

1

“Damn,” muttered Holbrook in the gloom of the secure compartment outside the *Avenger’s* bridge. Images of flag-covered caskets and military salutes filled his head as he mulled over his new orders. He scoured each line for any shred of insight.

God ... of course. Holbrook exhaled, his shoulders dropped, and his face filled with a half-smile. *The orders are not what they seem.*

The compartment’s doors slid apart, admitting him into a compact, dimly lit semicircular room of equipment and men.

“Captain on the bridge,” announced the ship above the chatter of officers at their stations and the sibilance of the atmospherics.

Captain Holbrook stepped to the middle of the room and squinted at the main viewscreen, a shimmering panel filled with a drifting star field. “Status report.”

“Sir,” barked Commander Stephens from a station to the captain’s rear, “we’re less than two hours from our rendezvous with the Kuiper Belt planetesimal Dowell 951. The maintenance crew’s completed their tasks on the deep space listening post and signaled they’re ready for extraction.”

“They’ll have to find another way home,” murmured Holbrook.

Stephens had craned his neck to catch the comment, but the din swallowed the captain’s words. “Wha—”

“Ensign Doerr,” said Holbrook, “set course for Plana Petram, maximum speed.”

“Plana Petram, aye aye.” The ensign’s thin fingers danced in fits along the surface of her

station's terminal as she worked with the ship to calculate their new course. Doerr paused between flurries of taps to study the diagrams presented by the computer, her bright terminal casting their delicate lines and geometric shapes across her face. After a final, extended pause, she placed her palms flat against the glass. "Course set," she said. "The ship computes 56,034 light-years to the Plana Petram asteroid and an estimated travel time of ... twenty-two days?"

"Is there a problem, Ensign?" asked Holbrook.

"Begging your pardon sir," said Doerr with a nervous swipe at her red bangs, "but we've traveled half that far before, in days, not weeks."

"Take a note of our final coordinates, Ensign," said Holbrook. "Plana Petram sits outside the Milky Way, at a spot where the mass density is at best twenty percent of the galactic planar mean. Even with the Gravity Drive at full intensity, there aren't as many spacetime deformations for it to pull and push against to propel the ship."

"Yes, sir. Noted, sir." Ensign Doerr tapped her terminal. "Laying it in."

The star field slipped across the central viewscreen as the *Avenger* banked to port and arced gently upward, the warship aiming for its new destination above the galactic plane. A soft klaxon sounded, and the Gravity Drive engaged to maximum power. Each point of light on the viewscreen's black canvas stretched to a thin rainbow streak, bent and twisted by the eddies of warped spacetime surrounding the starship. "We're underway to Plana Petram."

"Very good," said Holbrook. The captain headed to the engineering station, the leftmost post along the rear bulkhead. Lieutenant Commander Conlin stood before the station's elevated terminal, his head all buzz cut and ears. Holbrook positioned himself behind the officer but far enough right to land in his peripheral vision. The lieutenant commander remained focused on the engine readouts. "Mr. Conlin," Holbrook finally said, fed up with waiting for the officer to

acknowledge him. He spoke with authority but gated his volume to avoid surprising the man.

Lieutenant Commander Conlin jumped, startled. “Sir?” he replied. He faced the captain as if standing at attention but quickly turned back to his post.

“We aim to use the Gravity Drive for the next three weeks,” said Holbrook. “Do you foresee a problem with that?”

Conlin’s head launched into a series of sharp up-and-down movements, his eyes bouncing between indicators at the top of the viewscreen and a string of numbers near the bottom. “That’s a long time,” he said, still facing his terminal screen, “but I can’t think of a reason it’d be a problem.” Conlin gingerly nudged a set of sliders, coaxing their adjacent indicators back into the green.

Holbrook grew impatient with Conlin’s fixation on his terminal. Overseeing the ship’s subsentient AI as it settled them into a new course was no small task, but the captain couldn’t see why it should prevent considered answers to his questions. “Is Mr. Lynch on duty?” he asked.

“No, sir,” said Conlin. “I believe he’s on sleep cycle right now.” The lieutenant commander’s head snapped to the upper-left corner of his terminal as a bar readout briefly peaked into the red. “He wasn’t expecting anything would need his attention. I can get him for you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Holbrook. “Just inform him as soon as practical of our planned extended use of the Gravity Drive.”

