floor. Ballast control was completely lost, and they were sinking like a brick.

"Well, at least it's gonna be over *real* fast..."

With the fighters still in pursuit, Sierra Delta Two-Two-Nine plunged deeper and deeper in to the darkness below. Oxygen belched from ruptured ballast tanks, leaving a long trail that slowly ascended towards the surface; a place the shuttle would not see again. It was going to be a very rough landing...

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UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. En Route to Oceanographer Rift Valley. January 3rd, 2041...

Ainsley threw back his head and laughed as Commander James Banick told him the most stupid thing he'd heard all week. "I think if the Ensign was that unfortunate, perhaps some 'omissions' should be made in the report. I'm still not sure how he managed to get himself stuck in the torpedo tube when doing maintenance... but I think in this case some details are best left unfinished."

Banick grinned as he sipped his coffee. “Well, be that as it may, he could have killed himself. Had Ensign Wallace not been there, he’d have been suffocated by now... or worse.”

Ainsley smiled as he finished the last of his toasted sandwiches and sipped the cup of tea at his side. “We stopped firing officers out of torpedo tubes a long time ago, Jim. But we’ll leave the brig to those who actually do something criminal, yes?”

Banick nodded as he put down his own mug. “Of course, sir. Just the same, I think a reprimand is probably called for.”

“How about we find out what *actually happened* before we dispense with punishments. Besides, given *your* reputation in the past, I’m not sure you’re one to—

He was cut off again for the second time that day as his personal access link beeped at him impatiently. “...Don’t people know what ‘off duty’ means?”

Pulling out the small PDA-like device, he opened it up and accepted the call. “This is the Captain. Go ahead.”

It was Commander Canebride. “Sir, is Commander Banick with you?”

“Yes he is, Commander. What’s wrong?”

Her voice seemed distracted, and even slightly concerned. “Sir, I think you two had better come up here. I think we’re... under attack.”

The Captain blinked in bewilderment. “You *think*?”

“I’m sorry sir... I don’t know what to make of it.”

Now the Captain *was* intrigued. “Understood, Commander. Sound condition two.”

A minute later, Captain Ainsley and Commander Banick stepped through the big clam-shell doors of the *Atlantis*’s bridge and resumed their seats on the command deck. Ainsley’s first order of business was to find out exactly what was going on. “Commander Canebride... Do you want to tell me what’s happening?”

“I wish I knew sir,” replied the young Frenchwoman from Ops on the deck below. “We’ve picked up a large vessel closing in on an attack vector. Their weapons are armed, but they aren’t painting us with shooting solutions... *yet*.”

“Size and class?”

Canebride shook her head. “Like nothing we’ve ever seen sir. She’s at least 50,000 tonnes. Sensors indicate heavy weaponry.”

Jack Phillips reported from his station at communications. “Sir, the vessel is hailing us.”

Ainsley was growing more and more intrigued every minute, and settling back in to his command chair, he kicked his feet up casually. “Bring them up, Lieutenant.”

The main screen at the front of the *Atlantis*’s bridge resolved to an image of a uniformed man, African, standing on what seemed to be the most sophisticated bridge Ainsley had ever laid eyes on – this surprised him given that most ships he knew of didn’t even come *close* to comparing with the *Atlantis*, yet this one seemed even *more* impressive; complete with full-3D holographic displays, body-moulded command chairs and 3D navigation tables. Hesitantly, he stood up, reconsidering his casual demeanour in light of what he was looking at. Whoever this man was, he was not the common mercenary or privateer. “This is the United Earth Oceans submarine *Atlantis*. May I ask who I am speaking to?”

The man on the screen seemed impassive, but his demeanour was nonetheless serious. He spoke English exceptionally well, but another surprise was the heavy Taal accent he carried. He was *definitely* African. “Captain, I must ask that you withdraw your vessel from these waters immediately. You are in the sovereign territory of the

Nycarian Empire, and given recent hostilities by unknown forces... my orders are to intercept any and all maritime traffic entering these borders.”

Ainsley was staring at the screen blankly. He had no idea what the man was talking about. *Nycarian Empire?* Who was this person?

For argument’s sake, and to satisfy his own curiosity, Ainsley played along. “Captain, I... *apologize* for our intrusion. However, two of our senior officers are due to rendezvous with us in a short time at this location. If you will allow us, we will be on our way as soon as we have done this.”

The ‘*Nycarian*’ Captain seemed unsure of himself as he thought for a moment. He was obviously not used to taking ‘no’ for an answer, something which Ainsley found oddly amusing. “We have already intercepted and stopped one vessel encroaching on this territory, Captain,” he countered. “I must follow my orders... your vessel cannot be exempt from such jurisdiction.”

Slowly and deliberately, Ainsley pushed for more information. “Captain, these are international waters. We haven’t even heard of the “Nycarian Empire” before. You’re going to have to do substantially better than that if you just expect me to turn around and leave.”

His opposite seemed agitated by his insistence. But the feeling was mutual. “Captain... I can appreciate your position. But while you may not know about me, let me assure you that *we* know all about *you* and your ‘*UEO*’. You claim to keep the peace, and yet your submarine’s armament is so... *extensive* that you hold me at a significant disadvantage. If your reputation is indeed as well earned as I suspect, then I doubt you would risk a war by refusing to meet my very simple request.”

For a moment, Captain Ainsley was stuck for words. Whoever this man was, he was either extremely unstable, or an exceptional gambler... and there was the fact he was *right*. “Very well, Captain. You will need to give me a few moments to confer with my officers. Please stand by.”

Ainsley shifted his gaze slightly towards Lieutenant Phillips, drawing a finger across his throat. Jack Philips nodded receptively before terminating the video communication with a flick of a switch. Ainsley sighed deeply. He looked at Canebride who still sat at the Conn. “Commander, what are the capabilities of that vessel. And where the *hell* did they come from?”

The Lieutenant Commander scanned her eyes over the console in front of her, studying the sensor data being fed to the station from the Sonar operator. “Sir, I can’t be entirely sure, whatever their hull is made of is blocking our sensors pretty thoroughly. But from what I can tell, the tactical systems of that boat would be rated as class seven - definitely military. I can’t even tell you what class it is.”

The Captain was bewildered by this. “Class *seven*? Are you sure? That’s a lot a lot of firepower considering we have never even heard of these people.”

Canebride shook her head again despondently. “Sir, I don’t know. They could be as lightly armed as a launch, but then again, they *could* be as heavily armed as us. We just don’t know.”

“What about this Nycarian business? What do we know about that?”

“Nothing sir,” admitted Canebride. “I picked up that he was probably African... but South Africa has been dead quiet since the third world war. They’ve been in isolation since then, so anything could have happened. UEO mandates have prevented anyone from crossing their border.”

Ainsley just shook his head and went back to the command deck to sit down. The Third World War had left Africa nothing more than a smoking crater as acts of mass genocide erupted across the continent in the wake of the UN’s collapse, and the

end of globally-supported peacekeeping operations. Even the most developed nations of Africa were far from being able to build such a ship. "Wonderful... So where did they get such massive ships? And why are they sailing through international waters like they *own* them? Lieutenant Phillips, get me their Captain again."

"Aye sir." After only a few moments, the screen resolved back in to the image of the African Captain and he hadn't appeared to have moved.

Ainsley sat back in the command chair and straightened his uniform jacket. "Captain, I'm sorry about that... I'm afraid that until I see reason to act otherwise, I am going to continue my operations under the assumption that these are *international* waters and open to any traffic from any Confederation. Even assuming that these waters *were* your territory, *UEO* jurisdiction as set forth in the organizational charter of 2016 gives me the authorization to operate in *any* waters unimpeded as a representative of a humanitarian organization. We have no hostile intentions against you or those you serve, but mark my words if you do *not* stand down and allow my boat to proceed... then I will be forced to interpret this as an aggressive posture on your part."

Surprisingly, the Nycarian didn't flinch, and even seemed very unmoved by Ainsley's ultimatum. "I do not believe so, *Captain Ainsley*," he replied, revealing that he knew his name. "Under your own *UEO* charter, to which you have explicitly referred to, you may not fire on any vessel belonging to a confederation you are not directly involved in hostilities with unless they fire *first*. I am not sure you would be willing to start a war over this."

Ainsley was rapidly losing patience. Clearly this 'Nycarian' knew of him, and that also meant he may very well know his reputation. Sensing a way out, Ainsley decided to play hardball... "Well... I see you know of me. Then you also probably know that the last time someone tried to threaten me in neutral waters, I sent a taskforce of Macronesian Orion class submarines to the bottom faster than they could quote standing *UEO* orders to me. By now you've probably already poked and prodded by boat with half a dozen different kinds of sensor scans, so you know I have enough firepower to reduce any landmass to a smoking crater with very little effort... I ask you... Do you *really* want to test me on this? Commander Banick... Load batteries 1 through 12. Stand by to fire. Plasma warheads to 100 percent yield."

Banick hid a smile. The Captain was bluffing, but the look of pure shock on the Nycarian's face was worth a thousand words. Ainsley noticed this glimmer of panic in the man's eyes and repressed a grin of his own.

"Aye, sir. Shooting solutions plotted; tubes 1 through 12 loaded and outer doors are open: ready to fire on your orders."

Ainsley nodded and turned away from the screen dismissively. Not surprisingly, the Nycarian blinked.

"*Wait...*"

Ainsley smiled before turning to the screen again. "Yes Captain? Have you reconsidered?"

The other man seemed lost for words, and he nodded slowly. He'd lost this round. "I... recognise the *UEO*'s jurisdiction in these waters. You shall be impeded no longer."

Ainsley nodded and smiled far too graciously. "I am *so* glad to hear it. *Atlantis: out.*"

The screen went blank as Ainsley killed the video feed and sat back in the command chair with a satisfied sigh. Whoever these Nycarians were, questions had been raised that needed answering. "Stand down from C-2."

Ainsley allowed himself a moment's respite as the ship resumed its normal operations. Commander Canebride looked up from her station on the control deck again, a twinkle of mischievousness in here eye. "Sir, the vessel is pulling back. Their weapons no longer register as active."

"Good. Lieutenant Phillips?"

"Sir?"

Ainsley rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Have you received any further word from Commander Callaghan or Commander Hayes?"

The Communications officer shook his head despairingly. "No, sir. Not since our last communication a few hours ago."

Ainsley nodded slowly... The Nycarian Captain had said that another vessel had already been intercepted, was it possible they were his officers? Questions raced through his mind and he was already headed for the bridge doors. "Commander Canebride, resume your station at Helm and lay in a course at best possible speed to the rendezvous point with the launch. Take us along their projected path and maintain hypersonar sweeps. Keep me apprised. Lieutenant Phillips? Get me UEO Command."

~

II

SILENT WAR

UEO Atlantis. DSV 8100. En Route to Sea Launch Rendezvous. January 3rd, 2041...

Ainsley stepped in to his office on *Atlantis's* B-deck and walked straight to his desk. Switching on his computer, he found himself looking at the stern face of Fleet Admiral Travis Sinclair – The UEO's Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet. Ainsley was mildly surprised that he would be speaking to such a highly placed officer. "Yes Captain Ainsley, What can I do for you?"

Ainsley did not know the Admiral well, but he was acquainted with him, having met the man at various social and political functions that the UEO loved to hold. He returned the wary smile that the Admiral offered and sat down in front of the desk. "Well, Admiral... I just had a very interesting encounter with someone flying jacks for the "Nycarian Empire"."

The Atlantic fleet commander's expression was blank. He blinked incoherently, obviously not following a word of what Ainsley said. "Captain... I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you are talking about."

"They were *African*, sir. And what's more – their ship probably had enough firepower to make the Security Council want to run weapons inspections in Johannesburg," Ainsley paused as he brought up several sensor reports of what the *Atlantis* had gathered on the mysterious ship, and then sent the file data through the UEO defence networks directly through to Sinclair's office. "This ship, sir... was like *nothing* I've ever seen. My staff are still trying to ascertain if perhaps they were privateers or working independently, but for what its worth... I doubt it. I've just forwarded you what we've got on it. It's not much, but it's also everything we have."

Fleet Admiral Sinclair nodded to someone out of view, issuing a quiet order to find the files that Ainsley had just sent, and then looked back to the Captain sceptically. "Captain, your concern is duly noted... but just the same, just because an African is sailing the North Atlantic claiming to be part of some "Empire" does not mean we need to jump to dire conclusions. He could have been part of any number of smuggling guilds or special interest groups that are trying to make names for themselves. To say that Africa has picked its self off the floor and then built themselves a Supercarrier overnight is as preposterous as saying we have submarines being abducted by Aliens."

Ainsley smiled derisively. The Admiral was merely putting in to words what was already running through his own mind. For 30 years, Africa had remained deathly silent, and had been left to its own accords. On multiple occasions, the UEO had sent ships in to South African Confederation waters to try and find out what had happened, and none of them had come back. At this point, "aliens" were just as likely as any other explanation. "Admiral... if I had valid answers, I would not be speaking to you now. Two of my officers are missing, and I suspect that this "Nycarian" may have something to do with it."

Admiral Sinclair reached off-screen a moment and then revealed several papers that had obviously been handed to him by an aide. Even from where he sat, Ainsley recognised the familiar delta of the *Atlantis* at the cover page's header and knew it must have been the files he forwarded. The Admiral took a minute to go over

the information, his expression becoming progressively more concerned the longer he studied it. "...Ainsley... Are you absolutely sure of all this?"

"Everything on that page can be verified by *Atlantis's* sensor logs, Admiral."

Sinclair remained silent as he continued reading, only nodding to say that he'd heard. Ainsley went on. "Sir, I will, of course, give all the information I have in my report... But what about the North Sea Confederation? The NSIS must know *something* about what's going on up here."

The North Sea Confederation was made up largely of "G10" countries in Western Europe, including but not limited to Great Britain, France, Spain and Germany – all former-NATO states. While a member of the UEO, the NSC operated unilaterally from the organization (as opposed to the United States and the North Pacific Confederation which cooperated to the extent that the UEO and NORPAC militaries were one and the same) and as such, did not always think to share every little detail of information that they knew. "It would seem likely," agreed Sinclair, "I'll contact the NSC Naval Command to see what I can find out from Admiral Shraeder. I'll also forward this information to Section Seven and Naval Intelligence to have them work on it. In the mean time, consider your orders to proceed to Rehobeth in abeyance. I will have the *Enterprise* and her Battlegroup reassigned to cover for your duties. Find your officers, and then investigate this further. I'll keep in touch."

"Yes Admiral."

Sinclair looked up again just before ending the video feed. "And Captain? Try not to cause another war."

With that, the Admiral disappeared, to be replaced by the blue and gold crest of the UEO's Atlantic Command. Despite the intended jest of the Admiral's parting words, Captain Ainsley gritted his teeth. He *was* responsible for causing the UEO's war with Macronesia, despite being vindicated in doing so during his subsequent inquiry. But the UEO's fleet was stretched thin, outnumbered by over 4 to 1 in capital ships alone, and Captain Ainsley had to wonder if the UEO stood any chance against the Macronesian Alliance at all...

~

"...at least 20 batteries of torpedo tubes - capabilities unknown, energy weapon systems that are yet to be identified and up to around 16 vertical launch tubes seem to make up the visible weapons complement of the vessel we encountered." Commander Canebride pointed to the displayed schematics on the briefing room's holographic display with her free hand and hit a control with the other. The schematic began to rotate and then another scale image of the *Atlantis* appeared next to it. The size difference was considerable and the UEO DSV was at least twice its size, but compared to most cruiser-class submarines, it was also by far the largest Ainsley had seen. "We're still trying to determine the exact class of hull. For the moment, we've classed it as a Battlecruiser as it *does* seem to be comparable in capabilities to our own *Reverence* boats, but... we need to look at the possibility that there may be more of this class out there... *whatever* it is."

Seated around the briefing room, the other senior officers of the *Atlantis* were enamoured by the submarine before them. Its lines were incredibly sleek, with each one cutting back and diverging seamlessly with another. Whatever this sub was, it was built for speed, and certainly drew a lot of attention in the process. Captain Ainsley cleared his throat and looked up at the Lieutenant Commander from one of the briefing notes he'd been given by her just a few minutes before. "Where they got

the resources to build this submarine doesn't matter," he stated firmly. "But for the time being, we are going to operate under the assumption that this "Nycarian" business is legitimate, and we will be handling any further 'encounters' with the utmost of diplomacy. As you all know, Africa has been extremely quiet since the end of World War Three, so it's possible there have been substantial changes in any number of countries across the South African Confederation. *If* they have rearmed themselves, then it's likely that this ship is a part of that rearmament."

"Sir, I should mention that we've still received no word from Commander Hayes or Commander Callaghan."

Sighing, the Captain nodded grimly, looking at each of his officers slowly with steeled determination. "Yes... That's true. UEO Command has asked that we look in to this "Nycarian" situation further, and will be conferring with North Sea Intelligence to try and gather any information they may already have. But keep in mind we have two officers missing out there, so our first priority is to find them..." he paused as a grim possibility presented itself. "...Even if we don't find them alive, we do *not* leave our people behind. They *will* come home."

An agreeing chorus of "Yes sirs" came from the other officers seated around the table, but not wanting to sew the seeds of doubt, the Captain didn't waste any time getting on with the meeting's agenda. "Commander Canebride, as you already know the most about this from your analysis so far, I want you to do as much research as you can on the South African Confederations. Information on military, political and economic climates over the past 50 years would be the most useful things to look at - *especially* those dated just after the Third World War."

"Yes, Captain."

"Chief Stevens?"

The Atlantis's chief engineer looked up from his PDA, on which he was busily tapping away. "Yes sir?"

"I don't know what these Nycarian's motives are, but I don't want to find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. I want you and your crew to get this ship running like clockwork. If the torpedo batteries can reload in five seconds, I want them to reload in two."

Stevens smiled with a curt nod. "You got it."

Ainsley nodded. "Lastly, Commander Banick... I want you in charge of Tactical. Run up a full inventory of the ship's magazines and have all plasma warheads checked, fitted and secured. The same applies with the EVA arm."

"Aye, sir."

With that, the meeting was over. "Any questions?"

Most of the officers seemed content with the jobs asked of them, but Banick raised a curious and suspicious eyebrow. "Sir, what are *you* going to be doing?"

It was a question that evoked stifled amusement from the other officers. Ainsley eyed them warily and then regarded his XO almost coldly. "*I'm* going to be speaking with North Sea Intelligence and UEO Command. If you *wish*, Commander, I can leave the politics of this situation to you...?"

More snickering met the reply, and for a short but horrid moment, Banick was afraid he'd made a tragic mistake. "Ah, thank you sir... but I'm not sure that the brass and I get along all that well. I'd best leave the Fleet Admirals to you."

"I thought you might see it that way," he said while gathering his papers. "Dismissed."

~

Unknown location. Somewhere in the Mid-North Atlantic. January 4th, 2041...

Ryan Callaghan awoke to the pounding of hammers inside his skull. Massaging his temple gently as his vision cleared, he was startled to find that he was no longer in the launch. The last thing he remembered was the ocean floor rushing towards him through the cockpit of the shuttle, the small craft being totally out of his control. Now he was in a small room, no more than three by four meters with dull concrete walls and steel bars across one side – a prison cell. As far as prisons went, this one looked extremely old. Being on this side of bars was an unusual feeling... and reflecting on the situation, he would have much preferred the relatively comfortable brig of the *Atlantis* with its sterile surroundings, carpeted floor and much more agreeable temperature. This brig was freezing, and the “mess” around the cell suggested far ‘colder’ treatment of local residents.... It could have been worse, he thought quietly. Considering how much his head hurt at that moment, he was probably lucky he wasn’t dead. Looking around, he saw Madeline Hayes sprawled across the floor in the far corner of the room, her uniform jacket missing, and looking as if she’d just been dumped there without a second thought.

Struggling to get up, fire lanced through his leg causing him intense agony. He collapsed to the floor, his leg buckling under his own weight. He was more than slightly surprised that he hadn’t noticed the blood-soaked bandage that dressed his lower left leg. Cursing, he got up again, but this time being careful not to put any weight on it at all. He called to Hayes quietly as he hobbled across the cell. “Madeline? Are you alright?”

She didn’t stir as he knelt beside her. Putting a hand on her shoulder, she was very cold, and still didn’t stir. His blood ran cold and he instinctively put his hand to her neck.

He sighed in relief, feeling a slow but definite pulse. At least she wasn’t dead. Removing his jacket, he covered her carefully and then let himself sink back against the wall. His head was still aching like he’d been hit with the butt of a rifle (an experience he knew just a bit too well) and he closed his eyes to try and clear his head.

Letting the stillness of the room around him sooth his aching head, he was completely content. He could hear a lot more than he realised when he focussed on everything around him; the hum of vibrating air ducts, the throbbing of a generator through the floor, and the rattling of an unbalanced fan that spun from the ceiling of the detention block outside the bars. But that was not all he could hear. After a short time, he heard the sound of footsteps... quietly echoing down a corridor and getting closer.

Looking beyond the bars of the cell expectantly, he saw a shadow cast on the floor of the cell block, and seconds later, a figure walked in to view. He was a heavily-built man wearing old-style woodland camouflage trousers, a heavy utility vest and a very marine-standard crew-cut. Why the guard was wearing camouflage he had no idea. Was this a land installation? When the launch had gone down, they were at *least* a thousand nautical miles from the nearest coastline. It didn’t seem likely... The man, presumably a mercenary, held a very old weapon – a model of carbine at least 40 years out of date; a U.S. Marine Corps M4A1 with an underslung M203 grenade launcher. Callaghan hadn’t seen a weapon like that used by *any* military force

since 2020. The U.S. and UEO Marines had since adopted the far-newer M31 pulse rifles

Whoever the man was, he was not military and Callaghan knew that meant he was also unanswerable to military regulations. Whatever he said, and whatever he did, would be on thin ice as far as this person was concerned. The guard looked down at Callaghan and his hand tensed slightly on the rifle in his hands. After a second, he reached in to his trouser pockets and pulled out a small security pass before swiping it through an unseen reader next to the door. "Don't move," he said, opening the door. Callaghan nodded slowly and raised his hands, not moving from his uncomfortable seat against the wall.

"Where am I?" inquired Callaghan curiously.

There was no answer from the soldier in front of him, but a second person entered the cell. At about 6 foot, 3 inches and with a snarl to make Alexander Bourne look like a saint, something told Callaghan that this was the man he'd be speaking to. "I'll ask the questions, Commander Callaghan," the man replied.

Walking in to the cell further, he nodded to the gun-toting guard. With an affirming nod, he stepped outside the cell and the man looked back at Callaghan. "So," he began slowly. "Lieutenant Commander Ryan Callaghan, second-in-command aboard the infamous UEO *Atlantis*. This *is* an honour..."

Callaghan did not reply. So far, all the man had done was recite exactly what his uniform's name and rank patch already said. The man nodded and sat down on the bench at the side of the cell.

"But then, that's easy isn't it? You and Commander Hayes are a long way from home. Care to tell me what you're doing out this far?"

Callaghan looked at him blankly. "Who are you?"

"That's not important right now. All you need to know is that provided you cooperate, you will come to no harm."

The UEO officer nodded again slowly. The man was being remarkably calm, despite his apparent and obvious agitation. For the time being, and not knowing a thing about his captor, Callaghan decided to indulge him with the truth. "We were on a survey mission to map the Oceanographer rift. Our intentions were not hostile if that's what you're asking me."

The man hid a smirk as he got up and flexed his hands for a few moments. "I had a feeling you'd say something like that, Commander. Let me be perfectly forward with you... I am not a man who likes cover stories. We know that the *Atlantis* rendezvoused with a Nycarian cruiser yesterday. So my question to you is quite simple... What is the UEO's business with the Nycarians?"

Callaghan blinked incoherently. Who or what were Nycarians? He looked at the still-unconscious Madeline Hayes, and then returned his hollow gaze to the would-be interrogator. "Look... I'll level with you. I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about, but *she* needs medical attention. If you help her, I'll help you with... whatever it is you want."

The man worked his jaw for a moment as he flexed his fist several times. The guard outside the cell tightened his grip on his weapon again. "Your leg. How is it?" the man asked.

"Broken," said Callaghan honestly. "But I'll survive. Help Commander Hayes, and then I'll answer any questions you have to the best of my ability."

The guard and his master exchanged a wary look of indecision. The man walked over to Hayes and knelt beside her, examining her quietly. "How long has she been unconscious?"

"I assume since we arrived here," replied Callaghan.

His would-be interrogator got up and stepped back from Hayes, regarding Callaghan almost coldly. "I'll see what I can do... But when I return, you'd better have some answers. Even I answer to someone... and let me assure you, *they* are far less patient than me."

The man turned around and left without further word to Callaghan, and didn't even turn back as he walked off down the detention block, leaving the guard to lock up the cell. The flicker of a smile dawned at the corner of the guard's mouth, undoubtedly hiding some sadistic thought that lurked in the back of his mind. Locking the cell, the guard shook his head, and then walked out of sight, the sound of his footsteps fading as he got further and further down the detention block.

Beside him, Hayes was finally stirring... the jarring 'clank' of the detention block's door rousing her. Callaghan was at her side as she slowly opened her eyes and gingerly pulled a long strand of hair from her face. "Easy," said Callaghan, gently wrapping his arm around her shoulders and helping her in to a sitting position.

Hayes stammered in her daze. "Where--"

He tried to force a smile. "I'm still trying to work that out, too."

"*Damn it,*" she said with annoyance as she rubbed her head, looking at her bleak surroundings. Callaghan agreed with this exasperated state of mind. Despite the extremely limited information he got from who ever their captors were, he could already assume from their injuries that the crash had not been pretty. "How long have I been out?" she asked as she tried to climb to her feet. She didn't get far however as she winced in pain and slipped back to the floor, painfully grasping her side.

"Whoa, hey... don't try and get up," urged Callaghan, gently trying to hold her down. "Let me have a look."

She nodded weakly and inhaled sharply as he felt around her side. He felt a sharp bump beneath his hand, and looking only briefly at the severe bruising, knew immediately that she'd broken one of more of her ribs. She definitely needed medical attention as soon as possible, and this was beyond anything he could handle in the long term. "You've got broken ribs; definitely sixth... possibly seventh and eighth. You're not moving anywhere."

She rubbed her head again and took a few deep, painful breaths. "A prison cell?"

Callaghan twisted his mouth in to a grimace as he nodded slowly, reaching for the jacket that Hayes had put aside, tearing off the sleeve and then ripping apart the seam. He took the material around Hayes's chest and gently began tying it behind her back. "Eyes up, pal," she said, wheezing. "How long was I out?"

"I don't know," replied Callaghan "I had a brief 'chat' with whoever these people are a few minutes before you woke up. They didn't tell me much..." he paused, as he continued his work. "...Do you happen to know what a 'Nycarian' is?"

"...A what?"

"Whoever these people are, they seem to think the UEO is involved with them. I don't have a clue what they are talking about."

Callaghan stopped, looking at the bruising again and then back at Hayes apologetically. "Okay, listen carefully. Take a deep breath and hold my hand tight... I need to re-set the bone and immobilize it. I'm sorry... this *will* hurt."

Hayes gritted her teeth and obediently took a deep breath, gripping his hand tightly. She nodded to him, her eyes pleading to get the job over and done with. Callaghan nodded silently, and without hesitation, moved his hand to her side and grabbed the badly broken ribs, twisting them. Hayes's eyes opened wide in shock, her

mouth open, wheezing in pain. Her hand trembled in his grasp, and slowly slackened as she blacked out, her head falling back gently against his shoulder. Callaghan shook his head quietly, took hold on the loose knot he had tied in the makeshift, immobilizing bandage and then firmly pulled, immobilizing the broken bones in her side.

Gently supporting her shoulders, he lay her down on the ground, taking the tattered remains of his jacket and putting it beneath her head. "Where the hell am I?" he said to no one in particular, looking dreary-eyed around his cell once again. Lying back next to Hayes, he closed his eyes and let exhaustion take over...

~

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Somewhere in the Oceanographer Rift Valley, January 4th, 2041...

Moving at a relatively slow speed of 90 knots through the rift valleys of the Mid-Atlantic ridge, the *Atlantis* moved forward as gracefully as a bird riding the winds. Her flood lights illuminating the ocean floor, she continued a watchful gaze of her surroundings – probing the ocean depths for any trace of her missing officers.

Captain Ainsley stood at the chart table on the bridge with Commander Banick as they discussed the day's developments. *Atlantis* had remained at condition two for 12 hours with multiple reports of unknown vessels in the surrounding waters, and everyone on the Bridge seemed tense. Commander Canebride had filed a final report on the South African Confederation in less than 6 hours, and by the small size of the report and the limited information there was, the *Atlantis* Captain was not overly surprised. Ever since World War III, Africa had seemed to have been as quiet as the North Pole. No information had ever been gathered, and it had been largely forgotten in time. In short, Captain Ainsley and his crew still had very little idea about what they were dealing with. "Commander, have we received any further updates from the Spectre flights?"

Banick shook his head. The SFA-2C Spectre was the UEO's primary class of sub fighter. Being less advanced and having a lesser range than the new Raptors, they were still the most abundant fighter in service to the fleet. Ainsley had made the tongue-in-cheek decision to keep the *Atlantis*'s Raptor squadrons in ready reserve in the event that they were needed for combat sorties. Silently, he didn't have that much confidence in the Spectre in these conditions. With such little intelligence and lack of knowledge of their surroundings, it would not be difficult to get the jump on them, and an ambush could quickly turn in to a slaughter. "Not as yet sir. The Eagles and Stallions have reported clean sweeps of the east and south for a range of 30 nautical miles, but the Guardians and Grey Knight squadrons have yet to complete their run over the eastern and northern ridge lines."

Ainsley nodded thoughtfully and ran his fingers along a plotted line on the chart dome. *Atlantis* was running a west-to-east search patrol through the Oceanographer rift valley before being brought back around to search the more rugged chasms and trenches of the northern side of the rift valley. The area was a nightmare for this kind of operation, even when he had the most advanced sensor systems in the world at his disposal, and the endless, winding twisting ravines and deep-ocean canyons were the perfect place for an ambush... "Alright... Commander? Mark this position and slow to 40 knots. Bring us about to heading two-seven-zero."

“Aye, sir,” Banick swivelled around in his chair on the command deck to take in the front of the bridge. “Helm: decrease speed to 40 knots... Bring us about to heading two-seven-zero, steady as she goes.”

“Helm aye. Slowing to four-zero knots. Making my heading two-seven-zero.”

Ainsley rapped his fingers on the arm rest of his chair as he sat down and felt the deck gently lurch beneath him. This search was growing tiresome and they were making no progress at all. “Damn it Callaghan, where the *hell* are you?”

~

...Tearing through the canyons of the rift valley, a squadron of 12 subfighters ducked and weaved around the submerged ravine. The design was an old one, long since relegated to training purposes within the UEO, and no longer operated as a part of any carrier sea wing. The SF-27/A ‘Barracuda’ was big as far as subfighters went at 21 meters long, and there were many who called it the “Tomcat” of the sea. It was not the prettiest fighter beneath the waves, nor was it the most agile. But it had range, reliability and durability. The fighter had seen only about 14 years of service between 2020 and 2034, and despite its age, was still a formidable craft capable of speeds exceeding 200 knots.

With a flick of his wrist, the pilot of the fighter disarmed his weapons safeties. Ahead of him, he watched the hulking stern of the *Atlantis* DSV swing about. She was turning. Fearing he’d been seen if he drifted outside the massive submarine’s baffles, he eased the nose of the Barracuda around to break out of the small valley he’d been hiding in and entered the Oceanographer Rift. Hitting his comms; the pilot broke radio silence. “This is lead. Break by pairs and engage. Weapons free...”

“Understood.”

“Once you have visual sighting, close as quickly as possible and fire on my command...”

~

...Sipping his tea, Ainsley sighed. Despite the almost-criminally luxurious comfort afforded by its high, leather padded back and arm rests, he felt awkward. It didn’t feel right to be sitting around drinking tea while two of his officers were missing, but this was a search and rescue operation, and during such missions, regulations prohibited him from leaving the bridge any time he was on duty. Ainsley watched over the bridge with a dull interest at best. His crew was outstanding, and they seldom overlooked any details in the ship’s operations. It only made *his* job far less exciting. As he put down the teacup on the console beside him, he noticed the sonar officers discussing something – confused expressions on their faces made Ainsley frown curiously; the chance to hear something interesting enough to keep his attention. “Mister Ivashov, is there a problem?” the Captain asked.

“Sir, I think we just passed over something on the rift floor. Hypersonar just got a faint return on... *something*.”

Ainsley was out of his chair like a firing gun. “-The launch?”

“I’m not sure, sir. We’re repositioning *Junior* now. We’ll know for sure in a moment.”

Ainsley nodded, turning pointedly towards the helm once again. “Lieutenant Commander Canebride... Bring us around to course one-six...”

“-Contact! We have incoming!”

The Captain was reeling. “Sonar, talk to me.”

The sonar chief was wide-eyed with panic as the main screen of the bridge switched to what was being displayed on his own console. Atlantis was being lit up like a Christmas tree. “Twelve unidentified subfighters closing dead astern. They’re coming in fast!”

Ainsley had already started issuing his next orders even before the sensor chief had even finished with his report. “Battle stations! Get Hitchcock’s pilots in the water *now!*”

...On the Atlantis’s forward flight deck, Lieutenant Jane Roberts was already sprinting to her SF-37/E Raptor as Ainsley was issuing the order from the bridge. After doing up the last of the buckles on the front of her flight suit, she threw a salute to the crew chief overseeing her fighter. Atlantis had been at condition two, so the gleaming Raptor had already been pre-flighted some time ago. She was pleased to notice that the fighter’s twin engines were already idling with their distinctive, low growl. She ran her hand over the nose of the fighter and the lettering of her name that adorned it.

“Lieutenant!” said the chief, cambering out of the cockpit as she approached “This is a damn fine machine I have here. Bring her back in one piece for me, will you?”

Roberts smiled and winked as she put her flight helmet under her arm and began climbing the ladder to the cockpit as quickly as she could. Her fighter, which bore a rather large set of shark’s teeth and eyes on the nose like the rest of the VF-107 Raptors, was one of the best maintained in the entire squadron primarily due to the fact it was also one of the newest. Not a single seam in the fuselage had been marred by the stains and discolouration of the sea, and the paintwork was so new she could swear she could still smell the finish. The relationship between the technicians assigned to the squadron and the fighters they maintained was one of tireless love and labour. As far as these engineers were concerned, the fighters belonged to *them*. The pilots were simply “allowed” to fly them. It was no surprise or secret then that the flight engineers themselves were also fully certified pilots and knew the limitations of the machines they maintained like the backs of their own hands.

Roberts regarded the chief with a grin, remembering his dismay the last time she had come back to the *Atlantis* without her fighter. “I’ll bring her back in one piece, Mike. Don’t worry.”

The chief crawled across the fighter’s intake cowlings and wing before vaulting off and landing on the deck below with a solid ‘clank’. With a smile and a casual salute, the engineer backed away from the wing. “Give ‘em hell!”

“Will do. See you soon.” Roberts returned the salute and strapped her helmet on before closing the canopy.

With a thump, the canopy sealed shut, and the ambient noise of the flight deck and the whine of the engines were reduced to a muffled hum. Sealed in the tiny cockpit, she was now in a different world, and the adrenaline began pumping through her veins like acid.

Showtime.

Battle klaxons rang through the corridors of the *Atlantis* DSV. The giant submarine rapidly began to pull out of the rift valley that confined it so dangerously. Her sonar arrays could pick up targets at ranges in excess of 150 nautical miles, but

now... surrounded by the sharp, jagged sonar-shielding walls of the Oceanographer rift valley's many tributaries, she was blind.

Small volleys of torpedoes shot out from the rapidly closing Barracudas and closed in towards the *Atlantis* while the first of the Rapiers left the launch bays. An anti-ship torpedo like those the Barracudas were carrying had enough firepower to completely destroy a fleet attack submarine displacing more than 9000 tonnes. Despite *Atlantis*'s massive size and substantially better survivability, the torpedoes still had enough of a warhead yield to cause considerable damage.

Raptor and Spectre fighters of the ship continued to burst from the launch bays that opened from the submarine's EVA doors in to the crushing depths of the sea outside. Despite the exceptionally rapid deployment, there was nothing that could be done to stop the torpedoes that had already been fired.

Guided by the tracking systems aboard the Barracudas, the torpedoes found their marks and the ocean erupted in flame, sending brilliant, concussive shockwaves of blue fire against the heavily armoured hull of the DSV. The submarine's bioskin did little to protect the rigid double titanium hull from the impacts and was disintegrated instantly in blasts superheated plasma. One after another, the torpedoes smashed through the titanium plating of the hull to rip apart the pressure hull within, leaving a giant, mangled mess in their wake.

Captain Ainsley was just about thrown from his place at the Conn as the deck jarred heavily with a deafening staccato of 'booms' that reverberated throughout the submarine. Several stations around the bridge were now blaring master alarms and displayed innumerable damage reports and schematics of the ship, alerting the crew to the bleeding obvious. Steadying himself against the chart table, Ainsley looked around the bridge. All the officers who had been seated at the time had managed to remain that way, but there were injuries amongst those who had been unfortunate enough to not find something to hold on to. Despite the shock, professionalism kicked in, and the bridge staff wasted no time getting down to business. Ainsley barked at the tactical station.

"*Weapons!* Load all aft tubes with intercepts and standby to fire! Helm! Bring us about! Hard to starboard!"

...*Atlantis* began to pull her massive bulk around, surrounded by the dogfighting between the defending UEO flight groups and the attacking Barracudas. As more torpedoes shot away towards the *Atlantis*, the attacking fighters began to fall one by one under the guns of the UEO pilots. One such pilot was Lieutenant Roberts. "This is Rapiet two: Splash one bandit. Flight two... Stay tight. Paint the fighters at 4 O'clock low. Fangs out, gentlemen. Don't let them get off any more torpedoes."

Roberts' fighter barrelled downwards towards a duo of attacking Barracudas and with a quick flick of her thumb, she switched her fire controls over to the Raptor's twin, nose-mounted "Hades" supercavitating 25-millimeter gattling cannons. The relatively new weapon was undisputedly the most potent weapon yet developed for a subfighter anywhere in the world. The high-velocity uranium slugs fired by the cannon left the spinning barrels at such speed and with so much power that even a glancing hit on a pursued submarine could end a pilot's career in a split second of quite brutal climax. As she traced her gaze over the tail-wagging 'bandit' in front of her, she pushed the throttles up and increased her speed to 110 knots – an easy gain on the old Barracuda.

As the range on her HUD closed to within 200 yards, she locked on to the fighter ahead of her, held her thumb ready on the trigger and began tracking it.

"Rapier three... Stay my wing," ordered Roberts over the radio, noting her wingman, Lieutenant Tom Reynolds, straying slightly as the formation came around the turn.

"Wilco, two... Six is clear."

As the range closed even further, the Barracuda slowly filled her entire field of vision. At this range, she couldn't miss, and she steadied her grip on the yolk... But the Barracuda was not as slow as it looked, and her prey snap-rolled downward in a sharp evasive loop. Obliging, Roberts instinctively spun her Raptor around to bring it back on to the troublesome fighter's tail. Her adversary knew she was on him now, and wasn't about to let her job become easy. The Barracuda jerked left and right sharply and denied Roberts a clean shot. This was taking too long. "Rapier three, Break right and cut this guy off. When he breaks again, we'll catch him in the crossfire."

"Understood, two."

Continuing to track her target, Roberts only vaguely noticed Reynolds roll away from her wing to settle in to a wide flank several hundred yards away. The trap was set, and now all that was left to do was spring it.

"Rapier two, this is three. Ready and awaiting your orders."

"Alright... cat's in the bag three. Finish him."

Roberts kicked in her throttle again and depressed the trigger, sending white-hot rounds of 25-millimeter fire ripping across the path of the Barracuda. She could see the second she engaged that this pilot was not in the military, but a mercenary at best. The fact he had left his tail so open to pursuit like this was a telling mark of fatal inexperience. He wouldn't live to make the same mistake again.

The Barracuda broke away to evade the fire, but found itself running head-on in to the blazing cannons of Tom Reynolds. Wing from wing, the Mercenary fighter was torn asunder; the shells from the Hades gun ripping through its fuselage as if it were tissue paper at an astounding four thousand five hundred feet per second. In one final nova, the Barracuda imploded with a heavy 'thump' that rumbled through the water.

Roberts's fighter burst through the shredded debris, prompting her to grit her teeth anxiously. Flying through a cloud of shredded metal was generally not recommended for a fighter of any kind... a stray piece of debris being sucked through a Raptor's intakes would probably destroy the engines, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she cleared it without incident. Her radio headset cracked noisily in her ear. "Rapiers two and three... Are you quite finished?"

She rolled her eyes at the question, quickly thinking of a snappy reply for the squadron's CO; Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock. "Commander... What Tom and I do in our spare time is really none of your business. Besides, I'd say that doing it three times in two minutes has to be some kind of a record." She regretted the wry innuendo the second she said it, and could already imagine Thomas Reynold's face going bright red with embarrassment. He was lucky that in the cockpit of a Raptor, no one could see him.

"Lieutenant Roberts," scolded Hitchcock as his fighter fell in beside her port wing. "If you get *that* much excitement from blowing holes in barracudas, maybe we need to have a serious chat about your chosen profession..." the laughter which followed both statements was short lived as the Wing Commander gave little time for respite. They were still in trouble, and this was hardly the time for jokes. He quietly rued having said anything at all. "Ok, that's enough. First of all... Twelve kills, no losses. Well done, people. For once we'll be drinking to something other than our

dead... Secondly... I've received our orders from the *Atlantis*. She's in bad shape. We've been assigned cover duty until they get the situation sorted out."

Roberts didn't hear much of what the squadron commander said next as her attention was drawn away to the *Atlantis* beside her fighter; her stern in ruin, the bioskin puckered with blackened, shredded holes that exposed the blasted frame work underneath. The once-proud ship sat in total darkness, illuminated only by the flood lamps of the covering fighter escort, and the surrounding WSKRS sea satellites. She couldn't even begin to imagine the chaos inside...

~

Smoke filled the bridge, being illuminated in an eerie blood-red glow from the *Atlantis*'s battle lighting. Alarms blared from every station and damage control teams ran about trying to save the ruined ship. Captain Ainsley knew the situation was bad before he even asked the question. "*Damage report!?*"

Despite flickering displays and erratic power failures, the operations officer somehow managed to bring up a schematic of the DSV on to the bridge's main screen. Ainsley was no engineer, but it was plainly obvious that the entire engineering hull was severely damaged. Aft of the *Atlantis*'s wings, the entire boat seemed to be highlighted in red on the display and flooding charts showed that most of lower engineering was totally inaccessible. "We took eleven direct hits to the engineering hull," reported the shell-shocked officer. "All hits were taken on decks E, F and G in Section-46 aft. Flooding is limited to F and G decks, but damage on E in the reactor room has put engineering on the ropes... We've got casualty reports coming in from all departments."

Captain Ainsley gritted his teeth. Many members of his crew, he knew, were dead. Some of them wouldn't even be recognisable through the mangled ruins of the ship's lower decks "How many?"

"14 dead, 22 wounded... Reports are still coming in."

Looking around the bridge, Ainsley could tell by the lost expressions on the pale faces of officers everywhere that this was not the time to be succumbing to his own shock of the moment. "Keep me apprised."

Turning from the command deck, he looked around to find Commander James Banick who was helping an engineer in putting out an electrical fire on the lower control deck. "Commander Banick? Forget about the damage. Tend to the wounded. You have the bridge. I will be in engineering."

Leaving through the Bridge's two huge composite-titanium/steel pressure doors, the Captain paused to survey the damage. The doors themselves were built to withstand the most extreme of punishment – either natural or otherwise – and had been clamped shut and sealed during the ordeal. Now open, they were like a demarcation line between two different worlds; the bridge was relatively intact... but the corridor behind it was nothing short of a disaster area. Grimly, Ainsley looked at the Mag-Lev station just a bit further up the way. He doubted it was operational given the total power failure the ship was suffering, but he doubted its safety in the present situation even more. Considering the options, Ainsley decided to walk the 400-meter distance to the engine room instead. Normally, the Mag-Lev system would allow him to travel to nearly any place on the 490-meter-long submarine on any of the 11 decks, but after only a few months aboard the *Atlantis*, Ainsley was still learning how to make his way from place to place by foot.

Taking a left down on of the main corridors, Captain Ainsley found himself in the unusual position of feeling lost. For a moment, he considered how the Atlantis compared to a U-boat of the Second World War where every room was crammed tightly within a hull often no longer than 40 meters long with a single corridor not wide enough for 2 people to pass each other. The Nuclear-powered submarines of the cold war that followed were not much better.

Atlantis had been designed with every creature comfort one could dream off. The submarine had an entire deck given over to the Marine company stationed aboard which included a firing range, multiple armouries, a brig and a holding bay within the aft cargo hold for the Marine's four-wheel-drive recon vehicles. The boat had a dozen such decks, with some of the living space even given over to a small movie theatre and swimming pool. Atlantis had been designed to eliminate every problem of living under the sea for extended periods of time... and it had come to *this*.

Continuing on down the winding corridors, the Captain reached the big clamshell doors that kept the engineering section separated from the rest of the ship, (much like those of the bridge) Taking a long breath, Ainsley readied himself for hell...

~

III

BREAKING THE SURFACE

Unknown location, somewhere in the mid-North Atlantic Ocean. January 4th, 2041...

“That’s *it*. If I spend another minute in this hell hole, I am going to scream,” said Lieutenant Commander Hayes hoarsely as another wave of pain hit her broken ribs. Her fellow captive, Ryan Callaghan, still sat against the wall and was not looking at her. The ‘visitor’ they had received earlier had not come good on his word for medical treatment for Hayes, not that Callaghan expected anything else.

“At this rate, I don’t think ‘escape’ is the most viable of options,” he observed. “I’m not moving anywhere with this leg of mine... and I doubt you would do much better.”

Unamused, Hayes turned shook her head helplessly. “I’ve been in worse spots.”

“Really? Name one.”

She looked away and hid a grimace. Despite her disgust at the situation, she knew he was right. She had *never* been in a position like this, and she never expected she ever would have been. “Ok, fine. We have never been this helpless in our entire careers. Sorry for trying to be optimistic.”

For a moment, Hayes swore she saw a small smile escape Callaghan’s lips, but she let it pass. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let a bunch of Nazi jerks keep this up.”

Callaghan gingerly poked and prodded at his injuries. He had managed to fashion a crude splint from broken parts of amenities around the cell, and he could now walk on it with some degree of success, but he was still a long way from waging an all-out assault against their less-than-gracious hosts. It was this knowledge that got him thinking. “You know,” he said thoughtfully, “they are probably going to get tired of silence for answers sooner or later... and then drag one of us off for a little ‘chat’.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

Callaghan allowed himself to smile and he looked at Hayes who was visibly confused. “It means that when they do, we will have an opportunity to get a feel for this place and find out more about where we are.”

Hayes’s eyebrow went up in curiosity and a small smile crossed her delicate features. Callaghan had a point. Unfortunately, his words may have been a bit too true for either of their tastes as a heavy clank echoed from the detention block, followed by the plodding, measured steps of approaching soldiers.

Three men this time; two guards and a man – probably the one in charge - who Callaghan did not recognise, stepped up to the cell. The third man swiped his card through the access terminal, and entered the cell. “You,” he said sternly, pointing at Callaghan. “Come with us.”

The two guards held their antique M-4 carbines levelled on Callaghan and he cautiously stepped forward. The one in charge snarled. “If you so much as *cough* without me telling you to, I will shoot you like a dog. We clear?”

Callaghan nodded, and took a step forward dauntlessly. “Crystal.”

“Good. Now, move.”

Walking down the long detention block which had sickeningly plain-concrete walls marred by moss and condensation, Callaghan quietly examined the facility

around him. The lighting in the dank, industrial corridors and passages seemed crude at best – perhaps that of an old Naval base from the Third World War. The war had been devastating and many nations found their surface bases subject to open bombardment. The conversion of many new sub-surface colonies across the oceans in to armouries, naval yards and military command centers had been the response to that, and had proved a nightmare for the warring factions. The war had dragged on for a bloody five years in a stalemate before a ceasefire had been agreed to.

As Callaghan and his escort exited the detention centre, it became increasingly apparent that this wasn't simply a converted civilian colony; it was far too systematically laid out. Painted high on the wall at the end of the hall was the faded emblem of the North Sea Confederation. (Although almost 30 years out of date) This was a military base, or at least it used to be.

One of the guards prodded him in the side sharply with the muzzle of his rifle, ushering him down one of the subsidiary corridors of the base. He didn't need to ask where he was being taken – that much he already knew. What he didn't know were the answers to the questions they would ask... and *that* was going to be a problem.

Continuing to search for his own answers, he looked up at the ceiling of the hallway he was now walking down. It was nothing remarkable; much like the others, it was a long concrete corridor that had worn away over a half-century of time, with dull lighting and no obvious weaknesses in the structure.

They turned again, and Callaghan was pleasantly surprised to notice something he had previously missed; while the lighting for the wiring ran in clear view of the eye along the roof, there were vents above them that had to have been the air conditioning and ventilation systems for the base, and they would have had to have been big enough to feed enough atmosphere in to every part of the facility without losing pressure. It stood to reason that there had to be something above the ceiling.

In a facility born of the World War III era, most military installations followed a common plan of having power and environmental systems hidden away in maintenance shafts above the main corridors of the base. Not only were they used to keep the facilities in working order, but they also served the very convenient purpose of providing emergency access during evacuations... - he had found his way out. It was a sound and very simple solution, and the only remaining obstacle lay just 20 yards ahead, behind a heavy sound proof door tentatively labelled "Interview room."

Ryan Callaghan grimaced. He wasn't going to enjoy this.

~

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Somewhere in the Oceanographer Rift Valley, January 4th, 2041...

The scene that greeted Captain Ainsley in *Atlantis's* engineering sections was like something out of a horror movie - shattered power conduits, blackened and destroyed bulkheads from fire, smouldering debris from collapsed composite materials, deck grating that had been torn away under the concussive force of an explosion on decks below and thick smoke and steam that reduced visibility drastically – it was a nightmare. The fire suppression systems had doused whatever inferno that had torn through this corridor, but if this was just what the outer corridors looked like, he could only cringe at the idea of what main engineering looked like.

Teams of engineers and technicians ran down the corridors without pause, most of them wearing uniforms that had been torn to shreds, and with faces that were

unrecognisable beneath blood, ash and grease. One officer among them noticed his Captain and seemed shocked to see anyone wearing clean (and intact) clothes. He sent his team ahead and then stepped aside and saluted. "Captain, Chief Stevens needs to see you in the main engineering. It looks bad, sir."

"At ease, Ensign. How bad is it?"

The officer wiped dirty sweat from his forehead and began to massage an area on his shoulder where his uniform jumpsuit had been torn open, and an ugly gash marred his arm. "We've lost the fusion core, it would have overloaded had the safeties not kicked in... I don't know how long the emergency batter-" –the deck rumbled as an explosion of smoke and debris burst from a bulkhead concealing a reactor conduit not far down the hall. Ainsley didn't move, but the shaken and stunned engineer visibly jumped. "I'm sorry sir, I need to lock down this corridor... If we don't, we could lose equilibrium and then we'd have a reactor breach."

"Don't let me stop you, Ensign. I'll go and see the Chief."

"Right, sir."

The Ensign saluted again and sprinted off down the corridor after his team. Ainsley continued on his way, stepping over the debris of the collapsed ceiling which went straight through to D-deck above him – blown clean open by the force of an exploding ammunition magazine above. It had probably been the detonation of that magazine which had virtually destroyed this corridor, and left so much in ruin. Not much further onward, a heavy blast door that remained as the only intact bulkhead in the entire section blocked his path.

"Warning: this section has suffered substantial structural damage. Access denied," said the computer over the PA.

Overriding the safeties was a simple matter of providing his access code. With a sharp crack and a hiss, the blast doors unlocked and slid apart causing a low rumble in the deck beneath his feet.

As the doors folded back, the Captain's stomach sank. Engineering was totally ruined. The towering fusion core that normally hummed with life as superheated plasma was passed through it was now dark. Gas billowed from countless ruptured plasma conduits and supporting frame work from the inner pressure hull was jammed hard through the deck to the many levels below like they were broken ribs. Crew were still frantically trying to contain fires while others worked to seal ruptures in the bulkheads – And in the centre of it all, barking out orders and working furiously to help where he could, was *Atlantis's* chief engineer, Chief Petty Officer Edward Stevens.

Ainsley stepped on to the main deck to offer any help he could. "Chief! What've we got?!" the Captain had to yell to be heard over the chaos of the engine room, and Stevens turned from his work with another Engineer and shook his head.

"This is not looking good, Captain," he wiped dust and sweat from his face. The air conditioning systems had of course failed, and both the humidity and temperature had risen to almost intolerable levels. On a submarine, the air conditioning and ventilation systems were considered integral parts of the vessel's life support systems. "Fifteen power relays have been totally destroyed..."

"So we've lost main power?"

"Yes sir... But that's not the worst of it."

The Captain winced at the news. Losing main power was enough to turn his boat in to an oversized, submerged paperweight. 242,000 tonnes of submarine did not operate so well on secondary reactors. "How long until you can get some kind of propulsion back online?"

Again, the Chief Engineer – who had been one of the engineers involved in building the boat – had no answers. “I can’t even promise you power for the galley stoves, sir. In fact, we’ve taken so much damage that my *professional* opinion is that we need a dry dock.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” countered the Captain.

“I knew you’d say that, sir,” smiled the Engineer confidently. “I’ve been hanging around brass long enough for the past six years to know when stiff-collared officers want resul-“

Ainsley’s brow went up with shock. Had his engineer just insulted him? Stevens realised his error, and quickly doubled back. “-That is to say, well... I’m not saying you’re stiff-collared, but I do have a solution.”

Ainsley smiled cautiously. He let the cocky engineer’s snide remark slide, as he’d come to expect such things from Stevens; even if he’d never been on the receiving end of said comments. “Nice recovery. You’d better have a solution that’s just as good, Chief.”

Stevens gritted his teeth. “Well, you’re probably not going to like this. And believe me when I tell you that I like it even *less*. The idea of butchering my own submarine.... urm... I mean... *your* submarine is not a thought I don’t like to dwell on. It’s a very dire day when I need to consider performing the mechanical equivalent of triple-bypass coronary surgery on a magneto-hydrodynamic impeller assembly.”

“...That sounds painful.”

“No, not really,” said Stevens dismissively. “Well, not for me anyway. But I imagine the grease monkeys who have to put this boat back together when we return to New Cape Quest will be... well. Let’s just say that you and I had better make the most of our shore leave passes and stay out of their sights...”

Ainsley smiled weakly, and worked his jaw a little. His patience was beginning to run dry, and this was hardly the time for jokes. “Chief... while this is a charming little chat we are having, this is really not the time.”

“Yes sir... sorry sir. Well, the main problem we’re having is that the magnetic induction coils needed to power the main impellers require a *massive* amount of energy. Specifically; they need the primary fusion core.”