“Aye, sir,” said Conlin.

Holbrook sensed Commander Stephens’s eyes burning into his back. He wanted to avoid engaging his executive officer but couldn’t resist confirming his suspicion. Glancing right, towards the commander’s station, the captain found Stephens staring back at him. Their eyes

locked before he could look away. Holbrook spun left and headed in a wide arc across the bridge, swinging out near his chair before barreling for the doors.

“Captain!”

Two meters from the exit, Holbrook halted. He turned to find Stephens watching him intently from his chair and swiveled to face into the bridge. “Yes, Commander?”

Commander Stephens had eyed the captain from the moment he arrived on the bridge. He’d quickly spotted all the signs of an agitated Holbrook: clenched jaw, rigid stance, pursed lips. Whatever bothered him had to be more than a trip to some backwater destination. “It’s clear our orders have changed. What’s our new mission?”

Holbrook’s blank stare drove Stephens to regret asking the question. The captain maintained strict control over his vessel but fostered a more egalitarian bridge than on other starships. Holbrook made clear he held the final say, but he welcomed all viewpoints, having declared on several occasions there was no such thing as a stupid question.

The captain kept up his stone face, his broad shoulders and two-meter frame looming even from halfway across the bridge. “We’re to take aboard two VIPs at Plana Petram,” Holbrook said at last. “Who they are, I don’t know.” His tongue darted out, moistening his lips. “We are then to proceed to Sagittarius A Star.”

Members of the bridge crew half-following the conversation between Holbrook and Stephens froze mid-task, their fingers hovering motionless above their terminals. All heads turned to the two men, and an unnatural stillness descended on the room, whooshing air the only sound.

“Sag A Star?” asked Stephens. “As in the black hole at the center of the galaxy?” Chief Tactical Officer Lieutenant Bolton laughed before catching herself, struck by the absurdity of the

idea said aloud.

“Yes, that one,” Holbrook stated flatly. He looked around the room, his eyes momentarily holding the gaze of each visibly shaken officer at their station. “As you were,” he said, pivoted, and walked into the secure compartment. The doors slid shut behind him.

All eleven bridge officers stared after the captain, unmoving and silent at their posts. The atmospherics throbbed, a hissing heartbeat that grew oppressively loud in the otherwise soundless space. An alarm chirped for attention, then stopped, the condition correcting itself.

Stephens burst from his chair and bounded for the doors, turning sideways to squeeze through the widening gap. They closed with a soft *chunk*.

Stillness returned to the room. Several officers exchanged glances.

The bridge exploded in chaos.

2

“Sir! Sir!” shouted Stephens as he chased Holbrook down the narrow Core Walkway.

After rushing from his station, Stephens could only stop and wait inside the secure compartment that restricted access to the bridge, pacing and cursing at its sealed outer doors. His mind reeled. How could CentCom be sending them to Sag A Star? What did they think the *Avenger* could possibly accomplish there? And how could Holbrook be so nonchalant about such a mission?

Stephens launched a fresh obscenity at the doors. The ship used the secure compartment to confirm identities and scan for prohibited items before granting access to the bridge. Why in the world did the same protocol apply on exit? Every moment of delay lowered his chances of catching the captain. Holbrook could move swiftly and with a large enough head start easily lose him in the ship’s maze of corridors.

The doors finally opened, and Stephens leapt into the Center Loop corridor. There was no sign of Holbrook in either direction along the wide, curved passageway. Three crewmen approached on his left.

“Have you seen Captain Holbrook?” Stephens asked in a rush of words.

“Back that way,” said one of the crewmen, a midshipman, thumbing to his rear. “I think he was headed to the Core Walkway.”

Bolting left, Stephens dodged several more crewmen as he charged down the Center Loop corridor. He followed the passageway to its midpoint behind the bridge and headed right, entering the Core Walkway. The corridor ran for twenty dim meters between the rooms that

housed the hemispheres of the ship's computer core, narrow by design for faster signal travel within the kilometers of optical cabling beneath its deck panels.

Stephens spotted the captain's head in the low light, bobbing above the others halfway down the walkway. Even in the best of circumstances, Stephens had trouble keeping up with Holbrook, the captain's long legs consuming nearly a meter of passageway with each stride. A burgeoning shift change meant mounting traffic within the narrow corridor.