“And we don’t have a fusion core right now...”

“No we don’t. And we’re probably not going to until we get back to New Cape Quest. *But*, the intake impellers that bring in the water for the turbines and the fusion reactor’s coolant systems *don’t* need the fusion core. They are powered by the secondary fission reactors – which are still running. It’s possible we could redirect the intake flows directly in to the turbine shafts.”

“Chief...” said Ainsley carefully. “...I don’t understand a word of what you’re telling me. I don’t need the details; just the solution.”

“Yes sir... Well, I guess what I’m trying to say here is that I could retrofit every single MHD intake on this submarine in to a working Hydrojet system.”

“Good enough for me,” replied Ainsley with satisfaction, getting up from his knees. “How long until you can have this done?”

“Well, that depends on if it’s a matter of urgency, sir. I’m going to have every shift working over-time in order to get minimal operations status back from even basic systems. This would need *a lot* of personnel to pull off.”

“Make it your first priority,” said Ainsley. “And get as much power back online as you can. Emergency batteries don’t last forever, and we don’t like working in the dark on the Bridge.”

“Try doing what I’m going to attempt in the dark sir, and you’ll find we’re in complete agreement.”

~

Unknown location, somewhere in the mid-North Atlantic Ocean. January 5th, 2041...

His internal body clock protested in alarm. It must have been about 3am. The pain in Callaghan’s leg had worsened after the interrogation the day before, and the headache that had (for a time) become bearable was once again the same magnitude as a bad Vodka hangover.

The interrogation was not the most brutal form he’d ever seen. It was uncomfortable to be sure, and he knew they’d try it again, and probably introduce new and more ‘diverse’ methods of eliciting information. To a certain degree, the pain had been worth it; his brief escort to the interrogation cell was very informative about the layout of the base, and now Callaghan was fairly certain they had a way out. It was reassuring to know that wherever they were – it wasn’t Fort Knox. Time however, was not being their friend.

Madeline Hayes was sitting against the opposite wall of the cell, sound asleep. How she managed to sleep at all was a wonder for him. Despite her injuries, she had spent most of her time simply shuffling back and forth across the cell. She’d been doing it so often that Callaghan swore she must have worn the soles of her boots down to the sock.

Leaning back, he sighed and then frowned as he heard the sound of voices at the far end of the detention cell. Getting up and silently moving to the corner of the cell, he tried to listen in. It was a change of shift, and the two guards were exchanging some casual words. “...apparently the fighter jocks hit one of the big ones yesterday. Looks like it won’t be going anywhere.” The voice was followed by a low chuckle.

“Glory hounds. They get the good work, and we’re stuck here babysitting.”

“Typical, isn’t it? Oh well. Best not complain. I’d rather those fighter jockeys deal with them before we have to stare down a company of UEO Marines. I just wish they’d get this over with.”

“The sooner the better. Once the Nikes get involved with the UEO, we can go home.”

The other guard was going to reply, and Callaghan knew something was wrong. A ‘Nike’ was obviously a slang term for Nycarians, and there was a lot more here than met the eye. Callaghan shifted from his awkward stance against the bars of the cell, but his foot hit something heavy, and the chamber pot went clattering across the cell floor noisily.

Immediately, the 2 guards ran to the cell and shoved their weapons through the bars. One of the muzzles hit Callaghan in the chest and pushed him back hard against the floor. His military training told him that, on the guard’s part, putting a weapon through cell bars was not a good move, but when there was only 1 of him and 2 of them, he didn’t want to try anything potentially stupid.

“What’s going on?” asked the guard harshly

Judging by the man’s ‘creative’ facial tattoos and Neanderthal-neck, Callaghan could tell that this man was merely a thug with literally way too much power in his hands. Cautiously eyeing the rifle the man held, Callaghan couldn’t resist a sly comment as he shrugged and stepped back and picked up the empty pot.

Thankfully, the thing hadn't been used, simply because neither he nor Hayes had been fed anything since they arrived.

"Nothing at all. Well... Nothing that I think you'd be too interested in. I was just hoping you could empty this for me? I mean... That is what you're here for, right?"

The other Guard half-snorted and shook his head. The first one stepped back in. "Oh, you think you're funny, do you wise guy? I think someone needs to be taught some manners..."

Callaghan hid his look of discomfort as the man levelled his rifle, but the other man stepped in and gently pushed the muzzle down. Callaghan was not at all surprised. "Not now, John. Captain wants these two alive. Besides, it's late and I want some shut-eye before I start cleaning up grey matter from the floor."

Callaghan smiled and shrugged as the first guard pointed a warning finger at him. "...I'll be watching you."

"Well I'm flattered and all," he said wryly, casting an eye over Hayes in the corner. "...But she's much easier to look at, don't you agree? Maybe you've been down here all by yourself just a bit too long..."

The brutish guard snarled, but the slight chuckle from his companion made him stay his hand. Without further word, the guards stepped away

Callaghan watched them depart, and didn't notice Hayes – who had woken from the noise - staring at him. "Trouble?" she whispered.

He turned slightly, realising this and suddenly regretted what he'd said. "It sounds like it. I don't know what's going on around here, but I get the impression our hosts are more than who they appear to be. How're those ribs of yours holding out?"

"...They're ok," she said hesitantly. Callaghan could see in her eyes that she was lying. She was pained by it, and she wasn't doing anyone any favours by trying to hide it.

"...Madeline..." he said warningly.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "I don't need any he-"

-without much in the way of warning, Hayes wheezed and coughed painfully. The scowl on her features completely destroyed any composure that she may have had, and Ryan Callaghan could only shake his head as he shuffled over to her.

Hayes quickly moved a hand away from her mouth and hid it behind her. Callaghan didn't see the red stain on her palm. "Let me have a look, Madeline."

"I'm sure you'd like that, wouldn't you?" she teased almost too seriously, giving him a slightly scornful look.

He didn't let up, and regarded her coldly. "Madeline, stop arguing the point. You need help. And you know it."

Still wheezing slightly, she turned around slowly and let Callaghan inspect the bandaging he'd applied earlier. He winced the moment he saw it... the bruising was incredibly bad, and he doubted there was much he could do for it. The bones were still set the way he'd placed them, but the damage was worse than he'd originally thought. "We need to get you out of here," he said quietly.

"How bad?"

"...Bad."

"What do you think is going on with all of this mess?" she asked him, trying to change the subject as quickly as she could.

Callaghan did not look up from his grim work. “Well, not to get started on the conspiracy theories, but I think that these people are trying to stir up trouble between the UEO and whoever these “Nycarians” are.”

Hayes winced as Callaghan re-tightened the bandage that bound her and turned her tired gaze to cell block outside. “You think they are mercenaries?”

“I think so... I’m not sure who they are working for, though. My first instinct would be to say Deon International, but he lost out big time when the DSX contracts went to Lockheed... He’s probably still trying to get that company off the ground. I’d be surprised if it was him.”

If this plot did involve stirring up ‘trouble’ within the UEO, then both officers knew only too well that these people – whoever they were – would need massive financial support and substantial political ties to keep it secret. Deon International – formerly the world’s largest MNC – had been known to harbour serious economic ills towards the UEO and was even implicated in an assassination attempt on the UEO Secretary General, Thomas McGath in 2032. The company had been financially run in to the ground just a few years later when the UEO awarded the lucrative DSX contracts to Lockheed Martin and over a dozen other major contractors throughout North America and Europe. Deon had walked away from the table with nothing to chew on but its own problems, and hadn’t really recovered since.

“Thank you,” said Hayes suddenly.

Callaghan looked at her blankly, not sure of what she referred to. “For what?”

“You could have tried to escape when they interrogated you, you know. You could have left me here.”

He shook his head. “While I doubt I would have got very far with this leg of mine, I wouldn’t leave you here. We don’t leave people behind, Madeline.”

“Well, in any case, I want you to know it means something to me,” she replied genuinely.

Callaghan just smiled. “You’re welcome.”

~

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Somewhere in the Oceanographer Rift Valley, January 5th, 2041...

Mark Ainsley replaced the wall panel outside main engineering and smiled - It might just work. For the past 10 hours, his crew had worked without rest to get the *Atlantis* back on her feet. Chief Stevens was nearing completion on his makeshift engine solution, and most of the power grids had been reset across the main decks. Of course, priority of repairs had gone only in to systems which were needed to get the ship moving again. Getting up, he grabbed a dirtied rag on the submarine’s deck and began wiping insulating bio-gel from his hands. The genetically engineered neural-gel that ran through the fibre-optic wiring and power systems of the *Atlantis* was not the easiest substance in the world to work with, and often haemorrhaged out of its insulating, pressurized conduits like a severed artery. But it was a lot cleaner than grease, and made the work a lot easier to cope with.

He looked at Commander Banick next to him and gave an encouraging smile. “Well, that makes fifty six by my count.”

“The last one,” summarised Banick with an exhausted sigh. The Commander had long since tossed aside his uniform jacket in favour of his white turtleneck and begun using the jumpsuit as a rag. The steadily rising temperature had prompted that

decision, and Ainsley quietly wondered how long it would be until his Chief Engineer managed to get some form of main power back online for the environmental systems. The Captain pulled out his PAL and shrugged. "Ainsley to engineering; the Commander and I are done here. How are things down there?"

...On the control deck of the Engine Room, Ed Stevens quickly inspected a chaotic mass of goo-covered fibre-optic cables that ran out of a disassembled control node and bit his lip. Rewiring a 490-meter-long submarine like the Atlantis was not an exact science. "*This will be a miracle if it works*" ...he thought silently.

"Stevens here, sir," he reported back through his own PAL. "Everything looks... well, it looked a *lot* nicer before I started playing Frankenstein. But we're ready to give it a shot."

Ainsley and Banick walked in to the engine room just as Stevens was making his final preparations. "On your order, sir," said the Engineer, noting Ainsley's entrance to the control deck.

The Captain looked up at the *Atlantis's* towering fusion core with apprehension. It was dark, still, and would remain so for quite some time. "Alight. Bring primary power back online, Chief. We'll do it one system at a time."

"Yes, sir." Stevens looked up at a crewman who was working in the main control room on the deck above them. He wouldn't have heard them through the thick glass pane in front of him and all the activity in the room, but a simple thumbs-up was all the Chief Engineer needed to get his message across.

Stevens then walked over to a large schematic table and began checking technical readouts before pulling out his PAL. "Commander Canebride, are you still with me?"

Natalie Canebride was on the bridge overseeing operations from there. Her reply was prompt. "I'm still here, Chief. Are we ready to bring the main systems online?"

"The Captain just asked me the same thing. Open up the controls for the Nuclear reactors and I'll handle the rest from down here."

"Ok. Give us a minute. Stand by."

Stevens worked with the console before several red indicator lights turned green, and a low thrum surged through the deck plates. Ainsley looked down at his feet nervously, and exchanged a nervous look with Banick.

"Main power... online," said Stevens as checked over the status displays.

The PA cracked noisily. "*Chief?*"

Stevens looked up at the control center above, and a crewman who was looking down at him from a microphone on the desk in front of him. He pulled out his PAL again. "Yeah?"

"*Power is coming back up across most primary systems, sir. We've got full environmental control across all decks. Command systems are coming back up now.*"

Ainsley breathed a sigh of relief at this. They were not out of the woods yet, but this was a start. "Good work, Ed," he said appreciatively to the Engineer. "Commander Banick and I will be on the Bridge. Keep us posted on what happens down here."

"Yes, sir."

...Lieutenant Commander Canebride's hands flew over the operations console like those of a skilled pianist. She didn't even blink as the various technical readouts

flashed before her one after the other. There wasn't a single crewman on the *Atlantis* who was not occupied with something at that moment. Canebride herself had worked for 12 hours straight to get the main systems back online, and was only now beginning to make any form of progress. "Canebride to Stevens," she said in to her PAL. "I've got green across the board up here. Power levels are at 75 percent and climbing. Do you want me to release reactor control to you?"

"Thanks, Commander."

"Alright, hang on."

Captain Ainsley and Commander Banick walked through the Bridge's clam shell doors just in time to see the red emergency lamps flicker away to be replaced by the warming glow of the standard lights coming back to full strength. The Captain nodded in approval at this as he took his seat at the Conn and began running through his checklists. Atlantis was slowly recovering, and new, more troubling matters were beginning to settle in the recesses of his mind. Time was quickly running out for his missing officers, and it was not a luxury they had in surplus supply.

Whoever these Nycarians were, and whoever it was that attacked the *Atlantis*, were involved in something that Ainsley – let alone the UEO – weren't even aware of. A quiet little war was being waged in the North Atlantic, and it had eluded even the highest echelons of UEO Naval Intelligence.

"Captain," reported Canebride. "We're ready to bring the main systems back online."

Ainsley noticed the tired eyes of his Bridge crew looking at him expectantly. It had been a very long day, and they were clearly very eager to put the mess behind them. "By the numbers."

"Yes, sir."

Both Ainsley and Banick sat silently as Canebride ran up every station on the bridge. One by one, the crew gave their reports and she continued bringing the main systems to idle. First weapons, then sensors, then communications... As if accentuating the end of a very long concerto, she typed the last commands in to the operations prompts and then stopped; looking up at Ainsley with nothing more than a blank stare. She'd done everything she could, and the rest was up to the *Atlantis* herself – the living, breathing core of the ship's computer as it ran endless and hopelessly complex mathematical calculations and start up programs. The main status monitors at the front of the bridge and above the command deck went dark when she finished, displaying only the slowly rotating delta of the ship's crest. The seconds continued to go past in silence as the bridge crew waited until finally, the displays flicked over to their basic system readouts. Canebride looked down at the Ops console again and then smiled... "All systems are online."

The bridge staff cheered and applauded. Ainsley could hardly blame them for being pleased with themselves. It had been a very long day, and every problem they had faced had led to another without end. She might not have been in the same state of splendour as she had been just a day before, but Atlantis was back on her feet... and she wanted blood. Exchanging a quiet smile with his first officer, Captain Ainsley slapped the arm rest of his command chair and got straight back to business. Flicking the intercom on his control panel, he put an open comm. straight through to Edward Stevens in Engineering.

"Bridge to Engineering. Chief, from where I am right now, I think it's safe to assume I can convey the crew's congratulations."

"Thank you sir," replied the Engineer. "It's always a pleasure to make a nuisance of myself."

“Well done, Ed. Bridge; out.”

Ainsley killed the intercom and immediately looked to Commander Banick who was lazily reclining back in his own seat. “Sound-off, Commander Banick. Let’s see what she’s got.”

“Yes, sir! Alright people. You heard the Captain – report in.”

“Helm, Go.”

“Tactical. Go. Still ironing out a few bugs in fire control, but we’re ready for a fight, sir.”

“Just as long as we don’t need to start using Nukes, tactical, then I’ll take whatever you’ve got,” replied Ainsley with a wry smile. “Science?”

“We’re good, sir. Lost a little in the WSKRS department, but I should be able to get it back from the tactical array.”

“Good. Engineering?”

“Well, I’m surprised sir,” reported a junior Lieutenant from Operations. “I wasn’t sure if the Chief’s modifications would work... but we’ve got green over the board, although power levels are substantially lower like we expected. We should be good for about 150 knots.”

With a curt nod of approval, Ainsley listened to the last of the reports before Commander Banick finished off. “All stations report ready, sir.”

“Outstanding. Helm... Bring engines up, steady as she goes, ahead one quarter. Get us out of this trench.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Tactical? I want full Combat Patrols around the clock. If you detect even a school of fish where it shouldn’t be, I want you to follow it up with a firing solution... Let’s find our officers.”

~

IV

DECEIT

UEO Atlantis. DSV 8100. Oceanographer Rift Valley, 800 Kilometres east of the Corner seamounts. January 6th, 2041...

Chief Stevens walked on to the Bridge of the *Atlantis* for the first time in a week with ginger, cautious step. He rarely hung around the Bridge simply because his duties did not require it, and he found the place to be far too sterile anyway. He liked tinkering with things, and the Bridge was not the best place to do so. Going up the small flight of stairs to the command deck, Captain Ainsley and Commander Banick were standing over the navigation globe and didn't initially notice his approach. It was only when Banick looked up that Ainsley turned with mild surprise. The Captain ran a relaxed ship in terms of etiquette and didn't bother saluting. Ainsley was not a man to hold on ceremony unless it was a particularly formal occasion. For this reason, he was about the most approachable person on the ship even for the enlisted crew. Simple, quiet respect was all that the Captain asked. "Chief, this is a surprise. What brings you up here?"

Stevens smiled and held out a PDA. "I've been working more on our engine problems, sir."

Ainsley silently scanned his eyes over the PDA as Stevens looked around the Bridge. "What is this, Chief?" asked Ainsley in confusion. "It looks like a requisition list, not a solution to a problem."

"It is a requisition list, sir. That's the list I'll need cleared in order to get this to work."

"...This is quite a list, Chief. You want to run this idea by me first?"

"Yes sir, sorry," apologised the Engineer quickly. "When those Barras buried a dozen torpedoes in to our ass, we lost engines one and three."

"...Yes, and?"

"Well, the turbines themselves have been completely destroyed, and I doubt I can do anything for it outside of a drydock. But the intakes themselves are still intact, so if I were to redirect a few things through to the coolant systems, I *may* be able to get the fusion reactor operational."

Ainsley looked up and worked his jaw. "You've got my attention."

"Well, between the Fusion core and the fission reactors, we should be able to get back *close* to full power. I could give you ten percent more to the engines, and most of the secondary systems would be back online with a few hours."

Banick nodded approvingly of the plan. Stevens was a resourceful man, despite the fact he kept these talents quiet, and knew only too well how to make the most of a bad situation; it was the single reason he'd gotten this high-profile post ahead of any junior officer from the Academy. "I like it," offered Banick quietly.

"I agree," confirmed Ainsley. "You've got whatever you need, Chief. You do this, and I'll put you up for promotion."

The Engineer recoiled. "Me? An Officer?" he groaned and took the PDA from the Captain. "Forget I mentioned a thing. I could do without the rod up my-... I mean... *responsibility*..."

Ainsley didn't have a chance to rebut the snide statement before a shrill beep came from Natalie Canebride's station at Operations, and she gave her report without hesitation. "Sir, we've got something."

Ainsley and Banick were out of their seats before anyone even noticed they had left the command deck, and were soon standing over the shoulder of the Sonar chief as Canebride moved quickly to join them from her own station across the deck. "It looks like we've found the launch, Captain," said the Sonar chief. "It's very quiet down there, and I can't detect much with these sensors... It's like trying to crack a peanut with a sledgehammer." The officer adjusted several controls and brought up the virtual-view of the WSKR Satellite named "Junior" up on screen. The names of the three small satellites – Loner, Junior and Mother – were a carry over from the *seaQuest* and now merely a way of distinguishing between the satellites.

The main bridge display resolved in to the dark, battered silhouette of the sled-like sea launch – a long, cigar shaped hull mounted on simple ski-frames bearing the golden crest of the United Earth Oceans Organization. It's once sleek-hull was now just a twisted, buckled ruin. Despite its misshapen form, the pressure hull still appeared intact.

Ainsley breathed a sigh and looked at the image for a few moments longer. "The fact that it's in one piece is good enough for me. Commander Canebride?"

"Sir?"

"Prep the HR probe. Let's have a look at what's down there."

Hyper-Reality Probe

Depth: 15,000 Feet.

External Pressure: 6,500 Pounds per square inch.

Temperature: 2 Degrees Celsius.

...The Atlantis's Hyper Reality probe, or HR probe for short, was one of the most technologically complex pieces of equipment on the entire submarine. Sitting at the controls on the bridge for the small, unmanned probe, Natalie Canebride adjusted her head set and gloves before sitting back and taking a deep breath. Operating the HR probe was not an easy task, and required someone with sound mental discipline and even endorsement on the craft. The Computer's neural-feedback link was incredibly immersive, and Canebride was about the only person on the Atlantis who was actually qualified to operate the probe. It was a 2-way experience, while Canebride could control the probe through the input sensor-covered gloves and pedals, the probe also sent back every detail of the water around it directly to her brain, often making it feel like swimming in the deep, cold and dark waters of the North Atlantic completely alone. The safety of using such a device was occasionally brought in to question by various people in the UEO Medical corps, but to date, it had not caused any problems, and still remained the single most effective way of getting first hand information from the most inaccessible location.

The mere thought of it gave Commander Banick and Captain Ainsley the creeps as they watched her with awe-inspired interest. Looking at the small screen on the console in front of Canebride (Something she was completely oblivious to), they followed the movement of the heavily-modified WSKRS probe over the shuttle's hull while Canebride skilfully manoeuvred the probe's four arm-like limbs with her fingertips. "The shuttle's pressure hull is intact," said Canebride quietly in her semi-conscious state of mind. "The cabin on this side of the hull is still sealed. I'll move it around to the port side for a closer look..."

Ainsley nodded slowly as he continued following the Probe's movement. Banick grimaced as he looked over the wreckage, and the blasted, tortured scars that marred the launch's hull. The small probe glided over the surface of the shuttle with mere inches to spare as the floodlights mounted on the WSKRS 'ball-head' illuminated the long, metallic black hull with an eerie blue light. Three miles down; there was no light other than what was cast by the probe and the DSV that was station keeping not far above the crashed shuttle. It was the perfect kind of darkness.

Canebride spoke again as she guided the probe down on to the sea bed. "HR sensors still aren't getting anything from the interior..."

Ainsley narrowed his gaze as something in the image on the screen caught his eye - something that wasn't supposed to be there. "There," he said, pointing to the unknown 'object' on the launch's hull. "Put some light on that and bring us closer for a better look. I'm hoping that's not what I think it is..."

Once more, the HR sled moved in to position and Ainsley closed his eyes after confirming what he didn't want to see - an open wound of hull damage caused only by one thing: sub fighter cannon fire.

"Thank you Commander," he said sombrely. "We're done. Bring the probe back and we'll send out a DSRV for recovery operations."

Canebride's reply, while detached, was still hesitant and even audibly distressed. "...Yes sir."

Ainsley hurriedly moved away from the station on his way back to the command deck. He was trying hard to keep himself distant from the two officers who were missing, and Banick was quickly following. "Sir, you seem distracted," commented the XO quietly, trying not to rouse attention from the other bridge staff. "...What's wrong?"

"That shuttle was attacked, Commander. Two of our officers are missing. And whoever attacked it may as well have just declared war on the UEO. What do you *think* is wrong?"

Banick bit his tongue. He knew, of course, what was troubling the Captain, and shouldn't have asked the obvious question. "I apologise, sir. I shouldn't have asked. We'll find who did this, you have my word."

"I don't doubt it, Commander," affirmed Ainsley, sitting back down.

"You're thinking Nycarians?" asked Banick.

"Possibly," replied Ainsley hesitantly. "But whoever they are, these 'Nycarians' didn't seem to be too interested in shooting when we threatened to respond in kind."

Banick pulled his lips in to a tight, thin line. He didn't like where the answers were pointing, and knew the Captain was trying to rationalize other alternatives to avoid a war. "I don't want to be a pessimist, sir. But they *did* say they'd intercepted one of ours, and we still have no idea who it was that attacked us. Just because they backed down when they ran in to us doesn't mean they aren't responsible. Anyone who knows this ship knows that taking *Atlantis* on in a head-on fight would be messy..."

Ainsley's jaw tightened as he clenched his teeth. Someone did not want the UEO here, and Banick had only repeated what his mind was already screaming at him. "Taken under advisement, Commander, and duly noted. But UEO Command ordered me to avoid a war at all costs, and I fully intend to follow those orders. We don't need to inflame an already sensitive situation by throwing accusations and

torpedoes at someone we don't even know. But... just the same the situation *does* call for investigation.”

“Yes sir. Shall I send out a general dispatch to the *Enterprise* and her Battlegroup?”

“Yes. Use my authorization, and then resume a course in to the Oceanographer DMZ.”

“Consider it done...”

Half a dozen SF-37/E Raptors skimmed along the ocean floor as the sea speeder behind them moved in to lock on to the downed UEO launch. Commander Gabriel Hitchcock increased his throttle speed to 90 knots and then brought the subfighter back around to fall in to the sea speeder's rear quarter “All Rapier groups; fall in for escort. Open up active sensors and keep your eyes peeled. If something breaks the perimeter; kill it. Weapons are free.”

The other pilots ahead of him called in their affirmatives and Hitchcock watched as the Raptors snap rolled away and headed to form a standard ‘delta’ formation behind his own fighter, putting him at the head of a wide arrow.

Watching the displays in the dimly-lit cockpit, Hitchcock toggled his hypersonic array to a broader band and simultaneously rolled his fighter around to the right to follow the speeder ahead. The UEO's S-35 Sea Speeder II was the latest in a long line of such craft which could fill functions ranging from salvage through to transport of Marine Assault teams. Its unique laser docking collar at the nose airlock meant it could achieve a soft-dock on any airlock ever made, or if all else failed, burn right through and make its own entrance. The open radio channel to the speeder ahead was occasionally filled by chatter of various sorts ranging from bearings to casual banter between pilots. As a whole, none of it was offensive, and the crew were being quite professional about their grim task – undoubtedly aware of the wary ears of their Wing Commander behind them.

“Speeder eighty-one-hundred dash-five; this is Rapier leader. We're holding wing. Proceed with the mission. We will cover you.”

The leading sub made another turn down the twisting valley towards the downed launch. “Rapier 1, this is dash-five; wilco - Heading to the site now.”

‘Business as usual’ for fighter pilots meant that there was very little that could rattle their cages. It was a hazardous line of work, and every pilot within the Rapiers always got in to the cockpit seat half expecting not to return. The sobering thoughts came when presented with the prospect of recovering the remains of downed comrades. Today was no exception, and there was an awkward tension because of it.

To a great extent, the mission at the end of 2040 to find the remains of the celebrated *seaQuest* DSV was just as demoralizing. While Hitchcock did not know Commanders Callaghan or Hayes very well, he respected them amongst the *Atlantis*'s senior staff enough to know that their loss would be felt heavily by the crew. Losing an officer was considered bad, but losing two of the flagship's command staff was nothing short of a disaster.

For once, Hitchcock didn't know where he or his pilots were. These waters were dangerous, and whoever the predators were, they were dangerous, and had proven twice that they were not to be trifled with lightly. For the *Atlantis* and the VF-107 Rapiers – the gloves were off. They would answer fire... with fire.

~

...Aboard the Speeder's cabin just behind the forward airlock, UEO Marine Major Devlin Cortez's heavy EVA suit pressurized with a snap hiss as he secured the reinforced glove made of carbon Nanotubes to the sleeve of the suit. Tapping a control on his wrist where a heavy-duty PDA was mounted, he looked at the 3 other marines behind him. "Radio check," he said loudly.

The announcement was enough to make the other troopers wince painfully and instinctively move their gloved hands to their helmets. That alone was enough to verify that everything was working just fine, and he smiled.

"Yeah, clear... and very loud, sir," confirmed one of the Marines. "Don't need to shout."

"Just keeping you ladies on your toes. Check each others suits for pressure integrity. I don't want to be flushing you out of them with a garden hose."

The Marines chuckled at that as they went about the business of making sure their suits were sealed tight. A sudden loss of suit integrity at this depth would be fatal in the messiest way imaginable. How they found such gags amusing was a mystery to almost every non-marine crew member aboard the *Atlantis*. "That would be about right. The navy gives us a state-of-the-art, 3-million-a-piece item of indestructible clothing, only to have it implode on us when we use it."

One of the other Marines chuckled again, and couldn't resist adding his own remarks. "Always remember, girls: *Your equipment was made by the lowest bidder.*"

"As long as it wasn't made by Deon, I'll wear anything, Baby. This thing is sexy... Have you seen the heads up display on this sucker?"

Cortez went over his XO's suit carefully, checking each rim and seal by giving it a firm twist, and then a tug to make sure it wasn't going anywhere. They were surprisingly light, given their bulky form, and were quite easy to move in. "Last I heard, NASA was talking to the Navy about getting these things. They want them for the *Titan* mission - something about wanting a suit that can take micro meteorite impacts."

"-Major, this is Lieutenant Stacks. You all set down there?"

The sudden interruption from the speeder's intercom made Cortez look up curiously. "Yes, Lieutenant. Just give us the word and we'll be good to go."

"We're about to set down next to the launch. We don't want to rupture her pressure hull any further, so you're going to have to take a walk."

"Fun," said Cortez flatly. "How close will you land us?"

"As close as possible. Probably about 50 yards."

"That's not close, Lieutenant," chastised Cortez. "That's a freakin' mile when you're walking 15,000 feet below any kind of daylight."

"Any closer, Major, and you'll be walking through a cloud of sediment when I set this thing down."

"Point taken," said Cortez as he activated his suit's exoskeleton power unit. Suddenly the limbs of his suit thrummed slightly as the actuator servos powered up. Walking over to an equipment rack, he locked his forearm down on to a large rail rifle and loaded a heavy 10-millimeter magazine. The gun probably weighed about 60 kilograms, but with the suit's powered skeleton, it seemed to weigh no more than a standard-issue M31 rifle.

"You actually think you'll need that, Major?" asked one of the Marines in confused shock. "I'm not sure if I can think of any fish that is large enough to warrant the use of a 10 millimetre chain gun, sir."

“It’s not the wildlife I’m worried about, Sergeant. It’s what could be on that launch that concerns me.”

“Right... Well... Just don’t point it at me.”

“Would I do that?” asked Cortez with a smirk, lifting up his gun-arm and rotating it slightly.

“Standby Major, I’m going to set you down... Hold tight.”

Cortez gripped a railing above his head as the speeder prepared to set down. He peered out the porthole beside him at the darkness of the sea beyond, and watched as the seafloor became visible under the glow of the submarine’s flood lamps. With a solid thud beneath his feet, he watched as a billowing cloud of silt floated up from the seafloor as the speeder hit the bottom. He nodded to the marines, let go of the railing above him and shuffled towards the airlock. “Gentlemen, let’s rock the house.”

~

...Captain Ainsley paced back and forth over the command deck like a caged animal. The situation he was dealing with was intolerable. At the navigation table, Commander Banick killed time by plotting various courses, currents and charts for reasons unknown. At Operations, Lieutenant Commander Canebride was running a full recalibration of the ship’s sensor grid. Looking around the bridge, he failed to see a single officer who was not occupying themselves with some kind of task or duty. Ainsley – the ship’s Captain – felt useless.

His crew were the best in the fleet. Of that there could be no doubt. He’d said it many times before, and would probably continue to do so. While some of them were inexperienced, there was not a man or woman aboard who did not complete their duties with the utmost of dedication. Never did Ainsley need to sign a disciplinary report, and constantly was he aware of recommendations from department heads abroad for promotions, citations and notices of exemplary behaviour of their subordinates.

From Operations, a junior grade Lieutenant faced the pondering Captain nervously. “Sir, the recovery team is back aboard,” he reported quickly. “They report that they found no bodies inside the launch and that the main cabin itself was still sealed.”

Both Banick and Ainsley’s brows flared with surprise. “Sealed?”

“Yes sir. But the damage associated with the hull breach is not consistent with weapons fire, and was likely caused by a laser docking collar.”

“You mean to say someone found the launch before us?”

“Yes sir,” said the Lieutenant without further elaboration. He knew no more than anyone else on the bridge.

“Have they reached any other conclusions?”

“No sir,” said the Lieutenant after a moment’s pause as the report continued to come in. “Chief Stevens has assigned a few of his techs to have a look at it, but he says it will be a while before they can get anything which might tell us who did this.”

“Anything else?”

“No sir, that’s all.”

Ainsley nodded, and then did an about-face and walked towards the door without another word. “Commander Banick, you have the bridge.”

Banick raised an eyebrow as his Captain left the bridge. “Sir?”

“I’m going to get some answers we should have had a long time ago, Commander. I’ll be in my quarters.”

~

Stepping through the door of his stateroom, Ainsley pushed it shut behind him and immediately walked to his desk, and the computer terminal that sat upon it. Logging on, he rapidly brought up a direct video link to UEO Atlantic Command and sat down. The flagship of the fleet always had its advantages - normally, most commanders would need to go through several channels to reach the regional fleet commander, but all Ainsley had to do was push a button and it would take him straight to the top. It was a privilege best not abused, but it was also extremely useful.

After a few moments, the spinning image of the UEO crest (and the “connecting to server” message that came with it) disappeared and was replaced by the stern face of Fleet Admiral Travis Sinclair. “Captain Ainsley... We haven’t received a report from you in some time. What is going on out there?”

Ainsley leant forward and shook his head. “Admiral, we may have a problem. We’ve recovered our launch, but I believe we could be looking at something a lot bigger than a pirate dispute.”

Sinclair’s face was stern as always, but it betrayed a slight look of intrigue. “What do you mean, Captain? The Atlantic is a DMZ. The NSC has been watching it for decades.”

“*Atlantis* was attacked, sir. We’ve taken substantial damage. This is the first opportunity I’ve had to file a report with anyone in Command. We’ve been quite... busy.”

Sinclair suddenly seemed off balance, caught aback by what Ainsley had just said. “What? Attacked? By *who!*? How bad is your situation?”

“The damage is largely cosmetic sir but it put us out of action for some time. My engineers have repaired the primary systems and brought secondary power online... but we’ve lost our fusion core. Things are going to be sluggish around here until we get more permanent repairs. We lost... a lot of good people though, sir. I will forward the casualty list to fleet command as soon as I can.”

Sinclair nodded solemnly. “I understand Captain... Is the *Atlantis* still combat-effective?”

“She’s still the most ‘combat effective’ ship in the entire North Atlantic, sir. It’s going to take a lot more than that to put us out.”

“Alright. In light of this, I’m authorizing a full combat deployment. I can have the carriers *Trident* and *Enterprise* at your location within 12 hours.”

“While I appreciate the offer sir,” countered Ainsley, “I’m not sure a carrier battlegroup will help. Our biggest problem out here is lack of information on what is going on. What I *need* is all the intelligence data the UEO or the NSC may have on mercenary, smuggler and pirate activity in the North Atlantic. *Atlantis* can handle whatever it is out here. We just need to know what “*it*” is.”

Sinclair looked sceptical, and glanced off-screen briefly to someone who was out of view. “Captain, I can’t just go and ask that MI6 hand over all its intelligence data on NSC military operations. There is no way I can arrange that...”

Ainsley rolled his eyes. He expected red tape, but this was something new. “Well then Admiral, I suggest you remind Admiral Shraeder at NSIS that there is a war going on under her nose and unless she wants to see a lot of people get killed on her watch... then cooperation would be in their best interests. I appreciate how far you and everyone else at Atlantic command are willing to go for us out here, but “red tape” from our allies is not something I expected.”

“That’s a tall order, Captain – even for you. It could take some doing.”

“Well, being blunt sir, I’d recommend we do whatever it takes to get this situation under control. I don’t think it matters if we owe the NSC a favour or two after this is over unless you want another war to contend with.”

“Let’s not be melodramatic, Captain,” scolded Sinclair. “We don’t even know *who* attacked you for sure. Or at least not yet, and until we do, I’d advise caution. *Negotiate...* if at all possible.”

Ainsley smiled at the Admiral. “Do “*negotiations*” involve a wing of subfighters and a magazine of torpedoes, sir?”

“...I’ll pretend you didn’t ask the question, Captain Ainsley. Do *anything* you need to... within reason. I’ll forward your request for information to Admiral Shraeder. Good luck.”

“Yes sir,” said Ainsley, reaching for the “escape” key on his keyboard. “I’ll keep it in mind. *Atlantis*; out.”

~

Unknown location, somewhere in the mid-North Atlantic Ocean. January 6th, 2041...

Callaghan pounded the bars of the cell with his fist and yelled as loud as he could. Behind him, Commander Hayes’ motionless body lay behind the small bench with her arm stretched out at an odd angle. “We need help over here! Someone, - come quick!”

From the far end of the detention hall, one of the guards looked up, confused, and then began walking quickly towards the cell, his hand visibly tense on the grip of his rifle. Callaghan looked behind again at Hayes and then back to the approaching guard. “She needs help!”

The guard increased his pace to a quick jog and with the other guard not far behind, looked at Callaghan and yelled. “Get back from the door!”

Obediently, Callaghan stepped aside as the guard pulled out his key card and swiped it through the unseen access terminal next to the cell. With a clank, the door opened and the guard ran to the corner as his companion stood at the door and levelled his rifle towards the motionless Hayes. That was his first mistake.

The first guard was leaning over Hayes and Callaghan cautiously leant up against the bars and with his hand, grabbed the now-open door.

As the first guard lay down his rifle and leaned over Hayes to grab her wrist, (Second mistake) her knee suddenly flew in to the man’s stomach and sent him reeling back. At first, the second guard did not know what to do as his companion blocked his line of fire. Callaghan seized his chance and slammed the heavy iron door in to the door guard’s head. He fell to the floor like a sack of rocks and with a wry smile, Callaghan moved to assist Hayes. As the first Guard slowly got up and recovered from the unexpected blow from the ‘dying’ prisoner, Callaghan brought his fist down in to the man’s temple before following through with a brutal left uppercut. This guard also fell to the floor with a thud and without so much as a moan and Callaghan shook his fist for a moment before offering an outstretched hand to Hayes. “Too easy,” he said with a smile. “Had I known this would be so simple, we would have done it days ago.”

Hayes nodded as she picked up the first guard’s rifle and then looked at Callaghan’s still-bandaged leg. “How is it?” she asked with concern. He looked at it

as he checked the magazine on the other rifle and then shrugged. “Well, I’m walking on it. So I’ll manage. Let’s get these two gagged and tied up and move.”

Hayes nodded and began searching the man who was now slouched in the corner and found his hand cuffs. But there was something else. In his pocket were a set of identification tags. Hayes’ stomach went cold when she read what they said. “Ryan...”

Callaghan looked up from his work of incapacitating the other guard. “What’s wrong?”

“Check his pocket. This guy is no mercenary.”

Frowning, Callaghan began searching the guard’s pockets. Inside his left trouser leg, he found what he was looking for and pulled out an identical set of ID tags. Reading it, he had the same feeling of shock which Hayes still had in her gut. “These men are Macronesian...”

Hayes shook her head as she examined the tags. “What the hell are the Macs doing in the North Atlantic?”

“I’ve got more than a few ideas. Remember how they were talking about some mob calling themselves “Nycarians”?”

Hayes nodded as she finished gagging her prisoner. “You think the Macs want to push us in to a war with them?”

Callaghan nodded. “Possibly... whoever the “Nycarians” are that is. I just find it odd that they made such a big deal over the subject and kept asking what the UEO wanted out here.”

Before long, they had the two guards tied up and on opposite sides of the small cell. Callaghan motioned for Hayes to follow and they set out down the long hall.

“Ok, so we’ve got out of the detention center. Now what?” asked Hayes with a whisper. Callaghan didn’t turn his attention from the corridor ahead as he pondered the question... “This place was built during the Third World War,” he said, pointing to the faded and out-of-date military crest of the NSC on the wall. “If I’m right, there should be maintenance ducts running through the roof. They built them to keep full access to the base in the event of major flooding of the main corridors.”

Continuing down, voices could be heard from not far down the hall. Taking the next right, Callaghan and Hayes levelled their rifles and stuck to the wall. A few moments later, two more soldiers walked by and headed for the detention block.

Callaghan shook his head. If they found the other guards, getting out of the facility would be harder than they had thought.

Pointing to a small utility hatch in the roof just a bit further down the way, Callaghan looked at Hayes. “We should be able to get in to the tunnels through there.”

Quickly, Callaghan and Hayes worked to get the small door open. With 30 years of such little maintenance to keep it in good shape, getting the door open was a challenge. It took considerable pressure from Callaghan (who was not exactly a scrawny man) to pry it open, and it was so much of a drama that Callaghan wondered if climbing through the vents was such a good idea after all. “Alright,” he said as they finished. “Give me a boost so I can get up there.”

Hayes nodded and then realised as she looked down – Her ribs. Callaghan pulled his lips in to a tight line and sighed. “Oh... *right*. Get up on my hands, I’ll lift you up and then I’ll climb up myself.”

Obediently, Hayes placed her boot on to his hands and then pushed upward to the open hatch. Callaghan winced in pain as the sudden jolt of Hayes’ foot sent fire through his left leg. After pulling herself through the vent with some shoving assistance of Callaghan, she looked at him and shook her head.

“Are you alright?”

Nodding, he proceeded to pull himself up through the vent and then reached for his leg. Fresh blood had begun to come through the bandage and Hayes leaned over. “Here, let me help.”

Callaghan just as quickly pushed her away. “No, we don’t have time. Let’s keep moving.”

Hesitantly, she picked up the rifle and began moving as Callaghan replaced the hatch and followed her lead. The shaft ahead was only dimly lit by the occasional ventilation fan or grating to the corridors below, and the amount of cobwebs certainly gave the facility’s age justice. “Do you have any idea where we’re going?” asked Hayes.

“I have no idea.”

~

UEO *Atlantis*. DSV 8100. Oceanographer Rift Valley, 1000 Kilometres east of the Corner seamounts. January 6th, 2041...

The briefing room of the *Atlantis* was crowded with department heads and senior staff. Very noticeable though were the two empty seats near Commander Banick that belonged to Ryan Callaghan and Madeline Hayes.

After searching through the information which UEO command had given him, it hadn’t taken him long to find what he was looking for. The map on the briefing room screen displayed an area about 350 kilometres south of their current position – the Marsala mountain range; a large plain that ran straight from the foothills of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge with only one definable feature – a massive mountain of volcanic rock millions of years old that had long ago been pushed away from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge; and on it’s western side; a 35-year-old military supply base that had been used during the third world war, and been abandoned soon after. “This base was built by the North Sea Confederation during World War Three as a staging base for its fleet. Officially, it’s been shut down for the past 30 years and become a breeding ground for all kinds of absolutely *fascinating* fish and bacteria. Scientists would have a field day with it.”

From across the table, Natalie Canebride frowned and looked at the map carefully. “There must be dozens of bases like that in the North Atlantic. What makes this one so special?”

Ainsley nodded and typed in a few things on his control panel to bring the map in to a larger scale. Another location was highlighted only about 50 kilometres north of the base. “The North Sea Confederation has a scientific research station here,” Ainsley illuminated the second location with brackets and continued. “The station is used for geological surveys of the surrounding fracture zones and trenches. However, the weekly logs that are sent back to the North Sea Confederation command show that there is an unusually high level of activity around that base. Officially, the activity is coming from civilian freighters running between the North American sea colonies and the Mediterranean coast. What doesn’t work in the equation however is that periodically, one of these freighters would stop at the base for a period of about 18 hours every 5 days or so.”

After a brief pause, Ainsley pointedly added; “As for the Nycarians, the North Sea Confederation has never had any recorded run-ins with them.”

Banick nodded. "Why would civilian freighters be mooring with abandoned military bases?"

"Well, legitimately... they don't. Smugglers sometimes use the old ammunition and fuel depots to store their 'goods'. The NSC has tried going after these freighters, but their identifications don't seem to exist in any merchant marine logs or commercial registries, and conveniently, they disappear after making their delivery only to appear in Hong Kong a week later."

"I smell a rat," said Banick pointedly.

Ainsley returned the suspiciously wry smile. "As do both Atlantic Command and the NSC. UEO Command has sent the *Enterprise* and *Trident* to cover for our patrol operations. Our orders are to investigate this and find out what is going on by whatever means necessary."

"Do we wait for the Battlegroups?" asked Banick after a few seconds of silence.

Canebride's view was a little more challenging. "Sir, the longer we wait, the more danger Commander Callaghan and Commander Hayes will be in. If they are there... then we won't have much time to get them out."

"Assuming it's not too late already..." said Ainsley sadly. He hung his head for a moment and then looked at his officers. "...For the record, I think you all have a right to know that as of 1420 this afternoon, I filed MIAs on both Commander Hayes and Commander Callaghan."

Banick seemed shocked by this. He'd known Ainsley a long time, and he'd never seen him so readily give up a missing soldier. "With all due respect sir... we're not just going to *leave* them out there."

Ainsley shot a warning look at Banick. It was cold, and had seen too much death. In the 13 years of his Captaincy, Mark Ainsley had lost many men and women under his command during the Second Cold War. He didn't like being reminded of that fact, and liked even less being reminded of his 'duty' and obligation to look out for those under his command under these circumstances. "*Missing in Action*" does not mean we're giving up, *Commander*. But it has been three days, and we have absolutely no proof to suggest they are still alive. Dead or alive, we will do everything we can to bring them home given the opportunity, but this just became a combat operation, and we do not have the luxury of emotional baggage right now."

His XO said nothing more, and simply nodded. His displeasure and sorrow over this new piece of information was easily readable over the faces of everyone else gathered in the briefing room, and once the Captain was satisfied that no one else would protest, he nodded sombrely and folded his hands on the desk before him. "If there is nothing else... Lieutenant Commander set a course east-south-east for Marsala. Commander Banick? I want this ship combat ready within 30 minutes. Have our pilots suited up and briefed immediately. Let's end this."

~

Just like the briefing room, the *Atlantis's* pilot's mess hall was unusually crowded on this particular day, and Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock knew why. For nearly two days, the crew had gone without rest or recreation whatsoever as they tried to get the submarine back on her feet. For his own pilots of the Rapiers, it was the first real chance they had for a break in nearly 3 days, and now he was going to spoil it by telling them the news they didn't want to hear. Walking over to where the 11 other pilots of his squadron were seated, smiling and laughing over a few cool

drinks, he smiled at them, and waved them off as they all got up having noticed their CO's approach. "No, no," he said insistently. "I'm off duty and so are you. So why don't you drop the formalities?"

The other pilots relaxed a little and the leader of Flight three, a British Lieutenant named Stanley Jacobs looked up at the commander. "Sit down, sir. We were just talking about the rumours of these 'Nycarians'."

Hitchcock sat down and folded his hands on the table. "Don't you know better than to listen to strange rumours, Stan?"

"Sorry sir... But it seemed a more welcome topic than the other happenings aboard this ship..."

"Too true," admitted the Wing Commander. He bit his lip for a moment and then sat back in the chair. "It is... however... why I am here to a certain extent."

Jane Roberts raised an eyebrow and looked up from an untouched glass of water sitting on the table in front of her. "Sir?"

Hitchcock pursed his lips. He didn't like not knowing a thing about who they were fighting, and liked it even less when he had to give his pilots such short notice on the matter. "I just finished a senior staff briefing. Our search and rescue just turned in to a combat deployment."

The Rapiers looked understandably shocked. The frontlines of the Alliance war were over 7000 nautical miles away. The idea of a second front in the Atlantic didn't sit well with them. Lieutenant Tom Reynolds gawked at his commander. "Commander, you cannot be serious?"

The Rapier leader nodded slowly. "Yes it is. We'll be deploying in a little over two hours. You're to suit up and report to pre-flight at eighteen-twenty hours."

"Any idea of what will be waiting for us?" asked Roberts more seriously.

"No, but the good news is, provided there *is* actually someone there waiting for us; we should have an advantage of surprise."

Reynolds looked sceptical "That's one way of putting it. Has anyone considered the possibility of an *ambush*?"

"I've been asking myself the same question, Tom. There *is* the possibility, and don't let anyone fool you otherwise. Just remember that the first step in avoiding an ambush, is knowing that one is waiting for you."

"Rules of Engagement?" asked another of the pilots curiously.

"Unestablished... *yet*. Officially, we are only *investigating* Marsala base, but if I have anything to say about it... it will be shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later. While the Captain didn't say it in so many words I'm pretty sure he's hoping to find Commander Callaghan and Commander Hayes on the seamount base."

With a bit of surprise, another one of the Rapiers raised an eyebrow. "Sir, with respect to the Captain, isn't that a bit of a long shot?"

Hitchcock hesitated before answering the question. It was a touchy subject, and one that offended people on both sides of the fence. "Lieutenant, I've been in the navy for a long time. I've learned a great deal of things in my time. One thing I learned was that your crew means *everything*. And *you* know that too, otherwise you wouldn't be in this squadron. It maybe the greatest ship ever built, it may have the most firepower of anything ever built, but without the crew, she's useless. I learned that you never leave anyone behind – alive *or* dead."

Hitchcock seemed to momentarily drift off as if recalling a lost memory of some kind. Shaking his head, he looked back to his gathered pilots. "...In 2032, when I was still a squadron XO flying the Spectre, my squadron was assigned to cover for the attack submarine *Defiant*," Hitchcock trailed off again as the images of a day nine

years before began flooding back in to his head. “It was supposed to be a routine patrol, and when the Macs attacked us from out of no where, we had no idea what to do. There was no organization to our defence, and the *Defiant* went down in seconds. Her Captain ordered us to break off and retreat, but we refused. We lost 7 pilots out of 12 defending the downed sub before relief forces finally got there. Our squadron commander was among those killed. UEO Command praised our actions claiming that had we not stayed, we would have lost *Defiant* and her crew. For the cost of 7 lives, we saved over a hundred. What was left of the squadron was awarded the Navy Cross, but it wasn’t that which made us consider what we had done. We did something worthwhile that day, and we’re going to try and do that now... Whether a hundred people owe their lives to twelve, or whether just two people owe their lives to a thousand... There is no difference. It’s what keeps us human.”

Roberts was the first to break the long silence that Hitchcock’s brief recounting. “Sir... what happened after?”

Hitchcock mused over it for a moment. “Does it matter? Sure, the UEO held us up as heroes if that’s what you want to hear... but you ask anyone who survived that day and they will tell you a lot more than that. The five of us that survived were all promoted... Some of us got squadron commands - myself included. But we’re not invincible... And the seven pilots we lost that day proved it. We all had our reasons for being there, and dying was not part of those equations. Those of us who did survive are still here now because we watched each other’s backs.

I’ve said this once and I will say it again now - there is no such thing as deliberate heroism; it’s called *stupidity*... We might boast about the amount of Lysanders we shoot down out there, we might even make bets on who has the best score at the end of the day... but the truth is that any pilot who has survived even one knife-fight does these things because it’s their only way of dealing with the cold reality that when you sit in that seat... the only thing between you, 12,000 pounds-per-square inch of seawater and the *other* guy is a 3-inch reinforced glass canopy and the pilot who is covering your back. That’s the difference between an Ace and a Deadman. So I’ll see you at eighteen-twenty.”

~

V

SHADOWS UNVEILED

**Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.
January 6th, 2041...**

Stopping at one of the many junctions of the ventilation system, Callaghan leaned back against the side of the shaft and took a moment to catch his breath. Beside him, Hayes was holding her side that was now causing her excruciating pain. Callaghan looked at her and shook his head. “We’ve got to find a way out of here.”

Hayes nodded in affirmation. “If we don’t get out soon, they’ll change the guard and it will all be over.”

She was right. For nearly 45 minutes, they had been roaming through the facility searching for a way out. So far, their efforts had made no success.

Looking out of the small vent in to the corridor below, Callaghan watched as the guards moved up the hallway and shook his head. They needed to get to the launch bay... and soon.

And then the alarms went off.

“Damn it!” said Callaghan silently. “We need to move *now!*”

Over the screaming of the klaxons, the base speaker suddenly blurted out. “*Security Breach! Section twenty-three-delta, South-eastern detention block! All security teams respond!*” Picking up the rifle beside him, Callaghan nodded to Hayes, and they began to move down the shaft once more. Below them, the echoes of footsteps rang through the halls of the facility as numerous soldiers – both uniformed and what looked like mercenaries – went to answer the call of trouble. Eventually, Hayes came to a dead end.

The vent went one way – straight down.

“Oh no...” said Hayes almost needlessly. “I think we’ve got a problem.”

Callaghan was already heading in the opposite direction before she’d finished. He didn’t get very far as more voices, clearer this time, came from one of the nearby access hatches to the maintenance systems. “...*Captain, they must have gone down the maintenance ducts. There’s no sign of them.*”

“*Then get **in** there and **find** them!*”

“*Yes sir! Sergeant? Smoke them out! Cover every possible exit! **Now!***”

“No time...” said Callaghan. He looked back over Hayes’s shoulder to the shaft below.

“You’re kidding...” she said incredulously, looking down the shaft in dismay.

“It’s either down or back,” said Callaghan, “Take your pick.”

It was the feeling he hated most of all - the feeling of impending disaster; free fall. The steep shaft went on for what seemed like an eternity and Callaghan felt sick to the stomach as it suddenly levelled off and he found himself charging straight through a hatch undoubtedly already opened by Hayes on her own downward spiral.

With a grunt, Callaghan found himself falling straight through a hatch that had undoubtedly already been ‘opened’ by Hayes during her own downward plunge.

There was a grunt as he rolled out of the duct and found himself on the hard floor of the facility before realising the complaint was not his, but rather that of Madeline Hayes who was lying awkwardly straddled beneath his legs. “Do you mind?” she said dryly, with wit that was best described merely as sour. Grimacing,

(partially in disappointment...) Callaghan apologised and got up from the floor before retrieving the rifle that had fallen behind him.

“This way,” he said, pointing down the corridor. Hayes, who was rubbing her coccyx sorely, raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“You got a better idea? If we go back the other way, we’ll be walking back to the detention block.”

Shaking her head with an inward smile, Hayes headed off down the hall and Callaghan followed. That was before another series of voices instinctively drew them in to one of the hall’s many alcoves.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” said one of the voices.

A second, gruffer voice followed. “I’m not hanging around here any longer with that *thing* out there! Screw that! Where’s the launch bays from here?”

“About 50 meters down that hall! Let’s go! These Macronesians can stick their money where the sun don’t shine. This wasn’t in my contract!”

Raising an eyebrow directed at Hayes, Callaghan whispered and looked around before quietly stepping out in to the hall way once more. “What were they talking about?”

Hayes shook her head. “I have no idea. But they said the hangar on this place was down one of these halls. We should check it out”

Callaghan nodded and stepped out of the alcove to set off down the hall once more. He didn’t get far when the all-too-familiar sound of weapon safeties being disengaged came from behind, accompanied by the even less welcome sound of a dozen boots...

“Not that that little detail will do *you* any good, Commander Callaghan,” said the voice from behind. “Now turn around slowly and put those rifles on the ground.”

Annoyed with him self and tempted to open fire in his anger, Callaghan forced himself to calmly place his weapon down on the ground in front of him, and turned slowly. He was not at all surprised to find himself face-to-face with a squad of black-clad Macronesian Marines and one officer who looked more than a little smug. Callaghan chuckled slightly, amused that only *now* were the Macronesian troops willing to show themselves. In his entire time here, he’d been tended to by nothing more than second-rate mercenaries with bad attitudes. It didn’t surprise him that such an operation was being overseen by the considerably more capable hands of the Macronesian Military. “Why am I not surprised? What rank should I call you? Ensign? Lieutenant? I expect that President Bourne wouldn’t assign a *capable* officer this far away from the frontline unless you seriously screwed up.”

The Macronesian officer smiled as the corridor was rocked slightly by an apparent explosion. “Colonel will do just fine. Your friend’s untimely arrival may have forced me to alter my plans slightly, but I haven’t *quite* finished with you yet.”

Callaghan smiled again. “*Friends*”, he had said. Once more, the cavalry had arrived.

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UEO Atlantis DSV 8100. Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 6th, 2041...

“General Quarters, all hands secure battle stations. This is not a drill!”