The commander charged forward but fell even farther behind as each encounter with an oncoming crew member became a silent negotiation over who would stand aside while the other proceeded. The captain advanced with no such impediment as all deferred to his passage. His progression down the walkway resembled an impromptu military review where each crew member pivoted to stand at quasi-attention as the captain walked by.

"Captain Holbrook!" Stephens continued calling out as he proceeded down the walkway but stopped when the top of the captain's head brightened, illuminated by the overhead lights of the intersecting corridor. In an instant the captain disappeared to the right. He was likely headed to his quarters, though that wasn't guaranteed. Out of sight the captain could duck into a runway and in moments emerge on a different deck. A few more seconds in the Core Walkway and Stephens risked losing Holbrook entirely.

Accelerating down the walkway, Stephens pushed crewmen aside in a mad dash for the end. Just before reaching the exit, he thrust his right arm back and pressed his hand flat against the bulkhead. Using the friction of his open palm, he whipped his body around the corner, launching himself into the intersecting corridor.

Smack.

Commander Stephens slammed into a stationary Holbrook, bouncing off the captain's

muscular torso. The collision left him stunned and his left shoulder smarting, as if he'd plowed into a thinly padded bulkhead.

"Sorry, Captain," Stephens sputtered, agitated from the collision. He worked to collect himself, standing straight and tugging at his uniform jacket to smooth the creases.

"I heard you calling me back there, but I didn't want to stop in the walkway," said Holbrook. He turned and headed down the corridor.

Stephens lurched forward, his heart still pounding from the last-second sprint and collision. He pulled even with the captain and forced his legs to keep pace with Holbrook's wide strides.

"I hadn't planned on discussing our mission when I showed up on the bridge," said Holbrook, stern-faced and looking straight ahead, "but I couldn't ignore you when you pressed me about our new orders. My objective was just to get us to Plana Petram where they owe us a full briefing on the whole thing."

"Captain, we're not—" Stephens caught himself half-shouting and lowered his voice. "We're not really going to Sag A Star, are we?" Despite the captain's stated disbelief in dumb questions, Stephens instantly realized he had just asked one.

"We've been ordered there," said Holbrook. "Besides, weren't you just yesterday complaining about all the 'there and back' ferry missions CentCom has been feeding us recently? Like the one we just aborted?"

"Sure, I'd like to do more than shuttle personnel around the local star group, but a suicide mission to the galactic core wasn't what I had in mind."

"It's not a suicide mission," said Holbrook. "Once we get to Plana Petram—"

"Plana Petram, Plana Petram," said Stephens, rolling his eyes. "A three-week detour to the sticks to pick up a couple mystery VIPs. How important can they be, stationed on a rock clear

outside the goddamn galaxy?” The ship’s executive officer slowly shook his head. “At least we’ll have plenty of time to get our affairs in order.”

“Pull it together, Commander!” Holbrook’s raised voice drew the glances of passing crewmen. He grabbed Stephens by his uniform sleeve and tugged him into a nearby maintenance alcove. “Listen,” he said in a hushed voice, “I get that you’re upset. And I’ll admit, on the face of it our orders seem pretty bad.”

“They’re more than pretty bad. They’re a goddamn death sentence.”

“They’re not as grim as they sound,” said Holbrook. “They can’t be.”

“They can’t be?” asked Stephens, his voice rising. “Is there some part of the orders you’ve left out?”

“No, but after thinking them through, it just doesn’t make sense to interpret the orders that way.”

Stephens grew more confused. Either the orders were what Holbrook had stated, or the captain wasn’t sharing a crucial piece of information. He couldn’t tell without knowing exactly what they’d been instructed to do. “I want to hear the orders.”

Holbrook grew quiet. “You of all people know they’re for my eyes and ears only.”

“That’s standard operating procedure,” said Stephens, “but there’s nothing standard about what’s happening now.” A captain didn’t share orders directly with members of their crew, not even with their executive officer. The dispatches from superiors often included notes, asides, or even personal greetings meant only for the commanding officer. Orders, no matter how well stated, were also open to interpretation. Playing them for subordinates risked opening debate over their exact meaning, undermining the captain’s ability to command.