Captain Ainsley watched quietly as Commander Banick gave the order to rig the ship for combat operations and then leaned back in his command chair with a little more comfort than usual. Swivelling in the chair, Ainsley turned to face the sonar station. "Sonar, give me a full status report please."

The sensor officer removed his headset and turned to the command deck. "We've definitely found our base, sir. And there's something else too."

Ainsley raised an eyebrow and folded his arms. "What is it, Ensign?"

With a few quick commands to his station's console, the Ensign brought up the main bridge screen with what he was seeing outside – an old military supply base, most noticeably present; a squadron of attack submarines with long, sleek black hulls and blended bow planes that made Ainsley's stomach turn cold. "Macronesian *Orion* class attack submarines," said the Captain sourly, being unable to mistake the submarines for anything else. "Someone care to tell me why it is that I am *not* surprised?"

The sonar chief nodded, and Captain Ainsley was forced to remind himself that the presence of the Alliance submarines meant that their enemy was not just a bunch of disorganized, untrained mercenaries; but rather professional soldiers.

"Yes sir," confirmed the sonar chief. "I've identified no less than 6 Orion Class SSNs in the immediate area, in addition to whatever modified stock freighters the Mercs have, and I detected what *could* be a pair of Aleus class carriers trying to hide behind the seamount. I caught them before they went silent."

"What have the Mercenaries got in the way of hardware?" asked Ainsley dismissively. The carriers didn't concern him – they were something which his fighter squadrons could deal with.

"Mostly old hulls, sir. A few Delta Fives and a couple of old Oscar Threes. The few freighters they have are heavily modified and are probably just as well armed."

"Quite the little Armada they've assembled themselves," observed the Captain.

Beside him, Commander Banick looked at his watch and smiled. "Captain, all battle stations secured - 1 minute and 2 seconds."

Ainsley chuckled at the irony. His crew had brought themselves to the line once again, and hadn't disappointed. "Thank you, Commander. Flight deck status?"

"All fighter squadrons scrambled and are holding defensive position on our flanks, sir," replied Banick.

"I'd say we've shocked them enough, wouldn't you, Jim? Communications... get me an open-hail to their fleet. We'll give them one chance... failing that, well... we aim to please."

"Aye sir... Channel is open."

Captain Ainsley nodded and flexed his hand a little while he let a second or two pass to make sure he had the enemy's attention. "...Unidentified vessels. This is the UEO *Atlantis*. You are in violation of Article 43 of the UEO-North Sea Treaty which clearly states that any territory within 50 nautical miles of a recognized North Sea Confederation Colony is considered a protectorate of the United Earth Oceans Organization. By being in the employ of the Macronesian Alliance, you have effectively declared yourselves combatants in a warzone. This is your *one* and *only* chance to surrender unconditionally, and to turn over any and all UEO or North Sea Confederation personnel who you may be currently holding. Failure to comply with my demands will be met with *extreme* reprisal."

It didn't take long for the Captain to get his answer as the lead ships of the Mercenary formation opened fire with a volley of torpedoes. Commander Banick didn't even have to report this as Ainsley noticed it on his command consoles. Killing the hailing frequency, he looked at Banick inquisitively. "Have any of the mercenary ships responded?"

"None sir. Although a couple of them *are* trying to withdraw. Shall we disable them?"

Ainsley nodded firmly. The XO needed nothing more than that... "Tactical: All batteries fire at will."

In the cold waters surrounding *Atlantis* all hell broke loose. As the Macronesian subs closed with the huge UEO battleship that dwarfed them by many times, the *Atlantis's* own torpedo batteries opened up with howling screams of igniting plasma engines; sending dozens of torpedoes in to the middle of the enemy fleet. The few torpedoes that the Alliance ships had managed to get off at the onset of battle were cut down by Raptor subfighters as they dove in to the fray with guns blazing. While *Atlantis* manoeuvred to bring her secondary armaments of pulse lasers to bear, the last of the UEO subfighters broke out of their holding patterns from her flanks in spectacular precision; breaking by twos and fours in to their squadron formations. If the display of organization between the two fleets was any indication of what was to come, then the battle had clearly been decided as the Mercenary and Alliance submarines struggled to create some form of a defensive perimeter. By now, over 60 UEO fighters of varying types – Raptors, Spectres and even new Stormhawk-class fighter-bombers were sweeping over the Alliance fleet like a great wave of fire; ducking and weaving closely between the bigger hulls of attack submarines, cruisers and freighters with terrifying speed, strafing at will as they advanced.

The *Rapiers* led the UEO charge. Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock's Raptor was at the tip of the spear. The point-defence fire being put up by the mercenary submarines was extremely heavy, and the deep ocean glowed with an eerie light of laser fire and detonating plasma torpedoes all around. The once-black ocean glowed a fierce lightning blue, but as impressive as the display was; the fire was horrendously inaccurate. Lesser pilots might have been terrified by the sight, but the *Rapiers* knew it just as well as the mercenaries did – the 'defensive' fire couldn't hit the broadside of a barn. Not far behind his fighter and the rest of one-flight, a pair of UEO Assault Speeders stayed in close formation, dauntlessly pushing their way through the fray towards the base on Marsala. "Tigershark Six this is Rapier One," Hitchcock said over his radio to the lead speeder pilot behind him. "You're clear to begin your run. Alpha squadron has your wing... Do it by the numbers, and this'll be a walk in the park."

"Rapier One; Tigershark Six. Wilco. Commencing delivery now. Light 'em up!"

The pair of Sea Speeders rolled down and began spiralling towards the base on the seafloor below. This sudden change in direction did much to draw attention from nearby enemy subfighters, and within a couple of seconds, an entire squadron of Mercenary Barracudas was bearing down on them from above. The Rapier pilots didn't need to be told what to do, and their Raptors snapped downwards, pursuing the Barracudas without second thought. With a flick of his thumb on the sidestick, Hitchcock locked on to one of the fighters with his HUD and began tracking it. The

mercenary didn't know it at the time, but in that instant he became a dead man. Kicking in his throttles, the engines of his fighter opened up with a roar and accelerated the Raptor to a speed of close to 300 knots – a fast and almost reckless gain on the old Barracuda. The Barracuda pilot didn't even see it coming as Hitchcock depressed the trigger and rounds of super-sonic explosive bullets tore through the water around the Barracuda illuminating the dark undersea realm with an eerie display of miniature concussive shockwaves. The Barracuda rolled and attempted to pull out of the firing line, but Hitchcock second guessed the pilot and followed suit by putting a line of high-calibre slugs straight in to its path. The heavy uranium slugs tore down the fighter's centreline, every shot hitting an invisible bullseye between the barracuda's twin engines, cleaving its wings apart and disintegrating the fuselage. Hitchcock rolled and dove away to avoid flying through the debris of the fighter just as lances of laser fire shot past his canopy.

Behind him, a Macronesian Lysander ducked and weaved, trying its best to get a clear shot at the UEO fighter. It didn't get the chance as Hitchcock's wingman, Jane Roberts, blasted upwards from the darkness below, tearing away at the Macronesian fighter with a torrent of Gattling gun fire before rolling back around and letting her fighter fall back down beside the Commander.

"Nice save, Rapier two," commented Hitchcock as he bracketed another of the Mercenary fighters ahead. The UEO Assault Speeders were still visible ahead of him, ducking and weaving their way through the duelling UEO and Alliance fighters towards the base that was not just a couple of miles ahead. The targeted Barracuda tried with futility to break Hitchcock's lock, but the old fighter was simply too sluggish to evade the Raptor, and the HUD gave a telling, high-pitched tone of a solid firing solution. Flicking open the small safety on the back of his stick, Hitchcock depressed the trigger once more, and a small torpedo dropped out from the fighter's internal weapon racks and ignited in a tiny sonic boom before rocketing away towards the hapless Barracuda. It was the last thing the Mercenary pilot would see for the rest of his life...

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Captain Ainsley exchanged an apprehensive look with Commander Banick as they watched the battle unfold on the master tactical display. To say the battle was going well was an understatement; the poorly prepared enemy attack subs simply could not break through *Atlantis's* subfighter screen, and the continuous, withering barrage of torpedo fire that the big DSV had been laying down was making life extremely "uncomfortable" for the Mercenary/Alliance armada. "Commander, where are our assault teams now?" asked the Captain, staring down at the complex battle map and the tiny red and blue icons that represented the ships and fighter squadrons that surrounded the *Atlantis*.

Banick looked over the map for a moment and tapped his finger on a small icon that was quickly moving towards Marsala base. The holographic display highlighted the units when he did this, giving a detailed description of their disposition and location. It was real time battle data at a level that most submarine Commanders could only dream of. "Here, sir. They're about 2 minutes out from the base. The *Rapiers* and *Stormreavers* are covering them here."

Ainsley was in a stupor looking at the battle display. The two fighter squadrons - the *Rapiers* and the *Stormreavers* – stood out only as 2 small deltas either side of the Marine's speeders. They were surrounded by at least three times their

number in Mercenary and Alliance fighters, and were somehow holding their ground. Ainsley knew Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock as an acquaintance, and knew of his reputation only too well – he would have been surprised if there was a single UEO pilot in the Navy who *hadn't* heard of him, but watching the display by the *Rapiers* was numbingly impressive. There wasn't a thing on the field that could even *hope* to touch them; their movements were as skilful as they were unpredictable. Just when it seemed that a wing of Lysanders might have had a good approach and succeeded in breaking the *Rapiers* in to disarray, the Raptors would execute a flawless coordinated assault from all directions, cutting the Lysanders down like flies. Ainsley *almost* felt sorry for the Macronesians.

He turned his attention to the two bomber wings that were loitering just outside the engagement zone. "Order the *Paladins* and *Tigerclaws* to converge on those Aleus carriers and stir them up a little," he ordered whilst looking at the two Alliance carriers that were trying to avoid bringing attention to themselves. "See if they can get those Lysanders off our Speeders. The sooner those marines can make ground-fall, the easier it will be for Hitchcock's people to start worrying about their own tails."

The XO simply nodded as he relayed the commands in to his displays. "Yes sir."

Atlantis was a rock, unmoving, and unfazed by the steady stream of fire coming its way from the scattered Mercenary and Alliance forces. Her return fire looked like roman candles as tiny rocket-powered torpedoes screamed out of their tubes from batteries across the massive submarine's bow, some of them intercept torpedoes that would occasionally break away and destroy the incoming ordnance before it presented much of a threat. One hapless mercenary fighter – an aging Barracuda – strayed just a bit too close to the *Atlantis's* menacing line of fire. Realising his error, the pilot snapped his fighter about in a tight 180 degree roll and tried to pull away... There was little to see as the shockwave of vaporised water and superheated plasma instantly consumed the subfighter.

By chance, Captain Ainsley caught the demise of this fighter through the live feed provided by one of the WSKRS orbiting his ship's bow. He didn't think much of the event, and it was a cold thought that he didn't feel a shred of remorse for the pilot who had just been killed. If anything – as he remembered the wounds that had been reaped on his ship and his crew only days before – he felt a cold, satisfying sense of retribution in the recesses of his mind.

As Ainsley lapsed in to an almost hypnotic evaluation of the battle outside *Atlantis*, everything else on the bridge around him became invisible to him. In the seconds that he remained fixated on the battle, he failed to hear the report from his sensor chief just a few meters away. The Ensign had to repeat himself politely for Ainsley to finally hear him.

"...Captain?"

Back in the saddle, Captain Ainsley turned to the Ensign as if no time had passed at all. "There a problem, Ensign?"

"...I... Don't know sir..." replied the chief worriedly.

Frowning, the Captain strode across the command deck to stand over the officer's station. "...Your report, Ensign?" he repeated.

"...Well sir, we've got incoming. Speed: one-four-zero knots, and she's big sir - easily Battlecruiser class, and probably larger."

Commander Banick's eyes widened with bafflement. What the Ensign had just said was not possible, or at least not in any rational sense. "Captain... As far as I

know... We're the biggest damned thing out here. What moves at one hundred and forty knots and has the same displacement as a Battlecruiser?"

"Certainly nothing that *I've* ever heard of, Commander. Ensign, are you sure this is right? Put up WSKRS on the main screen."

Safely sitting behind the *Atlantis's* defensive perimeter, the WSKRS probes orbiting the submarine were like wireless periscopes. They had their own sonar systems, their own visual sensors and a multitude of other detection equipment that made approaching their "mothersub" undetected nearly impossible. As the unidentified contact finally came within visual range of the WSKR affectionately known as "Junior", the Ensign brought the video feed up on the main screen. Slowly... the dark silhouette rose from the darkness, illuminated only faintly at first by her running flood lights and the eerie background glow provided by the flashes of torpedo explosions and laser fire. The bridge was deathly silent as every set of eyes remained glued to the main display. Whatever it was, it was something that Ainsley had never seen before in his entire 32-year naval career. "...Ensign..." he said quietly. "What in the nine hells is *that* and *how* did it get so close without us noticing?"

Banick silently whispered something that Ainsley missed entirely. The sonar officer struggled to pull more information from the *Atlantis's* databanks and shook his head hopelessly. "I have no idea side. The class matches *nothing* in the databanks, but the configuration is *similar* in profile to that "Nycarian" ship we ran in to the other day."

"...Except about ten times larger. I need information, Ensign. *Now.*"

"I'm sorry sir, I've got nothing. The best I can tell you is that she weighs close to half a million tonnes and has an energy signature bigger than New Cape Quest."

Beyond the protecting, thickly armoured and reinforced bulkheads of the *Atlantis's* bridge, the new arrival didn't seem at all shy of making its presence known. The huge submarine – easily over 500 meters long (making even the *Atlantis* look small in some respects) - swung through the leading canyon edge and swept in to the arena of battle where the lone but imposing UEO submarine and Macronesian forces still duelled. With its long, sleek and sweeping hull design that flowed back and through a large annulus-shaped dome that glowed with fierce intensity before fanning out to a large tri-finned tail, it was an incredibly striking design. Each and every surface of the hull seemed to be accented by raised plating which followed the contours like sails. Following in the massive submarine's wake, and moving with perfect precision to take up echelon formations on either side of the mammoth battlecruiser were 2 smaller vessels which Ainsley and Banick recognised instantly. There was a reason the big submarine looked familiar... It *was* Nycarian.

"...Mary, mother of god," said Ainsley in awe-struck disbelief. "...Helm... Pull us back *now*. Tactical! I need a *full* report on what kind of firepower they have. I want everything you have, and then some."

"I... I really don't know, sir," said the Tactical officer helplessly. "...I can't even tell if she's painting us, let alone what weaponry she has. My sensors can't get through her hull."

Silence filled the bridge. Not a word was said by anyone, and no one was game to move from where they stood. All that could be heard was the quiet rattle of Ainsley's boots on the metal deck gratings as he moved back to the Conn. The dull bass thud of exploding torpedoes in the distance served as a reminder of what was at stake.

Atlantis slowly pulled back and gained some badly needed distance between herself and the Nycarians. Even the Alliance submarines had come to a momentary pause in their actions, also taking the time to warily put distance between themselves and the Atlantis. The seconds that passed seemed an eternity, and Ainsley finally issued his orders. “Lieutenant Phillips, hail the lead Nycarian ship and-“

“-Urm... Sir? *They* are hailing *us*,” interjected Jack Phillips quietly.

Perplexed, the Captain nodded cautiously. “...Put them up, Lieutenant.”

The main screen, still showing the imposing shape of the Nycarian cruiser, switched to the view of a bridge that was similar in design – but a lot larger – than the one Ainsley had seen in his last encounter with these people. The face that greeted him though was different – a Caucasian male in his early to mid fifties just as Ainsley, and wearing an immaculately pressed black uniform that looked more fitting for a formal dress. Unlike the previous Nycarian that Ainsley had spoken to, this man’s uniform bore considerably more elaborate insignia. It didn’t take much thought to know who was in charge.

“Captain Ainsley,” said the Nycarian in a heavy Afrikaans accent. “I am Viceroy Narius Rhodes of the Imperial expeditionary flagship, *Narcissis*... May we offer our assistance?”

That took Captain Ainsley off guard. It was not an offer he’d expected, let alone imagined after their first encounter. From the corner of his eye, he caught Banick’s amused grin and had to force himself from doing the same. “...Viceroy...” he said, trying to find appropriate words, “...any help, of course, is greatly appreciated. I must admit this is *unexpected*, but we will have time for explanations later. It looks like there may be a few enemy carriers a few kilometres from our current location. They should be close to your port quarter.”

The Viceroy nodded flatly, betraying nothing. His gaze drifted off-screen for a moment, as if signalling to an officer elsewhere on his bridge, and then looked back. “Understood, Captain... I imagine you have quite a few questions.”

“...That’s quite the understatement, Viceroy.”

“I’m sure...” Rhodes worked his jaw for a moment. “...You should know that these are not ordinary mercenaries you are dealing with. They are working for people who I believe you call...” the Viceroy’s trailed off as if searching for the right word. He seemed visibly uncomfortable with it when he finally found it. “...’*Macs*’. The Nycarian Empire considers this a matter of national security for both our governments. We apologise that it took us so long to intervene.”

Ainsley allowed a small smile, not only for the Viceroy’s candour, but also noting the use of slang to describe the Macronesians. “Thank you, Viceroy. We’ll coordinate our efforts with your tactical officer. *Atlantis*: out... And thanks for the assistance. We’ll discuss the details when this is over.”

The screen winked back to an external view of the *Narcissis* before changing once again to a display of the battle telemetry; now noticeably showing the presence of the Nycarian fleet. “Commander Banick, target those Merc attack boats and fire at will. Coordinate your efforts with the *Narcissis*.”

“Captain, can we trust them? This whole situation feels a little... odd.”

“I’m well aware of the current situation, Commander. Thank you. You have your orders.”

“Yes sir...”

Ainsley knew that his first officer was right. So many pieces of the puzzle still didn’t add up. The sudden appearance of the *Narcissis* like this seemed far too convenient, and the fact that they possessed a submarine of that magnitude to begin

with was beyond any rational explanation. How did they manage to build such massive vessel? And how had they managed to keep it secret for so long? They were very basic questions that everyone else on his bridge had to be asking themselves. If it was a trap, then it was a very transparent one... and perhaps that is why Ainsley didn't believe that it was. Macronesian ambushes may have been many things, but "sloppy" wasn't one of them.

~

The last Alliance Lysander imploded in a brilliant flash of fiery blue light as Lieutenant Roberts's small plasma torpedo slammed in to it head-on at a speed better than 300 knots and turned it to dust. Exhaling sharply as she rolled away after a somewhat lengthy dogfight with the Alliance fighter, she punched up her comms. "Rapier lead, this is Rapier two. Splash one bandit. That's the last one, sir. This sector is clear."

Commander Hitchcock's voice returned in its usual, deadpan calmness. Nothing seemed to bother the Commander, and sometimes she wondered if there was anything at all that could scare the man. "*Well done, Rapier two. The assault team is clear and reports soft-dock with Marsala. New orders are to cover them while the Marines do their work... They're sitting ducks down there.*"

Roberts didn't get a word of what the Commander said as a dark shadow was cast over her cockpit, prompting her to look up curiously. What she saw there was as shocking as it was inexplicable – the submarine that sat next to *Atlantis* was positively massive, and a design she wasn't familiar with. "...My god..." she whispered in to the radio without thinking.

"...*Is there a problem Rapier two?*"

"...I'm... sorry, Commander. But what is-"

Both pilots were cut off abruptly as Commander Banick cut in on the battle chatter from the *Atlantis*. "-Stand down on unknowns, Rapier wing," ordered Banick with a measure of reassurance. "They are to be assumed friendly. We'll give you the details at debriefing. Continue your cover of those transports. *Atlantis*: out."

...Not too far away, Ryan Callaghan and Madeline Hayes were being escorted by an entourage of Macronesian Marines, trying to think of a new way out of their current situation. Neither officer was getting much inspiration, and similarly, neither of them liked how their situation was progressively going from "bad" to "worse". The rumbling of the corridor, and the muffled shouts from corridors further away told of the sea battle that was being waged beyond the reinforced concrete walls of the facility, and Hayes had smiled inwardly when she overheard a couple of mercenaries mention the words "*UEO Marines*." If they were really the source of the commotion, then their chances of survival and escape had just increased considerably. There were few things that the Macronesians feared more than the UEO Marine Corps, and for good reason – the average Marine ego considered himself to be the most hardcore, ruthless, unstoppable and most downright nasty human killing machine on the face of the planet. The disturbing thing was that they were usually right in this assumption, no matter how inflated their egos may already have been.

Looking ahead, Callaghan noticed the Colonel who had 'met' them issue an order for his troops to halt as a panicking mercenary sprinted up to him from down the hall, looking flustered and very worried. The mercenary's words were largely

indecipherable, but the Colonel's look of concern and his grim, haunted eyes told the UEO officers most of what they wanted to know.

The base's PA system was loud as it crackled to life *"All personnel proceed to evacuation areas immediately! This is not a drill! Base perimeter has been breached!"*

The Colonel and the Mercenary ignored the warning as they continued to exchange heated words, but the soldiers who stood behind the Alliance officer were slightly more on-edge as they levelled their rifles and visibly tensed as the sound of gunfire drew nearer.

"*You!*" said the Colonel sharply, pointing at his two UEO prisoners. "Come here and sit down!"

Callaghan nodded at Hayes cautiously, and the two officers gingerly stepped up to the Colonel and sat down against the wall. Hayes however was not one to miss an opportunity, and couldn't help but offer a snide stab at the Colonel. "You sound worried Colonel. I hear you have a Marine problem... I take it insurance around here doesn't cover pest-control?"

"Shut up!"

"Heh," she said, inwardly amused. "I didn't think so."

She smiled sweetly at the Macronesian commander. She had struck a nerve, and it went without saying that this was no time for jokes on his part. He ignored her riposte and ordered his Marines to fan out across the hall in defensive positions throughout the small, sheltering alcoves.

The gunfire from further ahead was getting closer now. Drawled Australian accents from the Macronesians down the way were now panicked, and the two UEO officers noticed two of these troops dragging one of their wounded comrades back behind their line. He was a mess – his torso riddled with bloody, smoking holes from where high-calibre pulse rifle fire had hit him, in some cases going all the way through as told by the long smear of blood that the man's back left behind. In the chaos of the Macronesian retreat, Hayes looked at Callaghan beside her carefully and whispered. "Are you any good at picking locks?"

Callaghan whispered between gritted teeth. "Sure. SOCOM didn't want me for Special Forces duty for nothing you know..."

Hayes tilted her head back and strained her neck. "Can you reach my hair?"

Callaghan noticed that Hayes's hair was pinned up. He was surprised he hadn't noticed this earlier, and awkwardly rolled his shoulders forward as he tried to reach the hairpin that held the bun where it was. Thankfully, Hayes was a good deal shorter than he, and he was able to reach the pin and pull it free. Quickly, he started to work on the lock of his cuffs. Why they had bound him in cuffs that required a mere key he did not know, but he wasn't complaining.

The fire fight was getting serious, and judging by the occasional Alliance soldier who would duck from some near-miss or fire a returning round, she could only assume that the skirmish was now practically on top of them. Her attention wasn't diverted for long as a silent "click" and a chuckle came from Callaghan as his cuffs fell free. Without turning, he grabbed her wrists gently and felt around the cuffs she wore until he found them, and started working. The situation was now so chaotic that she doubted if they were even being watched at all. She spied a Marine just a few feet in front of her who was cautiously (and perhaps a little overzealously) trying to assess how bad it was around the corner and down the hall where his assailants were quickly advancing. "You were joking, right?" she asked off hand, taking Callaghan by surprise.

“About what?”

“SOCOM.”

“Oh,” said Callaghan, remembering where he left off. “...I prefer the tactical station, thank you.”

“...That’s not an answer.”

...The cuffs came off from Hayes’s wrists and she quietly massaged them behind her back. She wondered in that moment if it would be possible to jump the Alliance soldier in front of her and grab his rifle... but the thought was short-lived as a heavy boot stepped behind her. “Turn around... *slowly*”

The Alliance Colonel stood there impassively; his rifle held idly by his side. The look in his eye suggested he was about to execute them both right there, and Hayes grimaced unhappily – she hadn’t even seen the man move from where he was standing across the hall just a few moments before. The Colonel looked over his shoulder to see his Marines still firing down the corridor. Then, cautiously, without a word, he stepped back and called out to the squad sergeant. “Alpha team! Fall back! We can’t hold this position. Retreat to the command center, *now!*”

The Sergeant looked shocked. “But sir... we-“

“That was *not* a request, Sergeant! Move your troops out on the double!”

“Yes sir!” stammered the Sergeant, still in surprise. “Alright, you heard the Colonel! *Fall back!*”

The Colonel turned and looked at Hayes and Callaghan quizzically, and then whispered. “...Follow me...”

Confused, Callaghan and Hayes stared at the Colonel like he was speaking a different language, and then slowly got up from the floor. The Macronesian officer picked up a pair of rifles on the ground and handed them to Hayes and Callaghan before raising his own rifle...

...and firing straight in to the backs of his own troops.

Whatever was going on at that confusing moment, Hayes and Callaghan did not waste their opportunity, and fired several bursts down the hall after the fleeing Macronesian troops, cutting them down as they fled. Just as the last one hit the floor, a heavily armed and flustered squad of troops thundered down the hall behind the trio – their heavy boots falling heavily on the concrete floor, and their rifles raised high, clearing everything in front of them. Hayes and Callaghan turned around, and raised their hands, not wanting to become targets. Taking one look at their uniforms, and even recognising a couple of the troopers, both officers sighed in relief – they were UEO Marines, wearing standard sea-blue battle dress uniforms and geared-up with more electronics and battlefield equipment than most special forces outfits. The troops wasted no time, screaming at them to “**Get down!**” whilst rapidly deploying along the corridor junction, securing the alcoves and covering each other as they went. UEO uniform or not, the soldiers were taking no chances with anyone they ran in to – Hayes and Callaghan were no exception. Silence filled the junction for a moment as the marines held their rifles with sure aim on Hayes, Callaghan and the Colonel... and no one dared move.

Then – footsteps. From behind the marines, another soldier arrived, walking casually with his rifle slung over his shoulder while he lit a cigar and puffed on it... seemingly oblivious to the soldiers or their “prisoners” around him. Callaghan recognised the man immediately – Marine Captain Adrian O’Shaughnessy was as Irish as they came, and served as the second-in-command of the *Atlantis*’s Marine garrison behind Major Devlin Cortez. “Well I’ll be damned,” said the Captain with gritted teeth that held the cigar. “Lower yer’ damn weapons, Marines,” he ordered

casually as he walked towards Hayes and Callaghan, grinning happily, and seeming to be not fazed in the slightest by the Alliance Colonel or the numerous dead Macronesian troopers at his feet.

“Commander Calla’han?” he asked casually, as if he had never left. “These bast’rd Macs fall over like bloody children in a playground... And beggin’ me pardon, sir... But yeh look like you’ve seen better days.”

The Marines of his platoon lowered their weapons and smiled as they checked around them once more – ever wary of the possibility of an ambush, or inadvertently finding themselves in the path of a Macronesian retreat.

Callaghan nodded in relief, never thinking he’d be so happy to see the Irishman. He looked suspiciously at the cigar he now held in his hand, and raised an eyebrow. “...O’Shaughnessy... I thought smoking was illegal?”

The Marine shrugged. “Aye sir. But this base is in international waters, and as long as I’m here... I may as well take full advantage of it.”

Hayes smiled at this as O’Shaughnessy finally turned to his attention to the Alliance Colonel who still stood with his hands raised above his head. “...Hmm. A Colonel eh?” he said, looking over the uniform’s insignia. “What do yeh want us to do with him, Commander? Major Cortez says yer in charge till we get back to the boat.”

Callaghan sighed as a Marine medic appeared from down the hall and started examining his leg. The pain it was causing him was now excruciating, so he did nothing to stop the man from doing his work. “...Well, Colonel? How about it?” he said to the Macronesian curiously.

The Colonel looked around cautiously at the UEO Marines who surrounded him, some of whom had their weapons levelled on him, visibly itching to put a cap between his eyes. “If it’s not too much trouble... I don’t suppose I can take these off my head?” he asked politely.

Hayes looked at the Marines who held their weapons on him. They nodded back to her, giving a silent ‘OK’. “Fine.”

“Thank you... I suppose I had best start from the top. I am *not* a Colonel in the Alliance military,” he said as he looked over the troops he had shot dead just moments before. “My name is Sean Graves... *Major* Sean Graves of the North Sea Intelligence Service.”

~

The *Atlantis* bridge rumbled slightly as the battered submarine fired another full salvo of 24 torpedoes in to the now-routed enemy fleet. The water around the bow of the DSV seemed to distort with the eerily majestic trails of the torpedoes as they sped towards the enemy fleet. Not too far away, the huge *Narcissis* also pounded the rear of the enemy fleet as its strange and horrifically destructive torpedoes ripped apart whole carriers in single glancing hits. The sheer amount of chaos the massive Nycarian submarine was causing had Captain Ainsley in wonder as it effortlessly made the battle look like a ‘walk in the park.’

Keeping his concentration on *his* part of the battle, he then turned his gaze from the status reports that constantly streamed to his small console on the command chair to look at the tactical station just forward of the command deck.

“Commander Banick; Give me a SITREP if you will.”

Not turning from his work with another Ensign behind the console, Banick hit several controls and began transmitting the available telemetry to the Captain. “We’ve

got them on the ropes, Captain,” he began coolly. “Their main Battlegroup has been virtually destroyed. We’ve got a total of 11 enemy attack submarines confirmed either crippled or destroyed and 3 carriers pulling out from their flanks in to retreat. It looks like the *Narcissis* is taking care of those... rather well too”

Ainsley smiled wryly at the last part of the statement as the bridge rumbled again under the constant deliveries of torpedo salvos and the *Atlantis XO* continued. “We’ve taken a total of 16 hits from enemy torpedoes – both fighter and SSN delivered – and received contained flooding on E deck in sections 12 and 60 through 62. We’ve taken only slight damage to the port drives and rudder systems but the situation with mid-ships weapon control is bad. Damage teams are on it, but they recommend we finish this soon.”

The UEO Captain was slightly surprised at the amount of damage the *Atlantis* had taken. 16 torpedo hits on virtually any other class of submarine was virtually assured to not only sink it, but most likely tear it to pieces with very little wreckage left behind. That aside, he knew that while the Deep Submergence Vehicles were designed with nothing but sheer strength in mind, the battle couldn’t continue forever. While the Nycarian’s sudden arrival had been considerably helpful in throwing the Mercenaries and Alliance forces back, it was time to end it. Getting up from the chair to head to the Captain’s chart ‘dome’ to his left, he began carefully plotting the battle situation. The battle was clearly lost for the Alliance, but looking at the information on the chart, he saw exactly how to end it a lot sooner. “Commander Canebride,” he said looking at the senior helm officer. “All ahead one third. Set course bearing two-one-seven, mark twelve.”

Obediently, Canebride repeated the order as herself and the 3 other helmsmen began to steer the huge DSV to the co-ordinates given to them by the Captain; the middle of the enemy fleet. As Ainsley moved from the command deck to the conning position located on the main deck two levels down, the *Atlantis* pulled around through the battle to begin its final run. While the UEO Raptors and Spectres duelled in their delicate ballets with the Alliance and mercenary Lysanders and Barracudas, multiple torpedo explosions at various points around the battle signalled either more destruction or a luck escape or near-miss.

Taking the Conn, Ainsley turned to Banick at tactical and then looked back to the main screen that now showed a pair of withdrawing and beaten Macronesian ‘*Orion*’ attack submarines. “Tactical; target those two retreating *Orions* - pulse lasers – full charge. Target their power systems and fire at will.”

The *Atlantis*’s 6 bow pulse lasers – guided by the DSV’s sophisticated targeting systems - cut through the water like lightning as they fired multiple rounds in quick succession at each of the retreating submarines. The lethal blue-energy washed itself over the *Orion*’s hulls and several small, vortex-like explosions lit up the water around the submarines, putting them out of commission quickly and efficiently.

This was seen by Commanders Hayes and Callaghan from the small cockpit of the UEO speeder as they tore through the depths of the Atlantic back towards the imposing DSV that lay not too far away. Hayes smiled somewhat wickedly as the two Alliance submarines came to a dead halt as vicious breaches in their stern crackled angrily with the dissipating energy of the *Atlantis*’s lasers. For the first time in days Hayes finally felt just a little satisfied from the uncomfortable confines of the base prison cells as she suddenly found herself surrounded by colleagues and what looked like one hell of a turkey shoot for *Atlantis*.

Leaning over to the pilot, she gave herself more slack on the seat's restraints and nodded to the comm. system. "Tell the *Atlantis* that we're on our final approach and we've got prisoners on the base and it will most likely need some form of cover from the Mac forces."

The pilot – a Lieutenant Junior Grade – nodded and then fiddled with his headset momentarily before toggling the comms.

..."*Atlantis* control, this is Speeder Golf-Sierra-three-five-seven. We are on final approach vector and requesting immediate docking clearance. Commander Hayes requests fighter cover on the base."

On the *Atlantis* command deck, the EVA officer patched the comm. link through and then set several commands at her station. "Speeder three-five-seven, this is *Atlantis* Command. Your docking is cleared for SLE 1, Bay 12. Standby for confirmation on last request..."

Captain Ainsley – who was monitoring almost all the traffic on the bridge – came to the station quickly and nodded to the comms officer, eager to speak to his officers. Leaning over the station, Ainsley pulled on one of the comms headsets and smiled. "Speeder three-five-seven, this is Captain Ainsley. Good to hear your voice. Fighter cover is authorized. See you soon. *Atlantis*: out."

Ainsley nodded to the Fighter control officer and removed the headset. "Send Raptor Squadron Bravo and Spectre Squadron Alpha to the base and tell them to cover all friendly traffic both leaving and approaching the facility."

"Aye, Captain."

As Ainsley moved back to the Conn, he looked at his XO who was still busily in command of the Tactical consoles. "Commander Banick: Report."

Banick exhaled slowly with a long breath and looked to his Captain. Ainsley knew what the answer would be before he even heard it. "The last of the Macronesians are pulling out. Pretty well all enemy fighter activity has come to a halt and the remaining mercenary and alliance squadrons have pulled back. Shall we engage?"

Ainsley shook his head and sighed before clasping his hands behind his back. It was over – there was no point in hunting down cripples and risking more pilots. "Negative Commander. This battle is over. Recall fighter squadrons and deploy new patrols."

"Aye, sir."

As Ainsley turned from the Conning station to move from the bridge, he smiled and then quickly added;

"And Commander? After you've finished inviting Viceroy Rhodes to join us for a debriefing and tour, Perhaps you'd like to join me in sickbay. I believe we need to say hello to a couple of people..."

~

VI THE PHOENIX

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 6th, 2041...

Captain Ainsley walked in to the *Atlantis*'s sickbay with both concern and relief as a thousand different thoughts ran through his head after the battle that had just subsided. Walking past several wounded officers and crew who lay on beds around the room, he smiled reassuringly to them as they managed to nod respectfully to their Captain.

Looking around the room, he noticed that the chief medical officer was now approaching him with an encouraging smile of his own. "Captain, what can I do for you?"

The doctor – a man named Michael Reed – was dressed in his standard light-blue UEO science department uniform with white lab coat and looked, for the most part, in a good mood. Ainsley knew that if the CMO was happy after a battle, then the health of his patients must have been equally good. "I'm after two of my senior staff, Doctor - Commanders Hayes and Callaghan. They should have been brought back on one of the launches."

The Doctor nodded and pointed to the far corner of the room. "Yes, sir. They are both here. Given their probable treatment over the past three days, I have to say that they are in remarkably good health."

Ainsley smiled and chuckled slightly. It was the second piece of good news he'd heard that day. "Well enough for duty?" he asked in jest.

The doctor grimaced and worked his jaw. "I doubt it. The fact that they are in good health doesn't mean that I'm not taking them off the active duty list. Commander Hayes suffered broken ribs and a punctured lung... which I'm glad I got to when I did, and it looks like Callaghan managed to get himself a minor concussion and broken leg."

Ainsley nodded slowly as he took it in. He knew that broken bones would not heal quickly and both officers would be off duty for at least three to four weeks. "Thankyou, Doctor. I assume you have others to see to, so Id better let you finish the rounds."

As Doctor Reed moved off to complete his work, Ainsley put his hands in the pockets of his uniform and walked over to the two beds in the corner of the room. The usual clutter of medical tools and monitors seemed to be a bit excessive for the 'mild' injuries that the two officers had, but all-said, they were in good spirits as Ainsley walked up with a broad smile. "Doc says you two will be able to report for duty at 04:30 tomorrow morning."

Callaghan shook his head and chuckled at the remark. "Captain, if you do that to us, I am likely to go back to those goons who had us as their 'guests' for the last three days."

"Don't you worry," the Captain said with a wry grin. "You two just take it easy. As of now you may consider yourselves relieved of duty. Just take it easy for a while, ok?"

Hayes nodded slightly. Ainsley could tell that she was exhausted. The dark lines under her eyes and her overall-drowsy reactions and movements told Ainsley that he would need to keep this quick. "Banick and Commander Canebride should be

down here soon, but if you like, we can come back when you're feeling a little better."

Callaghan shook his head and pulled himself up in the bed.

"Thankyou, sir, but there are some things we need to talk about before it's too late."

Ainsley nodded understandingly and then held out his hands to slow Callaghan down. "Take your time, Commander, there is no rush.

A few seconds later, Canebride and Banick approached from behind the Captain and smiled. "Way to go, guys," Banick said with a wink. "Been on the front line for two months and you've both earned yourself the Purple Heart."

Callaghan and Hayes both rolled their eyes and groaned at the comment. Banick's typical sarcastic and joking nature fit well with the Captain's easy going sense of command, and it was easy to see how they worked well together. Any other Captain would have had Banick reassigned months ago.

"Everyone is a comedian," said Callaghan dryly with a smile of his own. The smile was only brief as it was soon replaced with a more serious expression. "Captain, our escape was aided by a North Sea Confederation intelligence agent – Major Sean Graves. He was taken to guest quarters when we arrived."

Ainsley nodded slowly and then looked to Banick and Canebride on either side of him. It was something he'd need to look in to very soon. Looking back at Hayes and Callaghan he smiled. He was sure that Banick would be able to provide at least some amusement – however terrible it might have been. "It's good to have you two back."

"Thank you, sir."

Nodding again, Ainsley looked at them and then turned an eye to Banick and Canebride who stood to his side. "In any case, I have a lot of work to catch up on. I'll check in with you two some time soon."

Callaghan and Hayes tried to manage salutes as best as they could. Ainsley smiled and waved them off. "And don't salute... I hate the attention."

With a few last goodbyes, Ainsley turned from the gathering of officers to leave. The *Atlantis's* medical centre was one of the most advanced to be found in the entire UEO Fleet and rivalled many base-side facilities. It functioned as both a scientific research centre and Med bay and utilised the most cutting edge equipment in medical science. Nearly everything could be treated from minor burns through to major conditions requiring neuro-surgery. He was sure they'd both be on their feet again in little time.

Taking his mind from the matter, Ainsley brought about his thoughts on the NSC Intelligence officer who was now at the guest quarters. Which ones, he did not know and Ainsley then stopped outside the hospital to inquire at the *Atlantis's* computer terminal. "Computer? where is Major Sean Graves located?"

"E-Deck. Guest Quarters 14-B," said the computer.

Ainsley moved off down the corridor to the Mag-Lev station. This particular Mag-Lev system, unlike *seaQuest's* before it, was able to travel not only horizontal, but also vertical through each deck. Stepping in to the Mag-Lev car as the doors slid open with a silent hiss, Ainsley sat down and the car came to life.

"Please specify destination."

"E-Deck: Sector 23."

"E:Deck: Sector 23 confirmed. Please remain seated at all times throughout transit."

Soon, the magnetically-levitated carriage had arrived at its location and Ainsley stepped out on to E Deck in section 23 of the huge submarine. The Guest Quarters were a mere 50 yards from the Mag-Lev heading towards the bow of the submarine. Predictably, a pair of UEO Marines stood outside the quarters on guard duty. While it was not really necessary to guard an ‘ally,’ Ainsley still had not determined if the man was a spy for the UEO... or the enemy. Despite this, standard war time regulations stated that all non-UEO personal were to be under guard at all times during all situations.

Approaching the door, the Marines snapped to attention and the ranking officer of the pair – a Sergeant – looked at the Captain as he approached and nodded. “At ease, gentlemen. I’m here to see Major Graves.”

The Lieutenant nodded and stepped aside from the door. As Ainsley politely knocked on the ‘hatch’ that resembled more of a pressure door, the reply of ‘*come in*’ followed quickly.

Stepping in to the room, Ainsley found himself in relatively comfortable accommodations that had everything from a small lounge through to a window to the black ocean outside that was only illuminated by the eerie glow of the *Atlantis*’s floodlights. He briefly saw a pair of Raptors fly past the window to disappear in to the darkness just a fraction of a second later. Standing at a small bar in the corner of the room in a simple, standard-issue black UEO jacket and white turtle neck sweater was Major Sean Graves - a fairly tall man of about 6 foot 2 inches, with slightly greying hair on his temples that helped to give him a fairly distinguished appearance. “Captain Ainsley” he stated simply as he snapped to attention and gave a very-‘British’ salute.

The Captain nodded and returned the gesture slightly more casually. “That’s correct. At ease, Major. You may however drop the formalities. As an officer of the North Sea Confederation acting under the jurisdiction of the NSIS, you can consider yourself a guest.”

The Major gave a pleasant smile to the remark and picked up a glass of water that had been sitting on the bench behind him. While officially the North Sea Confederation was a part of the United Earth Oceans, its military operated both in and out of UEO Jurisdiction making it more of an independent civil force, as such, the chain of command between the two forces was less integrated, with neither side really answering to the other unless in a joint operation. “May I just say, Captain, that it is indeed an honour to be taken on as a guest on what is probably the single most famed ship on the planet at this particular point in time. I thank you for your hospitality. May I get you anything?”

The UEO Captain smiled but shook his head as the Major gestured to the lounges in the centre of the quarters. Taking a seat, Ainsley settled back in to the chair, feeling a little bit odd being invited to sit down when aboard his own ship. “No, thankyou, Major... and the pleasure is mine. It is my understanding that you were of some assistance to my officers earlier. For that, *I* should be thanking *you*.”

Graves shrugged simply; his expression both impassive and gracious all at the same time. “The UEO and North Sea militaries have always shared a certain mutual interest, Captain. I was merely carrying out my duties.”

Ainsley nodded again. “That brings me to the main reason I have come to see you,” he began as he resettled himself in to the lounge. “What business does the North Sea Confederation have with a group of mercenaries? I tried going through NSC channels to get information, but your government denied any knowledge of it.”

For a moment, the British Major looked a little uncomfortable. “There are, regrettably, many reasons for that, Captain,” he said before taking a sip from the glass

of water in front of him. “Perhaps the foremost is because I was operating under... *unsanctioned* orders that meant, officially, my companions and I were lying in a military hospital south of London. My Government knows just as little about these “Nycarians” as the UEO, and that is why I was sent to this facility.”

Ainsley raised an eyebrow in slight surprise. The comment about being sent to this base implied that the North Sea military had known for some time that a conflict was indeed being waged in the Atlantic. “You knew that the Mercenaries and Macronesian Alliance had operations in the North Sea?”

Graves nodded gravely as he sat the glass of water down on the table that separated him from the UEO Captain. “Yes. We’ve known about this for quite some time as we’ve been following the actions of certain rogue groups that initially operated off the waters of France. We considered the matter an internal affair as they were in breach of our law, in our territory and eventually when we began to see the ‘larger picture’, it sparked the interest of such agencies as MI6 and the NSIS. Why the Defence Ministry has kept this a secret for so long I’m not in a position to say.”

“You mentioned other... companions?” continued Ainsley.

Graves hesitated with his reply. Something had gone wrong. “Yes... Some time in to the mission... They were caught trying to access the base computers, and were executed the next morning.”

“I’m sorry...” managed Ainsley flatly. “How long ago was this?”

Graves bit his lip. “I’ve been operating on the base for over two years, Captain,” he admitted. “It was a deep cover assignment... Infiltrate the target’s command structure and intercept high level dispatches. At the time, we didn’t know the Alliance was involved with the Mercenary operation, which is how I was able to remain in position for so long. Drop the right names and know the right routines, and Mercs will believe anything you tell them. It must have been... two months ago that this happened. We were looking for information on the disappearance of *your seaQuest* at the time.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” said Ainsley. “How is you managed to convince the Macronesians you were a *Colonel* in their Army? That’s an extraordinarily high rank to be impersonating...”

“Which is one of the main reasons I wasn’t caught,” said Graves as he handed Ainsley a PDA with several personnel papers on it. “I’d assumed the identity of a Colonel in the Macronesian Intelligence service, the ASIS, named Jeffrey Edmonds. He’d gone missing several years ago, supposedly on a deep cover assignment of his own from what our Counter-Intelligence people could tell... Possibly even defection. His records were changed, and I became him for a period of two years until you extracted me today.”

“Risky... Considering the consequences if he decided to resurface,”

“That’s what we live with in this service, Captain,” explained Graves regretfully. “We face that risk every day we’re in the job. The only sure way we have of surviving is to gain the trust of the people around us. If you can’t convince *them*, then you certainly won’t convince the Counter-Intelligence analyst who digs through NSC personnel files to try and find out who you really are.”

“Yes... Call it coincidence, but I’ve found myself crossing paths with more than one Intelligence officer lately... I suppose it wouldn’t be too appropriate for me to discuss it, however.”

Graves modestly smiled. “Well, that depends on the circumstances sir, but... I’ll save you the trouble of that and won’t ask.”

“Yes... indeed.” Ainsley decided to change the subject. “I suppose I should apologise then for “interrupting” your mission, but I’m sure you understand the urgency given the position of my officers.”

“Yes, I understand that, Captain... I learnt of their capture only yesterday. I was on my way to try and speak to them when they...”

“When they what?”

“Well sir, if I ever need instruction in escape and evasion, your Commander Callaghan will be the first person I approach.” For a few moments, Graves remained silent and then he sighed and looked back to the Captain with a smile. “In any case, Captain. I’m not sure if much I’ve gathered over the last two months will be relevant to what you are looking for, but I am quite willing to share it with you just the same.”

Ainsley returned the smile and nodded thankfully. “Anything at all would be extremely helpful. There will be a debriefing in a few hours... you are quite welcome to sit in on it.”

“Debriefing?”

Ainsley nodded in affirmation. “I’ve invited the Nycarian Viceroy to the *Atlantis*. I am guessing he is probably as anxious as we are to find out what is going on.”

~

A little over an hour later, Captain Ainsley found himself standing uncomfortably in his dress whites along with his other senior officers and Major Graves on the *Atlantis*’s sea deck.

The Nycarian flagship – *Narcissis* – still held a position some 600 meters off the DSV’s bow and Ainsley had learned shortly after the meeting with Major Graves that Viceroy Narius Rhodes had accepted the invitation to the *Atlantis* and had now docked along with his escort in the *Atlantis*’s submerged EVA bays. Despite his own disdain for dress uniforms, Ainsley found that Banick looked a lot more uncomfortable in his own, squirming and shrugging uncomfortably. Captain Ainsley’s personal access link chirped in his pocket and he pulled it out to answer it. “Ainsley here, go ahead.”

“Captain, the Viceroy’s shuttle has docked.”

Taking a slight breath, Ainsley nodded to himself slightly. “Understood. Thank you.”

A few moments passed and Banick then looked to Ainsley and sighed. “I’d still love to know why we’re dressed like we’re receiving the Secretary General himself. It isn’t like this “Viceroy” is a head of state...”

The Captain smiled at his Executive officer and then sighed helplessly. “Consider it ‘saving face’, Commander. From what I’ve been able to tell, they are way ahead of us on a technological scale.”

Banick smirked and then turned back to the large clam shell doors in front of the airlock. “I think you forgot to mention they consider us egotistical warmongers.”

Nearly every gathered officer was staring at Banick in bafflement over the statement. He looked around in surprise and then quickly added; “What? They *did* say that we were ‘yet to embrace our...’ What did they say again?”

Ainsley and the other officers chuckled and the Captain shook his head hopelessly. “Thank you, Commander. You’ve made your point.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

A few moments later, the large clamshell doors that separated the hangars from the sea deck hummed and began to open. Despite her official classification as a warship, *Atlantis* was also more than capable of carrying out comprehensive diplomatic and scientific duties. In this case, it would be the first time the *Atlantis* had served for a diplomatic function, and Ainsley was sure – given the lack of information they had about the Nycarians – that it would be a good test in that field. As the clam doors opened completely, Captain Ainsley found himself looking up to a man dressed in relatively simple attire consisting of a gold lace-lined, high-collared black cross-over tunic that was decorated with an assortment of military ribbons and insignia. Flanking him in less elaborate attire were two other men wearing a similar uniform, followed by the UEO marine guards who had been assigned to the escort duty as per regulations.

“Attention!” said Ainsley in more formal, clipped tones to the arranged officers beside him. His gaze was unwavering in the direction of the Nycarians who now walked down the stairs from the clamshell doors to meet with the UEO Captain.

The officers in dress uniform snapped to attention quickly and in perfect unison that raised curious and peculiar eyebrows from the Nycarians who now stood before them. Ainsley stepped forward from the line, saluted and smiled before extending a hand to the man who he recognised as Viceroy Rhodes. “Viceroy Rhodes, I am Captain Mark Ainsley. On behalf of the United Earth Oceans Organisation, I welcome you aboard the *Atlantis* DSV 8100.”

The Viceroy nodded in return and took the proffered hand with little hesitation. The man’s grip was firm, he noticed; something to respect and perhaps trust. “Thank you, Captain. And on behalf of the Nycarian Empire, I thank you and your crew for your hospitality.”

Ainsley returned the curt nod and began to turn towards the officers behind him. “These are my senior officers – My executive officer; James Banick, my 3rd officer Natalie Canebride, Wing Commander Gabriel Hitchcock and my Chief Engineer Edward Stevens. I would have introduced you to my other senior staff... but under present circumstances it is not possible at the moment.”

Viceroy Rhodes nodded – his expression sombre. What he said next surprised the UEO Captain. “War, Captain Ainsley, is never a pleasant time. I do hope they make a fast recovery.”

Ainsley nodded quietly, wondering if it had been instinct or other knowledge that left him to make the observation. The Viceroy turned slightly, half-extending a hand to the men behind him. “I believe you have already met Captain Arthon Kallis, commander of the cruiser *Nartuum*, and this is Prelate Andrew Drayson; my aid.”

Ainsley nodded and exchanged greetings with the two other officers before looking to the first Nycarian with recognition. “Kallis?”

Rhodes simply nodded in affirmation to the comment. “As you said in your invitation, Captain, there is much to discuss. But sufficed to say, the Captain was the first of the Nycarian Empire to ‘meet’ you. He felt it appropriate to be here now to... correct any misconceptions he may have inadvertently conveyed.”

Ainsley raised his eyebrows and suddenly remembered the face of Kallis with much more clarity. “You’re the one who we ran in to a couple of days ago?”

Kallis maintained an impassive expression, but he politely nodded. Ainsley turned to his officers and straightened.

“You are dismissed... Command Banick, Commander Canebride, will you accompany us, please?”

Walking down the corridors, Ainsley and the entourage of both Nycarian and UEO officers conducted their tour and inspection of the UEO Flagship. Viceroy Rhodes seemed to be impressed by what he had seen to that point, but Ainsley got the distinct impression that Rhodes was also, to a certain degree, being quite polite. From what Ainsley and his crew could tell from the *Narcissis* that sat only a few hundred meters from the *Atlantis*, the Nycarians already had technology that made the *Atlantis* – by all rights the most powerful, advanced, and sophisticated ship in the UEO fleet – look like a child’s toy. Ainsley stopped outside the bridge of the submarine and turned to face his officers and guests. “This, Viceroy, is the bridge,” Ainsley then turned back the Clamshell doors and placed his palm on the scanner beside the door. The heavy doors swung open with a throbbing hum and Ainsley led the others inside. “You have the distinction of being the first non-UEO official to ever step foot on it I might add.”

“It’s... *Impressive...*” said Rhodes politely as he surveyed the command center around him, noting the duty officers who turned to look on curiously. Ainsley and his officers felt awkward, almost like children trying to impress a parent with something they’d done in kindergarten. It was a formal tour, yes, but that didn’t make it any less superfluous. Kallis and Drayson moved around the main deck of the bridge and cast their eyes over the decks both above and below. So far, Ainsley thought, things seemed to be going well...

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Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 6th, 2041...

Jane Roberts pushed aside several boxes and crates that blocked her access to the dark alcoves of Marsala base’s command center. Rapier Squadron had been assigned along with several crews of technicians to sweep the base for any and all information that may lead the UEO to what was possibly considerably more complex than a simple pirate operation. While the Rapiers’ first and foremost duty was simply that of a fighter squadron, their purpose ran a lot further than simply flying escort for the capital ships of the UEO Navy. For this reason the squadron commander - Gabriel Hitchcock - had expressed the opinion that the Rapiers should get more field operations and experience on more ‘hands-on’ operations... Not that anyone expected they would be picking up rifles to take on squads of Macronesian marines any time soon.

While the idea had merit, Roberts found it only further infuriating her mood as she pushed aside debris that had collapsed from the ceiling and walls of the base’s central hub. With her in that particular area of the base, were around a dozen marines, techs and a few pilots from the rest of the squadron. They had been tasked with going through the base’s archives of computer files and other such information about the Mercenary-Macronesia operation.

Stepping over more debris, Roberts stumbled on towards a bulkhead and a large pressure door hidden behind some wreckage. “Commander?” she called to Hitchcock across the room. A locked, sealed and hidden pressure door in a command center was probably worthy of attention.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” asked Hitchcock as he walked over to where Roberts stood next to the half hidden door.

“I’ve found something, sir. It looks like we may have a second chamber.”

Hitchcock frowned and moved closer to the door. It had been sealed tight by an explosion that must have buckled the frame around it. For the most part, the command centre around them was in a similar state of disrepair. He made a thoughtful sigh and began checking the edges of the large titanium-reinforced door and then shook his head.

“Looks like one of those stray torpedoes that hit this place brought down the whole deck above us. I doubt we’re going to get this open easily without flooding the whole compartment.”

Turning to one of the techs who stood across the room trying to access one of the many computer consoles that lined the walls, Hitchcock called his attention their way. “Petty Officer Collins? We need your help over here.”

The Petty Officer obediently turned from his work and then began to walk quickly across the control deck. “Yes sir.”

A few seconds later, the Petty Officer arrived and saluted smartly to the two officers. As Hitchcock and Roberts both casually returned it, the crewman came to a slightly easier stance. “What seems to be the problem, Commander?”

“This door; it’s jammed pretty damned tight. We were wondering if you and your team could get it open.”

The crewman walked up to the jarred pressure door and looked over it for a few seconds. “Shouldn’t be a problem.” Taking a pause, Collins reached for his Personal Access Link and punched in several commands. “Bravo Team, this is Collins. We need you and your tools in the Command Center as soon as possible.”

“Bravo here, sir. We’ll be there in two minutes. Out.”

The Petty officer replaced the PAL to its place on his belt and then looked at Hitchcock and Roberts. “Looks like this could take about a quarter of an hour, Sir. I’ll notify you when it’s done if you wish.”

Nodding, Hitchcock thanked the Petty officer and led a very distracted-looking Roberts aside from the door. “What’s bothering you, Jane?” Hitchcock asked with a wry smile that said he knew something was up.

“What gives you the impression there is anything wrong, sir?”

Hitchcock sighed inwardly. Roberts usually went about every duty with a certain dedication and diligence that he’d come to expect, but today, it was obvious that something was stuck in her mind, troubling her deeply. “Well, in the nine months we’ve served together in this squadron... you’ve always gone about things in a fairly... *reclusive* way. But I’ve never seen you as distracted as you have been over the last week. It’s like you’ve had something on your mind.”

Roberts nodded, conceding the point. “Yes, Commander, I have... I got a letter from home last week...”

Robert’s voice seemed to trail off and Hitchcock immediately saw what was coming. While the *Atlantis* had been assigned to the Atlantic Ocean, the fighting back in the Pacific had grown fierce. Roberts was born and raised in Japan – a country that shared borders with the Chaodai Confederation *and* Macronesian Alliance in the middle of the biggest war since 2010, and both of those nations were allied with one another in the war against the UEO. “What’s news like back home?”

Roberts shook her head and looked away slightly. The repair crew had already arrived and had started work. “They don’t know. The UEO authorities aren’t telling them anything. I checked on the UEO battlenet for any information, and it isn’t good. The whole Marianas defence is falling apart on a daily basis. These damned Macs aren’t giving in.”

Hitchcock nodded and placed a hand reassuringly on Robert's shoulder. "I understand how you feel, but I'm sure if the UEO begins to feel that Japan is in danger, they will evacuate it."

Roberts smiled weakly and looked up at Hitchcock.

"It's a nice thought, but when that happens, I'd love to know how they plan to evacuate 110 million people."

~

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 6th, 2041...

Sitting in the wardroom of the *Atlantis*, the senior crew of both the DSV and the Nycarian fleet were well under way with their debriefings and introductions. Captain Ainsley had already introduced the Nycarian Viceroy to the latest situations in the UEO and - indeed - the world, but for some reason, he was left very unsurprised that he suspected that Rhodes already knew what Ainsley had told him. Ainsley had to admire the political finesse that Rhodes had shown – he was a very adept and polite diplomat.

Seated opposite Captain Ainsley, Viceroy Rhodes was now briefing the assembled officers on the Nycarian Empire. "...As you are fully aware, my – *our* – nation was left in total decimation after the *Weltschmerz*...literally-"

"-'*World Sorrow*'," interjected Ryan Callaghan, who had insisted on sitting in on the meeting despite the vehement objections of the doctor. He hadn't given a reason why.

The Viceroy raised an eyebrow curiously, surprised by the statement. "...You speak Taal, Lieutenant Commander?"

"I've... picked up a few words."

The Viceroy nodded carefully, continuing on, but maintaining his haunted gaze on Callaghan for a few more unnerving seconds. "Yes... What you call the "Third World War" was a far more *domestic* affair for southern Africa. The west's military response to the widespread use of nuclear weapons in the middle-east, Asia and east Europe was... *measured*. You had the luxury of going to war without ever seeing your homes, your cities destroyed..." Rhodes' voice trembled slightly, as if recalling some terrible event which had pained him long ago. "...The war for us had no objective. There was nothing to liberate, nothing to conquer... no 'greater cause' led by coalitions of the willing. It was a war of racial *hate*; a mass *genocide* driven by nothing more than a need to exterminate the other side to the last living man, woman and child."

The powerful words shocked the UEO officers in the room, although not everyone was willing to let it show. Banick swallowed a rising lump in his throat. Canebride moved a hand to her mouth, her eyes sadly looking at the Viceroy. Rhodes went on. "Our war did not end at Reykjavik's negotiation table as yours did... It continued for another fifteen years, in one form or another. Our cities were annihilated, our borders dissolved, and our culture destroyed. It's been only 15 years since the establishment of the Nycarian nation, and only 12 years since we celebrated our final liberation."

Ainsley nodded slowly, noting the passionate strain of Rhodes' voice and the underlying determination and strength he found there. But the Viceroy had not yet answered the most baffling question of all. "Viceroy... the sorrow of your history,

the... *tragedy* of your loss, raises a question I have been wondering ever since you arrived... A question raised by your own ship; the *Narcissis*."

Rhodes nodded quietly, seeing the Captain's concern. "Despite your... *expectations*, Captain, the Empire has not yet fully recovered from the great sorrow and our revolution. There are still vast centres of population devastated by the damage caused in the war. Disease and plague runs rampant throughout our outer provinces, and we have not made such great expansion to the sea as you and your UEO have. What few colonies we control in the Indian and Atlantic oceans are defended by only a *small* military. The very taskforce you see here today represents a full *half* of our standing capital fleet in the Atlantic... our subfighter forces not withstanding. But there have been *discoveries*, and perhaps – if my esteemed colleagues will allow – *benefits* from the sorrow we endured. There are just two words that have grown to hold both reverence and pride in the minds of our people... a subject that we will not openly discuss with outsiders... 'Sierra Leone'. We have gone to great lengths to both conceal *and* embrace this part of our history, but what I can tell you is that it led to a revolution on a technological and cultural level."

Ainsley and the other gathered officers were suddenly very intrigued and many eyebrows were now furrowed as Ainsley inquired further. "What was found at Sierra Leone?" the Captain asked. The Sierra Leone basin sat near the edge of the Ivory Coast and was largely unremarkable for anything short of elephants and large diamond deposits. For the first time since his visit began, Rhodes smiled wryly at the question. "You must understand, Captain, that if my nation was ever to release this knowledge, it would, quite literally, change the way the world sees itself. The consequences would be far too dire, and while there is much speculation over exactly what happened there, all I can bring myself to ask you is if the events of Sierra Leone changed the face of an entire nation in less than a year, what could it do to the world?"

With those extreme words, an uneasy silence settled in the briefing room. For a few moments, the gathered UEO officers could only silently contemplate the words that had just been said. Finally, the usually silent Major Graves cleared his throat and broke the moment of tension – much to Ainsley's relief. "If you'll excuse me, Captain? I've just realised there is a matter I must attend to."

Ainsley raised an eyebrow and turned to look at Graves who had gotten up to leave. "Can it wait?"

Luceno smiled somewhat weakly and paused for a moment. "Not really sir... It's a... classified matter."

"Oh."

With a smile, Graves excused himself and left the room. The three Nycarians all raised an eyebrow and looked to Ainsley with bemused expressions. "Captain?"

Ainsley smiled. "Don't ask; don't tell."

Rhodes' face betrayed little. "I apologise..."

"No apology is necessary, Viceroy. Such things should probably be expected under these... very *unique* circumstances."

"I agree, Captain," said Rhodes with a curt nod. "Shall I continue?"

Ainsley opened his hands. "By all means."

Rhodes went on. "After the events at Sierra Leone, the political situation in Africa changed and many new technologies and beliefs were adopted. Despite this, the extreme radical tension of the war still carried on. Eventually, South Africa went in to civil war as an uprising led by a man named Neureon Vuender-Weist-Hezuin... a prominent figure in our recent history waged a guerrilla war against the government

of the time. Eventually Neureon passed, and his successor – Marteen Carthedin - brought the final downfall of the old government. He became the First Chancellor of the Nycarian Empire. Our nation is young, Captain, but our achievements are many.”

Ainsley nodded slowly. To say that the Nycarians were proud of how far they had come would be an understatement. “Is he still your current Chancellor?”

Rhodes shook his head. “No, High Chancellor Carthedin’s term in office ended long ago. The laws and beliefs that were set forth during his term however are now to us like the Declaration of Independence is to the United States. His inaugural speech was originally only intended as his Imperial address, and has since become a very revered official document. It is often referred to for deciding matters of constitution. Our Current Chancellor is Reisson Bauer.”

Rhodes took a pause for a moment and brought up another image on the briefing room’s main screen. He’d worked out the *Atlantis’s* computer systems very quickly. It showed two large vessels; both of which Ainsley recognised as holding off the *Atlantis’s* bow – one he now knew as the *Narcissis*.

“As you know... the Empire’s borders have been completely closed to *all* trade, immigration, politics and visitation since 2010. It is enforced by a small navy. Currently, the two main vessels of the Nycarian fleet are the *Neureon* and *Nexus* class vessels. The *Neureons* act as the back bone of our expeditionary fleets and only 2 *Nexus* – the *Narcissis* and the *Nereus* – are currently in service to us.”

“Impressive vessels,” assured Ainsley. He paused for a moment and then cleared his throat. “Forgive me for asking Viceroy, but you seem quite prepared to offer all this information free of anything in return...”

Rhodes showed only a hint of a smile. “My government does not consider that an issue, Captain. There is no need to worry. As I have stated, we have long observed the actions of the rest of the world and feel that it is not *you* who is our enemy. The very fact that these “Macronesians” wish to drive a stake of mistrust between us is evidence enough to support this.”

Ainsley caught the slip and hid his surprise of the comment. The fact that Rhodes had not mentioned the Macronesians to this point was disconcerting – and wishing to be more safe than sorry – Ainsley went on with a hint of caution. “How do you know what the Alliance plans are? Not even my officers had determined that yet.”

“We see and hear many things, Captain... Even the affairs of “President Bourne” do not escape the offices of the Pretorian Citadel... But there are times when we can only regret that such *acquisition of knowledge* is necessary...”

~

Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 6th, 2041...

Standing over the computer console in the newly opened room, Lieutenant Roberts and Commander Hitchcock worked on breaking in to the Alliance base’s network. Of course, being pilots they had little experience with any kind of technical work on computer systems, so one of the *Atlantis’s* technical staff – Petty Officer Muir - sat at the keyboard bypassing sub routines, passwords and main file systems looking for the ever-elusive ‘back door’. The process of reopening the room took longer than Hitchcock and the UEO engineers initially thought. As it turned out, not only had the frame and ceiling jammed the door closed, but the door was merely an

entrance to a very secure and small passage that lead to an even thicker and stronger blast door beyond it. Whatever was contained within the computer systems was obviously very valuable. "Damn it," said the tech as the system locked him out for the tenth time. "Whoever set this system up put some uber measures in place to make sure we can't get in."

Hitchcock frowned at the tech. "'Uber'?"

The tech grinned as he proceeded to retrace his steps through the computer system and begin the lengthy process again. "It's an old term, sir. When I was younger, I spent almost all my time on the 'net... You know... downloading music, movies, surfing chat rooms and forums..."

Hitchcock was growing frustrated. They had been working on getting in to the network's files for the better part of three hours and not a single other cipher team had managed to get in to any of the other consoles that lined the room. It was growing very tiresome. "Well, Petty Officer, I spent most of my life around missile cruisers and fast planes. The word 'computer' for me meant nothing beyond what I read from the FMC of an F-22 Raptor..."

For a moment, he thought about the last few words with a slight grin; when he had decided to become a pilot, the Raptor was always his dream machine. He found it ironic that while he never got the wish of the F-22 and the air force, the namesake in the form of the SF-37 Raptors that he now piloted were easily making up for any past disappointment. "...Of course this hasn't changed much."

The Petty Officer busily went through the numerous sub directories and sub processes and then paused for a moment when another security prompt brought his progress to a halt. "Yes sir. The Raptors are cool and all, but I still like the classics. I always loved the *Stinger* myself..."

The chief smiled at the thought and then clicked his fingers in satisfaction as he bypassed the security prompt and went deeper in to the jungle of files. He stopped when he came to a single file that was more encrypted than anything else he had gotten through. "Whoa..."

Roberts, who had remained quiet to that point spoke up with curious concern. "I'm hoping that 'wow' was a happy one."

The tech shook his head as he hesitated on what to do next. "I don't know, ma'am. This file has at least two dozen other slave sub routines. By the looks of it, I'd say that if I don't get this right, we'll lose the whole file as it deletes itself."

"Can you get us in?"

The Petty Officer sighed and set about going to work. "I think so... Just give me a few seconds."

After a few moments, the chief hit the air in triumph as he got in to the file system and the display began showing the multiple files and sub directories within it. "It's too bad this system isn't as old as the base itself. If it was one of those ancient Pentium Fives, I would have simply ripped out the hard drives and plugged them in to the *Atlantis's* computer and told the ship's A.I. to do it. I can't network a secure server. Sure, it would have taken nearly three minutes to copy the files, but it's still faster than *this*."

Hitchcock and Roberts exchanged a confused look as the other techs on nearby stations chuckled in amusement. Hitchcock cleared his throat, trying to re-establish some form of focus. "What do you have?"

"Several main directories under the file name 'Rising Thunder'. What that means I don't know. We'll open them and have a look if you like."

The Commander nodded in approval. "That's what we're here for. Do it."

The tech's hands flew over the keyboard in skilled touch-typing and he began to copy the files. "I'm downloading the files from the database sir, it shouldn't take too--"

He was startled suddenly as the massive file archive suddenly did the unthinkable. His stomach went cold. "Damn it! The system is erasing the files! There must have been a backup system within the file itself. I should have *seen* it!"

Hitchcock looked at the tech incredulously. "Can't you stop it?"

"I'm trying..."

As Hitchcock watched the file size indicator tick down at an alarming rate, the Petty Officer worked to save whatever he could from the server. These files may have held the answers that they had been searching for so desperately. Losing them would be a major blow. "I can't stop the program but I'm copying whatever I can from the system."

Eventually, the last file was lost, and all Hitchcock could do was to sigh with defeat. "How much of the files did you get?"

The Chief shook his head in dismay. "Twenty percent, sir."

Hitchcock rubbed his face with his hands and looked to Roberts and then back to the chief. It had been an extremely long day. "It's late, Petty Officer. We should get what we saved back to the *Atlantis* and get it analysed. Maybe we'll still find something useful."

~

VII

MISCONCEPTIONS

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Marsala Military Supply Facility, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 7th, 2041...

It was early; *very* early. At 3 o'clock AM, the *Atlantis* was running a night watch. With most of the senior crew having retired for the night and the bridge being manned by only a few watch officers, it was comparable to a ghost ship. Major Graves found himself walking out of his quarters very quietly and closing the cabin hatch behind him. Of course, "Major Sean Graves" was not his real name. The real Major Graves had died along with the rest of his intelligence group when they tried to infiltrate the Alliance operation. Lieutenant Allen Rayner found it ironic that for the most part of his initial conversation with Captain Ainsley – perhaps the most respected and even infamous captain in the UEO – he had lied only once. Everything about the North Sea Confederation's mission had been the truth, and he had, in fact been on deep cover assignment for 2 years. And indeed, during the briefing, his sudden departure held more meaning than he openly admitted. Having already contacted his superiors, his new orders were perfectly clear. The two security officers – who now lay dead in his quarters – provided the necessary access to the *Atlantis*'s communications array and after bouncing the signal off multiple external WSKRS satellites using both a scrambled code and secondary system, his brief communicate remained undetected and his cover had still been maintained.

With a wry smile, Rayner peered around the corner of the corridor leading to the Mag-Lev and quietly walked to the car and stepped inside as the Mag-Lev's door slid open with a quiet hiss. "Please specify destination," came the computer's usual voice.

Rayner sat down in the corner of the Mag-Lev pod. It seemed odd; he was taking the time to sit down even though it was very probable he would need to get up in very short order. Why the UEO bothered with such superfluous amenities he'd never know. Even so, standing up in a horizontal elevator that accelerated from zero to 60 miles per hour in less than 4 seconds seemed like a bad idea, so he made use of the seat anyway. "Main engineering. Section 50."

"Please confirm identity. Red level security access is required for all non-command personnel."

Rayner reached in to his pocket and pulled out a small electronic device that he then proceeded to plug in to the computer console. Within just a few moments, the computer continued. "Identity confirmed. Please remain seated at all times throughout transit."

Rayner smiled in grim satisfaction and obediently settled back in to the chair. He reflected that it would be best to simply do what the computer said lest he end up little more than a crumpled and broken heap against the Mag-Lev wall.

...In the main science lab of the *Atlantis*, James Banick sat with the ship's chief computer tech in both boredom and frustration. He could not sleep at all and the only thing to do that was half productive was analyse the computer data brought back from the mountain complex just a few thousands yards away. "You found anything useful yet?" he asked with an extreme lack of enthusiasm.

“Not yet, sir. All I have found so far is a bunch of personnel files. There’s enough of them that it’s going to take quite a while.”

Banick sat up in his small stool and looked at the computer tech. “Try going through the personnel files. See if you can find out who was running the show out here.”

“Alright. It may take me a while to get through all the passwords they have on the system, but at least the computer isn’t rigged to self destruct this time around.”

For a few moments, the only sound that came from the room was the soft tapping of the keyboard and the steady hum of the *Atlantis’s* auxiliary systems. He was somewhat startled when the computer tech began light conversation. “So, how goes your life, Commander?”

Banick smiled weakly and managed a slight chuckle. “Aside from being exhausted, unable to sleep and dealing with the mountains of paper work that has accumulated over the past week, life isn’t too bad I suppose. What’s life like for you?”

The Chief shrugged as he continued his work on the files. “Can’t really complain, sir. Submarine life out here I suppose is, for the most part, a lot quieter than it would be for those Marines over in the Pacific.”

Banick grinned. “Well sure, if you consider being shot at by Pirates and Alliance mercenaries ‘quiet’.”

“I’d still prefer it over sitting in some artillery-shelled foxhole in the Marshalls.”

“...Any progress with this file?”

The tech nodded slowly and pointed to the screen. It showed several faces and names that clearly indicated that they were the base’s personnel files. Scanning the names, Banick was not surprised to see that most of the officers were a part of the Macronesian Special Forces. “Yes sir, I’ve accessed what’s left of the personnel files. Anyone you’re after in particular?”

Banick shook his head. “If I knew, I would have already said it. We can come back to these, Chief. How much of that “*Rising Thunder*” file is still here?”

The chief shrugged and began typing in commands to the terminal. “Let’s have a look...”

...Rayner stepped out of the Mag-Lev pod quickly and quietly and moved to the cover of one of the many alcoves that lined the corridor. Looking around from the safe haven against prying eyes, he looked to the sign on the door of the Mag-Lev to get his bearings.

‘D-deck:’ The stern of the submarine in section 46 just forward of the engineering section; right where he needed to be. Smiling slightly, he headed aft along the corridor he was on. This was too easy. For what was supposed to be the biggest threat to the security of the Alliance navy, the *Atlantis* was not putting up much of a struggle... not that it would matter after he was finished. Turning his thoughts to the task at hand, he began to consider the problem before him. How to get a 240,000 tonne submarine to surface uncontrollably with no hope of submerging again? It was a ‘challenge’ to say the least, but his brief tour of the submarine had told him most of what he needed to know.

Just like every major vessel in the world, the *Atlantis* relied on ballast and bilge pumps to stay at neutral buoyancy. Too much ballast and the submarine would sink, too little and it would immediately begin to surface. The one sure way to get a submarine to ascend rapidly and indefinitely was to create a very substantial amount

of damage or to forcibly blow the ballast tanks. Reaching in to his coat, Rayner pulled out the Colt sidearm and cautiously moved towards the clamshell doors that sealed the highly-secured Engine room and Fusion core from the rest of the submarine. Approaching the hand scanner on the wall, he immediately proceeded to open it up and begin cross-wiring the numerous circuits and cables that made up the complicated device. Under most circumstances, such an action would merely short out the panel and make opening the massive pressure doors impossible. But once again he was prepared for the eventuality and he then reached in to the bag that sat on his back and pulled out a small black box.

Examining the small box, Rayner checked several settings and then turned it on before attaching several small clips to the jumble of wires hanging out of the wall. Before long, a little plasma display on the top of the box began ticking away to reveal the number “8210” – the imbedded security code to open the door. Rayner smiled and hit the enter button on the small keypad, and before long, the clamshell doors were opening with a sharp hiss.

...Banick and the tech scan-read the files that scrolled down the screen and the XO shook his head in bewilderment at the sheer volume of files that had been in the archive. Much of it had been lost, and all that remained was to sift through the rubble. “There must have been at least 16 Terabytes of files on this system,” said the tech with shock.

“What’s left?” inquired Banick.

“Only the related Personnel files and a few bits of data on the operation they were running out here, sir.”

Banick considered the thought for a moment. While it was a long-shot, it was possible that the personnel files held information that would tell them what they needed to know. “Open up the personnel files again. If they are linked to this ‘Rising Thunder’ then maybe we’ll find something.”

Soon, Banick was looking at a lengthy list of pictures and names and he sighed. It was going to be a very long night.

...Glancing around one of the corners to the many different sections of the incredibly advanced, 5-deck engineering section of the UEO flagship; Rayner found himself looking at 3 UEO marines – the Engineering night watch. All three looked quite tired, but despite this, Rayner was not about to take his chances with 3 professional soldiers. Looking around him, he searched for another way to get to the pressure hull and the ballast controls. One thing he noticed about the submarine so far was that the ventilation system didn’t rely on ducted shafts, so there was no way to crawl to where he needed to go. The monolithic fusion core that stood in the centre of the engine room spanned 3 of the 5 decks and secondary systems stretched in to unseen areas of the submarine out of main areas of the boat. The eerie bluish-yellow glow seemed to shimmer ever so slightly as the coolant that ran around the outer core of the reactor flushed through a system of internal conduits and pipes. The reactor was only idling, and was not active. For whatever reason, *Atlantis* was operating on her secondary reactors only. Despite that, coolant still had to be flushed through the fusion reactor periodically to keep it from failing entirely.

Seeing that gave Rayner an idea and he produced a small micro-explosive device from his jacket pocket. The Marines were still gathered a few yards down the hall, and taking no time to wonder just how long they would remain there, he headed

to the reactor control terminal and quickly scanned his eyes around for the coolant system status monitor. Finding it, he noticed that it was locked out by password to nearly everyone but the Chief Engineer of the watch. Fortunately, he wouldn't need to access the terminal. All he needed to do was find out where the primary coolant conduits ran.

With a wry smile, he found what he needed and quickly checking the hall again to see what the marines were doing, he moved back to the reactor and placed the small explosive on the pipe he'd found on the systems display. Looking down the hall again, Rayner noticed that one of the marines was now headed back towards main engineering. Cursing, he took refuge behind the console and silently crawled away. As the marine walked around the deck doing his inspection, Rayner cautiously watched from behind one of the many alcoves around the Engine room's walls. Finally, he smiled as the marine walked up to where the explosive charge was set and then, reaching in to his pocket, he hit the trigger.

With a sharp crack and hiss of escaping gas, the marine was hit by a jet of boiling steam and fell back on the deck with a scream of pain and surprise. As the gas vapours continued to spew from the reactor, several alarms around engineering began wailing and predictably – the two other marines came running in to the room to the aid of the downed soldier. Taking his chance in the chaos, Rayner walked quickly behind the expanding cloud of gas and steam and headed down the hallway.

...Banick felt the tremor in the deck nearly at the same instant as he heard the warning from his PAL's ship status monitor. His gut ran cold as soon as he recognised the face on the computer screen in front of him.

Graves.

He was already in mid-stride as he pulled his PAL from his uniform pocket. "Banick to the Bridge! Intruder alert! Sound Condition three!"

The reply that came back was surprised by the order. "*Urrm, sir? I'm afraid you must be mistaken. There is a minor problem in Engineering with the coolant systems, but other than that-*"

"*Damn it! Just do it!*"

...Captain Ainsley awoke with a jolt as his stateroom's intercom came to life. "*Bridge to the Captain, we may have a problem, sir.*"

Struggling to force himself up, Ainsley got out of his bed and walked to the computer at his desk and pulled up a vid-link to the bridge. Commander Canebride – looking that she too had just been awoken – was on the screen. "This had better be good, Commander."

"*Sir, Commander Banick insists you come to the bridge. It seems that 'Major Graves' is a Mac spy.*"

The Captain found that he was suddenly much more awake. The idea that a Macronesian saboteur had managed to get aboard the *Atlantis* was worrying enough. The fact that it would seem they had no idea where he was made matters all the more complex, and not to mention dangerous. Pulling his uniform jacket over the command-white turtle neck, he nodded grimly.

"I'm on my way, Commander."

...The heavy bridge doors of the *Atlantis* swung open with the usual ringing of caution bells and the Captain stepped on to the command deck and headed for the

Conn. He noticed that most of the senior staff had already reported to duty – some of whom were still dressed in their night-ware.

“Commander Banick, what’s our status?”

Banick who was now getting out of the Command chair for Ainsley who had just relieved him headed for his own station beside the Captain. “Engineering says that they are still determining the cause of the explosion and I can’t tell you whether our spy was responsible, but I can tell you that we did a background check on the Base’s personnel files and it seems that one Lieutenant Allen Rayner is more than who he seems.”

Ainsley’s stomach turned. “Let me guess... Graves?”

Banick nodded.

”And we have *no* idea where he is?”

”No sir.”

Ainsley cursed and then looked back to Banick. “I thought NSC security cleared him when we ran up his file!? Take security teams and run a deck-by-deck search. If he manages to get to any of our important systems, we may end up in a lot more trouble than we already are.”

Without a word, Ainsley’s XO got up from his seat and signalled to two marines who stood at the back of the bridge. The three men were then walking out the way Ainsley had come in. The Captain was about to call to Commander Canebride at the Ops station when a slight rumble in the deck caught him off guard. Hitting the command console’s intercom to engineering, he knew in just a few short moments what the problem was as the Submarine began to lurch to starboard...

“Captain to Stevens; you there Chief?”

“*I’ll bet you’re glad I am, sir. Things are getting bad back here.*”

“Let me guess, Chief, our starboard ballast tanks were just ruptured?”

Stevens was heard sighing for a brief moment and Ainsley could almost imagine his Chief Engineer smacking his console in frustration.

“Yes, sir. We’re already on it but at this rate we’re going to sink unless we blow the tanks and surface.”

Ainsley shook his head. With what he already knew, that would be the worst possible action he could possibly take. “Negative, chief. I want you to flood the port tanks to the same point as our damaged ones. Level our descent as best as you can.”

In engineering, Stevens raised an eyebrow as he rolled his sleeves up and looked back to the towering fusion core. “You’ve got to be kidding me, sir. We’re sitting over a trench. If we sink with the damage we’ve taken over the last two days, we’re going to be turned in to shredded tin foil!”

Ainsley was grimly certain. “Do it Chief, I know what this guy is doing. Flood the tanks.”

“I hope *you* know what *you’re* doing, sir.”

“So do I Chief. Bridge out.”

Cutting the intercom, Ainsley caught the eye of a shocked Canebride who was still standing at Ops. “Sir?”

”When those Ballast tanks went,” replied Ainsley. “I asked myself what the hell a saboteur would do it for knowing full well we could simply blow the rest and surface the boat. If he wanted to destroy the *Atlantis*, flooding our tanks isn’t the way you do it.”

Canebride caught the drift. “He *wants* us to surface.”

“Exactly. The only reason he would do that is so he can either get off the sub using a jump jet or have us in a position to fire our missiles or detonate them. In either

case, I don't intend to let him. The nukes may be useless to him without the keys and codes, but we have a hell of a lot of conventional weapons on this thing that could make London or Paris look like the dark side of the moon. Get me a security team to-

"Captain," said Lieutenant Jack Phillips from the communications station. "Sorry to interrupt you sir, but Viceroy Rhodes on the *Narcissis* is hailing us."

Ainsley sighed and nodded. To the Nycarians, the *Atlantis* going down like a falling brick would likely raise many humourless eyebrows. "I was wondering when they'd decide to ask questions. Put them up."

The main Plasma screen at the fore of the *Atlantis*' bridge resolved to an image of Viceroy Rhodes standing at the back of the *Narcissis*'s bridge. "Captain? My sensor officer says that he's picked up two explosions on the *Atlantis* over the last five minutes and now you appear to be sinking. Is everything under control over there?"

Ainsley didn't look to the screen but continued to send commands through his small console at the side of the chair.

"I hope so, Viceroy. It seems we have a saboteur on board. He's blown out our starboard Ballast tanks and damaged a coolant system for our main reactor. If we can't-

"Sir!" -came the cry from tactical. "We've got a breach in security in Missile Control, section 34; weapons bays."

Ainsley closed his eyes and pulled his lips in to a tight line. While the Missiles could not go nuclear by themselves, the weapons still had enough conventional explosive force to devastate the submarine and totally destroy it from the inside out. The resulting explosion may even be enough to detonate the idling fusion core leaving hundreds of square miles of ocean floor – including the Nycarians – utterly pulverised. The result would be the same as every nuclear weapon on the sub being detonated simultaneously.

Ainsley looked at Rhodes – his expression cold and stone. "Viceroy? I'll get back to you."

...James Banick and the group of six marines moved quickly through the corridors of the DSV as Canebride's voice came over the radio. "*We've got word he's in aft Missile Control.*"

"On it, Natalie. Thanks."

After a brief pause, her voice came back, this time it was cool and showed concern. "*...Be careful, Jim.*"

"Have a little faith." He replied with an inward smile.

Moving to the heavy doors that kept missile control isolated from the rest of the ship, Banick placed his hand against the access scanner and waited for a moment as the Ship verified his clearance. "Identity Confirmed," said the computer. "Access granted."

The heavy doors slid open and Banick and the Marines levelled their rifles and found themselves walking between 12 massive missile tubes that reached upwards with threatening intent. "*Ainsley to Banick.*"

"Go ahead, Captain."

"*You've got exactly 5 minutes and 45 seconds to find this guy and stop whatever it is he's doing.*"

"Or else what, sir?"

"Or else UEO Command is going to be picking our pieces of the bottom of this ravine. Chief Stevens says the ship won't survive deep submergence in our current state."

"You've got to be kidding me," said Banick with monotonic dismay. Three marines on his order had just split off from him and his companions to search the upper levels. He and the other three – one of who was Captain O'Shaughnessy - would cover the lower parts of the missile bays.

"5 minutes, 27 seconds, Commander."

"You're a barrel of laughs, sir. Banick: out."

The Marine Captain next to him whispered as he looked straight up to the decks above. "He isn't kidding is he, Commander?"

"It didn't sound like it. Fan out, if you find him, get him alive if you--"

-A shot flew past their heads.

"...and if not?" asked the Marine, looking wearily behind him to the direction of the "Ping" that came from the ricochet.

Banick looked around the corner and a second shot rang out. "Then by all means... *shoot the bastard!*"

With that, Banick jumped out with weapon levelled and fired several pulse rifle shots blindly to the place where the bullets had come on the deck above.

On the Bridge, Captain Ainsley was being brought to the attention of a new problem as Canebride patched a communication from Stevens through to the Bridge.

As the small screen on the Captain's command console turned from the numerous systems monitors to the face of Stevens, Ainsley could tell immediately he was troubled by something. "*Captain, we have a problem.*"

"I knew you'd say that."

"I don't know if I can blow these tanks when we need to surface again, sir."

Ainsley looked at Stevens forlornly. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I wish I was. When the starboard tanks ruptured, we lost pressure around the inner hull and the rest of the port tanks went to hell with it. Way I see it is that we have about 4 minutes before we lose hull integrity all together."

"You mean we're going to be crushed."

"Yes sir."

Ainsley sat back in the command chair and checked a few of the status monitors. "Great..."

"It gets worse sir, Some parts of the ship wont even last that long. The doors of the weapons bays can only take a certain amount of pressure before they start to collapse."

"The missile tubes..."

Banick ran down the corridor with a shower of sparks spraying off the deck grates behind him. He fired several pot-shots in the direction of the fire and then dived behind one of the massive missile casings that stretched upward to the dorsal hull of the *Atlantis*. Pulling out his PAL, he opened a link to the Captain, who was across the corridor next to another of the missile tubes, "O'Shaughnessy this is Banick. On my order, lay down cover fire."

"Yes, sir."

He closed the PAL and placed it back on his belt and then looked to the Marine across the corridor. Putting up a hand, he silently counted down the seconds from three and then he got up and ran straight towards where the fire had come from.

The Captain laid down a barrage of pulse rifle fire in to the shadows of the hall and the return fire seemed inaccurate and random. Of course, for the person on the receiving end, firing back was much more preferable to doing nothing. *"Banick, this is Ainsley."*

Taking cover behind a set of conduits that ran across the deck, Banick fired several shots in to the darkness where the saboteur hid. "Go ahead, Cap'."

"We have a new problem."

Banick rolled his eyes and ducked a little lower as a stream of pulse rifle shots was returned his way. Several of the UEO marines were making efforts to fire back, but had not had any luck. "Great. Well give us the bad news."

"How about the idea that the missile room is going to be flooded in less than two minutes?"

Banick shook his head and laughed at the hopelessness of the situation. It was a no-win scenario and he was still bothering to try and catch the person who was going to die anyway along with every other person in the room. "That makes me feel so much better sir. Banick, out."

Time was running out. The idea that the missile room was about implode meant that the saboteur didn't even *need* to detonate a warhead to sink the submarine. He probably knew that, which worried Banick about "Graves'" true intentions.

"Captain O'Shaughnessy," said Banick in to the Personal Access Link. "In a few seconds, I'll lay down cover for you. Try and get to his other side. Got it?"
"Yes sir. On your order..."

Reloading the rifle with a new magazine, he pressed himself against the pipe behind him and took a few breaths. With that, he jumped up and fired several shots across the deck and noticed the marines move from their safe haven behind the number 12 missile tube and run straight across behind the Macronesian spy. Soon, Banick and the UEO marines were laying down a crossfire that was nearly impossible to avoid... Before long, the firing had stopped. "Cease Fire!" called Banick over the room. "O'Shaughnessy, you see him?"

"Negative, sir."

The other marines had already fanned out to cover the room when Banick got to the small alcove where 'Graves' had been... But he was no where to be found. All Banick saw were a spent magazine and shell casings. "Where the hell is he?" asked Banick

"You have 20 seconds, Banick!" came Ainsley's voice over the comm. "Get the hell out of there!"

"Over here!" called one of the other marines from the missile control room.

Banick ran over to the control room, and cursed as he saw the open maintenance hatch that led to the ducted systems below the deck he now stood on. Graves had escaped. He then noted the groans of tortured metal above him, echoing through the vast chamber... the outside pressure was building quickly.

"Shit," said Banick, looking in to the vacant hole. "We've gotta go! We'll catch him on the lower deck!"

Banick led the Marines out of missile control and headed to the ladder leading down to the lower deck, and the exit from the cavernous launch bays... They didn't have enough time...

Ainsley silently counted down the seconds and before long, the deck of the submarine shook with a thunderous and echoing 'crack' followed by multiple

klaxons. Canebride didn't even need to be told to give a damage report as she struggled to maintain her balance under the lurching bridge deck. "We have a massive hull breach in sections 34 through 37! Missile bays are completely submerged!"

"Seal the section off!"

Canebride's eyes suddenly filled with dread. Ainsley couldn't bring himself to look at her. "But, sir! They-"

There was no time...

"Commander, they are dead already, now *seal off that deck!*"

~

VIII

PIECES OF A PUZZLE

UEO *Atlantis* DSV 8100. Marsala mountain range, South of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. January 7th, 2041...

Atlantis's engine room was alive with activity as technicians, engineers and other crew worked frantically to get the ship stable again. The fusion core still hummed quietly beside him, still offline from the pounding the ship had taken days before, but the coolant systems ruptured by "Graves'" attack were still being locked down. Chief Edward Stevens sprinted across the upper control deck to the auxiliary ballast maintenance controls, shaking his head at the Seaman who manned the workstation. "We just lost hull integrity in missile control," he said under his breath. "We've taken on too much water. We're going down like a stone..."

"Sir, there is *nothing* I can do... Between the ruptured starboard tanks and the missile decks, I can't even blow the other tanks to get us to rise again. I've stopped the flooding of the starboard ballast tanks, but I *can't* find a way to purge them again."

"Bloody hell," said Stevens, pushing in to try and take the controls himself. "You're going about this all wrong..." he noticed, watching the Seaman work.

"Sir?"

"You can't equalize pressure on the port side ballast tanks without blowing out every remaining tank on the starboard side."

"But Chief!" protested the crewman. "I've sealed all the pressure valves on the starboard tanks. They aren't connected to the port side."

"Seaman... Have you ever seen what happens to a pressure valve when you try to equalize pressure with the outer hull at this depth?"

"...No sir, I-"

"You nearly flooded half the ship..." said Stevens quietly, his attention focussed on the ballast controls. The hull groaned around him as the ship continued to descend, approaching nearer and nearer to the point where it could no longer withstand the mounting pressure. "There has got to be a way we can get positive buoyancy from the tanks..."

"Well, there isn't anything on this ship except the coolant systems which has that kind of volume, sir..."

It hit Stevens harder than a plasma torpedo at 100 percent yield. He blinked once or twice, and then looked up to the massive, torus-shaped Fusion core that stood high in front of him. "That's it..."

"What?"

"Seaman, you're a genius... Go to reactor control, I'm going to walk you through this."

The crewman obediently, and without question, ran across the deck to the main reactor controls and brought them online. "Ok," he said. "Reactor control is online..."

"Alright. If we redirect reactor coolant to the starboard tanks, then we can purge them with the coolant before blowing the *other* ballast tanks to get the ship to rise. I want you to reroute the coolant conduits through-

"I'm sorry, sir... did you just say you wanted to redirect our *reactor coolant* in to the *ballast tanks*!?"

“You heard me, Seaman!” barked Stevens. “The coolant is about ten times lighter than water, so it *should* be able to give us the buoyancy we need to get this girl back up. We have to time this exactly... Because if I open up the ballast tanks too soon, or you open up the coolant systems too late, then the back-pressure on the coolant valve will force its way through, and then we’ll have sea water coming out the fusion core... and that would be *really* bad.”

“But, Chief... if we purge all the coolant, the reactor will overheat and burn itself out!”

“...Last I checked, we weren’t using the damned thing anyway.”

...Banick dived under the water-tight door just as split-seconds before it clamped shut behind him, the groans of shattering, collapsing metal on the outer hull above him making him gaze up to the ceiling nervously. Ahead of him, Captain O’Shaughnessy was picking himself off the deck and straightening his helmet. The Marine let out a long sigh and then looked at the Commander with bewilderment. “*Fuck’s* sake,” the Irishman cursed angrily. “I ‘ate it when that happens!”

“He’s headed to the hangar,” said Banick quickly as he walked away down the hall. O’Shaughnessy and the other marines followed closely behind.

“How do you know, sir?”

“Because every other part of the ship between here and the torpedo rooms is sealed off... If he wants a way out, then that’s going to be it.”

“Alright... We’ll split up. Sergeant? Take Private Johns and head down to the lower hangar. Commander Banick and I will try and track him up here.”

“Yessir.”

The other two marines disappeared quickly, and O’Shaughnessy nodded confidently to him. Banick motioned for the marine to go around, and set off down the main access corridor to the hangars. The halls were abandoned now, the crew having long since evacuated this section of the ship.

His rifle clutched high at his shoulder, he carefully advanced forward to the end of the corridor, adrenaline racing through his system as he scanned each alcove around him. Graves couldn’t have gone far...

On cue, he saw a shadow move across the corridor, and he dove for cover just as the first, accurate shots cut through the air where he’d been standing. He aimed his own rifle around the corner and fired several shots before risking a quick glance in to the passage... *Nothing*. He stepped out in the hall carefully, and then ran to the end, looking in to the vast hangar beyond... The flight bays were filled with subfighters, speeders, launches and sub-bombers, but of Graves, he saw no trace.

The ‘clack’ of a charging handle being pulled back behind him made Banick close his eyes as a new, sickening feeling swept through him. “Turn around,” said a familiar voice. “...Slowly.”

Banick obediently did as he was told, and set the rifle he held on the deck. “Major Sean Graves”, perhaps more accurately called Lieutenant Allen Rayner, stood with an M31 rifle in his hands and a blank, cold stare in his eyes. He wanted nothing more than to pull the trigger and put an end to Banick’s life then and there, but first, he had a few questions.

“What do you know of Rising Thunder?” he asked flatly.

Banick didn’t know how to answer, and swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. “...Who are you?” he countered.

Rayner's grip on the gun tightened, and he raised it threateningly. "Answer my question!"

"It's my ship. You first," dared Banick, not yielding lightly to the threat.

Rayner shook his head, and raised the rifle high... his finger coming on to the trigger firmly, squeezing it...

The crack of the rifle cut through the air like lightning. Banick's eyes opened wide with shock, but still he stared in to Rayner's eyes, in the very depths of the man's mind. Rayner's gaze suddenly became weak, and the hammering blow of bullets that Banick had prepared for never came... instead, he watched as the other man grew pale, and collapsed to his knees. The clattering of empty shell casings against the deck pinged electrically through the air, and Banick's jaw dropped, exhaling sharply as he saw Captain O'Shaughnessy standing at the opposite end of the corridor, his own rifle raised high to his shoulder, and his eye gazing down the irons.

The Marine lowered the rifle, and quickly ran down the hall, the two other marines of the squad not far behind.

"Are you ok, sir?" he asked Banick, who was still shaken by what had just happened. "Yes..." he rasped, staring down at the crumpled form of Rayner on the deck. "...I'm fine."

...Canebride closed her eyes and pulled her lips in to a tight line as she carried out the order and sealed the aft missile decks from the rest of the submarine. Ainsley could only sit and shake his head slowly at what he had just ordered. Slowly, the klaxons were cut off one by one and he took a moment catch his breath and he was brought from his state of momentary shock by Lieutenant Jack Phillips at the Communications station. "Captain, we're being hailed by the *Narcissis*. Viceroy Rhodes is asking if we need assistance."

Ainsley nodded as he looked at the numerous status monitors around the bridge. So many systems were simply not working and others were non-existent. The most powerful ship in the world was - by all rights - crippled. "...Tell them it would be appreciated, Lieutenant."

He then turned to the command console once more and opened an intercom through to Stevens in engineering. "Ainsley to Stevens," he said.

"Go ahead, Bridge."

"You'd better have good news for me, Chief."

Stevens' voice was calm, which came as a relief to Ainsley after the chaos of the past few minutes. "I have good news and bad news, the good news is that I've stopped our fall, and we have dive control again... at least for the time being. The *bad* news is that in about 5 minutes, the fusion core is going to burn itself out completely, and there isn't a thing I can do to stop it... We're *going* to need a dry dock... *and* a new fusion core."

Ainsley nodded slowly and smiled. If that was the worst thing that happened that day, then he could consider himself lucky. He already suspected the ship would be headed back to the dry docks given the events of the last few days. She had been gutted, beaten and rewired so many times that he was nearly sure the technicians at New Cape Quest would be baffled as to how it was still operational at all.

...That said, he was certain that the DSV development teams would be quick to come up with solutions to eliminate the flaws, and *Atlantis* would likely see time being refitted before she put to sea again.

"Banick to Ainsley," said the familiar voice over the intercom. Ainsley smiled at the sound of that and noticed Natalie Canebride look up from the Operations station

with a smile that said a thousand words. “It’s good to hear your voice again, Commander. We were getting worried that we might not hear from you again.”

“I was worried about that too, sir. I’m in sickbay at the moment. A little banged up I’m afraid, but nothing too serious.”

Ainsley kept smiling. Maybe today wouldn’t be so bad after all. “Welcome back to the land of the living Commander.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The intercom closed, and Canebride was visibly distracted as she stared off in to nowhere: *finally* content. She eventually caught the Captain’s gaze, and Ainsley smiled again. “Go on, Commander. I think we can do without you for a few minutes.”

~

Captain Mark Ainsley and Viceroy Narius Rhodes walked along the decks of *Atlantis* one final time as the two Captains and their ships – *Atlantis* and *Narcissis* – prepared to go their separate ways. They had decided to meet one final time to discuss the few remaining loose ends that had to be tied up. For the most part, Ainsley still had very little knowledge about who Rhodes or the Nycarians were, but he could tell from the way Rhodes had avoided so many questions before that it was not a welcome topic of conversation, nor one that was easy to discuss for the South African. Even the massive *Narcissis* that sat only a few hundred meters away was a mystery to him: a mystery that wouldn’t be solved any time soon. “Captain,” said Rhodes one final time. “I would like to thank you again for your help over the last few days. That said, what you’ve told me of the UEO has... opened my eyes. I assure you it will be reflected in my report. I must confess that while I cannot agree with many of the decisions your government is making... I can *understand* them.”

Rhodes was speaking with conviction once more, his tone both passionate and solemn. Ainsley was forced to wonder just how many secrets Rhodes still hid. “Are you sure you understand us?” he asked with an inward smile.

Rhodes nodded slowly; he himself had a hint of a smile as he contemplated the unspoken question, secure in the knowledge that in some degree, both he and Ainsley were still thinking on the same level. “I don’t know if we will ever fully accept *your* world after what we’ve been through, Captain. The Empire has already travelled the road you follow now, and it did not end in a way that we could be proud of. It was a good fortune that saved us, and we learned greatly from our mistakes... I live in a very different world to what I saw ten years ago.”

For a moment, Rhodes paused. “...There is something a wise man once said that I’ve contemplated more than a few times... ‘Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.’”

Ainsley smiled inwardly before looking at Rhodes knowingly. “Albert Einstein,” he replied.

The Nycarian nodded in affirmation and raised an eyebrow curiously, perhaps as a teacher might regard a student. “Perhaps there is hope for you yet, Captain.”

“I’d prefer to think there is always some degree of hope, Viceroy. Our most enduring quality is the search for that which we can’t achieve... And it takes only a few men of courage to make a majority in human society.”

“Insightful,” thought the Viceroy aloud. “Although one might say that the words ‘human society’ are a contradiction.”

Rhodes kept walking, letting Ainsley look at him with a bemused smirk before he stopped and then turned to face him one last time, removing a file from under his coat and passing it to Ainsley. "They say 'seek and you shall find', Captain... But sometimes there are answers you're looking for... that, perhaps, you would rather not find."

Ainsley took the file hesitantly as he read the label on its cover. Rhodes nodded slightly and then extended a hand. "Until another time, Captain."

The Captain took the hand firmly, and confidently. He had made an ally here, and in time, he would need all the friends he could get. "...And an interesting time it has been."

~

Commander James Banick sat in his quarters with Natalie Canebride beside him, going over the day's events with a grim sense of mortality he would have rather not dwelled on. Banick had come from the *Atlantis's* medical center only to have Canebride quite literally run in to him outside. Now they finally sat quietly with little to worry or disturb them. "What happened, Jim?" asked Canebride quietly from her comfortable place leaning on his shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"The missile room - Ever since you came back, you've been... distracted."

Banick sighed as he placed an arm around Canebride who did not stir. "It was something Rayner said to me before he died," he said quietly. "He asked me what I knew about something called 'Rising Thunder'... And it's not the first time I've seen that name."

She looked up at him curiously from his shoulder. "What did he mean?"

Banick smiled stupidly and shook his head. "I dunno. Maybe it was just the gun he was pointing at me, but... there was something in his eyes that I just can't explain, like there was something going on which he was trying very hard to hide."

She smiled, sighing softly. "But nothing happened. You're safe..."

Banick shook his head. "It's not that... I just get the really bad feeling that something's coming that we're not ready for... And I could tell by the look in his eyes that he knew that. Whatever we found today was important to him, to the *Alliance*, even. And we don't have a clue what it is."

Gently pulling away from Canebride's side... he instantly regretted it when he got up of the lounge, the warmth of her against him was comforting, and tender... He walked to the window that looked out over the eerie darkness outside. Only the occasional floodlight from a passing WSKR would illuminate any detail from the abyss. It was a strange feeling; standing, looking out at the bottom of the ocean knowing you were over 20,000 feet beneath the surface, all alone.

Soon, she was by his side once more, and she put her hands on his waist, and rested her chin on his shoulder to gaze out after him. "We'll get through it," she whispered. "Together. I promise."

Banick smiled at her. For once, he didn't have an answer. "Why are we doing this? I'm so...*confused*."

"Don't be," she said. "Whatever happens, whenever it happens, we'll be ready for it."

He nodded slowly, and for the first time, he wasn't sure if he could really believe those words.



...Ainsley sat quietly in the dimly-lit stateroom, twirling the brandy in his glass slowly in time with the soft music that drifted through the room. Berlioz was one of many classical composers that he'd taken a liking to over his life. The particular movement of 'Vallon Sonore' that he now listened to reflected his mood to a tee – exhausted and most definitely *Diminuendo* – 'gradually slowing down'.

In four days, he had got a total of just nine hours sleep and was now so tired that it was *hard* to sleep at all. He was about to decide that he would give sleep another shot when a rapping came from the door. Getting up from the couch, he moved over to his desk, turned down the music, and then walked to the door to answer it. He was not surprised to see Commander Gabriel Hitchcock standing there as he remembered he'd been expecting him. "Ah, Commander," said Ainsley. "Please come in."

"Thankyou sir," replied Hitchcock as he walked in to the Captain's quarters. As the chief Pilot on the *Atlantis*, Hitchcock was very rarely seen doing anything but paperwork and had very little time for social calls. Even his visit now was on mostly official business.

Nevertheless, Ainsley was glad to see him. Hitchcock and Ainsley had served together several times over the years, and if not a friend, he was certainly a close acquaintance he could talk with.

"Long time; no speak, Gabriel," he Ainsley with a smile, extending a hand. Hitchcock took it, grinning wryly. "How's life for you then, Mark?"

Ainsley nodded and shrugged. "I can't complain... I *did* accept the assignment, so I suppose I have to live with it."

Hitchcock laughed as the two men walked over to the lounge. "Can I get you something?"

"Sure, why not. What have you got?"

Ainsley walked over to the small bar and opened the cupboard. "Whiskey, Scotch, Vodka--"

"-My *god*, man," laughed Hitchcock incredulously. "If UEO Command knew how much alcohol you have stashed away, they'd arrest you for drink-driving... and I'll have the Whiskey, thanks."

Ainsley laughed and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels before getting a glass out from under the bench. "To *hell* with regulations. It's bad enough they won't even let me smoke a cigar these days, so what's a hangover once in a while?"

Pouring the drink and heading back to the lounge, he handed it to Hitchcock, picking his own up from the table. "Cheers," he said as he clinked the glass against the Commander's. Hitchcock looked down at the file he was holding and then snapped his fingers. "Before we get so carried that I forget about it, heres the reports from fighter command that I *am* actually here for."

Ainsley smiled as he took the file and put it on the table. "Excellent. So, How's life been for you? ...Dare I ask the question."

Hitchcock shrugged as he took a sip of the whiskey. "Like you, I've hardly had time to scratch my ass, let alone run a sea wing. There're problems in the *Stallions*, constant maintenance of the *Rapiers*...And then Command, of course, expects me to complete every possible report on every single pilot on this ship at a weekly interval..."

“I know the feeling,” sympathised the Captain. “I’ve had to hack through the red tape that Command has sent my way with a machete. *One* torpedo hits the ship and suddenly they want a board in inquiry in to the matter. Heaven help us...”

Hitchcock’s mood dampened with that. “Unfortunately, I understand why... The wife and kids have been a little concerned.”

Ainsley nodded again. “Jannet isn’t coping?”

Hitchcock shook his head slowly. He and his wife had two children and owned a house in Pearl City: Right in the middle of a war zone. “They want to sell the house and move to New Cape Quest where things are a little quieter. I’ve told them not to rush in to anything... but I have to admit I’m starting to wonder if they are right. The front lines around the Marianas have turned to hell... And my squadron XO tells me things aren’t so great around Japan, either.”

Ainsley put his glass down and sank back in to the lounge. “Funny that now, when UEO Command finally begins to see just how SNAFUed this situation is, we’re *already* at war and don’t know which way to turn... I know Samantha was going to meet me in Pearl Harbor in a couple of months with my sons... but I’ve told her to stay in London.”

Ainsley’s own wife Samantha lived in England along with their three children who were each over 20 years old. For quite a while, he’d wanted to take them around Hawaii for a holiday, and that had been his intention for over a year. Then the war came and turned Hawaii in to an undersized, cramped bastion for thousands of Marines and hundreds of ships, and he’d decided that ‘sightseeing’ probably wasn’t the best of ideas.

Realising the tension in the room had suddenly risen to an all-time high, Ainsley quickly changed the subject. “Tell me, Gabe,” he started wryly. “I don’t suppose you could put light on a certain rumour I have heard in recent history...” Hitchcock smiled, suspecting he knew where the conversation was going. “...I have heard a rumour from certain birds up in the brass,” Ainsley continued, “that your sister is going to be taking command of the new DSX sitting in Pearl Harbor right now.”

Hitchcock grinned, failing miserably to keep a poker face on the subject. “I was under the impression *DSV-III* was still classified?”

Ainsley shrugged. “It is, but given our position in the chain of command I’m not really sure it matters.”

What was generally an overlooked piece of information on the *Atlantis* was that Gabriel Hitchcock had an elder sister - Katherine – a former Lieutenant Commander who had served as the Second Officer aboard the first *seaQuest* during its first tour of duty in 2017. In more recent days, she had re-enlisted in the UEO under the crisis act when the Admiralty had asked many of its veterans to return, and she was given a commission once again.

“Yes, it’s true,” said Hitchcock, confirming Ainsley’s suspicion. “Katie *is* indeed taking command of the *Odyssey*. And I might add that even that the ship’s name is in question right now...”

Ainsley raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Hitchcock was now grinning broadly. “Well that would spoil the surprise. But sufficed to say it’s a nice homage to history.”

Ainsley smiled, silently suspecting he knew what the secret was, but saying nothing of it. “I have to admit I’m surprised you know more than I do about the project... But I’m sure it helps when you are so close to the Captain of the ship, so I’ll need to leave it at that.”

After only a little while longer, Both Ainsley and Hitchcock had begun to wind down once more. Since being woken up at 3am, Ainsley had not slept and it was now nearly 0900.

“Well,” said Hitchcock as he pulled himself off the lounge and finished the last of his whiskey. “I think I’d better be off, Mark. I’m going to call in sick with the watch and try and get some rest. I’ve not slept in days...”

Ainsley nodded and extended his hand once more. “I feel like doing the same, but unfortunately I’ve got to debrief the senior staff again before we head back to New Cape Quest for repairs... and I’m *not* looking forward to the paperwork.”

“Yes sir,” said Hitchcock putting on a bit more of a formal tone. “I’ll talk to you later then... For now, I think we’re both going to have enough on our plates.”

~

Ainsley sat at his desk once more and sighed. In front of him were two files – one read “Rising Thunder” and contained all the information they knew on the Mercenary/Alliance operation on Marsala base, and the other he was almost too hesitant to touch. It had been given to him by Viceroy Rhodes, and across its cover were two words that had raised much interest. ‘Sierra Leone’.

Sighing, he picked up the file and opened it to begin reading.

Within only a few sentences, he swallowed a lump in the back of his throat, and opened the top drawer of the desk and placed the folder under a bunch of papers that he would probably not get to for a long time. Picking up what was left of his Brandy, he looked at it a moment, and then placed it aside, thinking the better of it. Getting up from the desk, he headed off to the bridge with Viceroy Rhodes’ words still hanging in the back of his mind;

‘...If the events of Sierra Leone changed the face of an entire nation in less than a year, what could it do to the world?’

~

Atlantis DSV: "Shadows of the Phoenix"

Written by James Ward

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