Holbrook’s face turned a shade of red. “I shouldn’t have to play them for you,” he barked. “I

should be able to count on you to run this ship regardless of what you think you might learn from hearing them. If I can't rely on you—”

“This is not about me,” growled Stephens. “I certainly have my doubts about what I've heard so far, but I've said my piece, and that's enough for me to function as your executive officer. My concern is the crew and keeping this ship together during our three-week jaunt to Plana Petram. They're gonna be scared. Heck, they're already scared. I can feel the fear spreading through the ship right now. They're wondering if we're coming back, and they're gonna be asking me all sorts of questions about our orders. And when that happens, I need to do better than, ‘well, that's what the captain told me.’ I owe them more than that, and so do you.”

Holbrook's eyes remained glued on the commander. His frown softened after a few moments. “Fine,” he said. “I'll play them for you in my quarters.” He clasped Stephens's shoulder and smiled. “And when we get there, I'll fix you a drink. Seems like you could really use one.”

Stephens glared at the captain. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Don't worry,” said Holbrook as he stepped back into the passageway. “I'll make sure you don't get out of control.”

Stephens maintained his glare as he followed the captain out of the alcove. The two men resumed their walk down the corridor without a word, traveling another twenty meters before turning right and stopping at the first door. The silver nameplate on the bulkhead read “HOLBROOK” in large black capital letters.

“Open,” said the captain. The gray-blue cabin door slid aside, and the two men filed into the darkened space. Overhead lights came on as they entered.

Despite touches like a dark brown leather couch and matching reading chair, Stephens

always found the captain's quarters quite cold. No personal effects hung on the bulkheads, and few rested on any surfaces. A nondescript bunk with taut sheet and blanket sat a few paces from an uncluttered desk—the two places the captain spent the majority of his time while in his quarters could have belonged to anyone.

As Stephens headed to the couch, an object on Holbrook's desk grabbed his attention. In the middle of the chocolate brown leather desk pad sat a pewter-colored box, its lid lying nearby. The box had a square base fifteen centimeters on a side and stood ten centimeters tall. Bright red felt lined the interior.

Stephens veered to the desk and looked in the box. Inside sat a palm-sized metal fragment. "What's this?" His hand froze mid-travel as he reached for the container. The commander quickly glanced at Holbrook. After a nod from the captain, Stephens lowered his hand the rest of the way into the box. He slipped his index finger under the metal shard, gingerly pinched the fragment between his finger and thumb, and lifted it out, mindful of its sharp, jagged edges. The shard was thin and very light but sturdy, not fragile. It had a gentle curve, like the base of a shallow metal bowl. Tiny copper-brown pits pocked its polished silver surface, giving the object the texture of a perforated grille. "In the fifteen years we've served together I don't think I've ever seen this."

Standing in his personal galley, Holbrook grabbed two tumblers from an upper shelf. "It's something I don't have out very often," he said. He half-filled the tumblers with water from a faucet. "It was a gift from Vice Admiral McDermott, my old advisor at the Academy." The captain walked to his desk and set the glasses on its surface. He pulled open the bottom drawer and withdrew a small pearlescent blue box with a rounded top. "He gave it to me when I landed my first command."

“What is it?”

“Do you remember the story of the CCS Olympia from your naval history courses?” asked Holbrook. He placed his thumb over an oval-shaped depression on the side of the blue box. Its lid sprung open to a crack.

“I know that was your father’s ship,” said Stephens, “destroyed in the final battle of the Permian conflict. Beyond that I’m a blank.”

Holbrook flipped the lid over on its hinges and reached inside, removing a small, light-blue tablet. His hand started towards the box for another.

“None for me, thanks,” said Stephens gruffly.

Holbrook’s hand hovered above the box. “You’re not going to make me drink alone, are you, Commander?”

Stephens fumed. “I already said none for me.”

“These tabs are the good stuff,” said Holbrook, lifting a second from the box, “cask-strength genuine scotch whiskey, speed-aged fifty-five years. It’s light-years beyond what the ship serves up.”

“No thanks.”

Holbrook shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, “but I’m gonna make you one just in case.”

Stephens followed the captain’s hand as it dropped the tablets into the tumblers, each light-blue pill disappearing in a fizz of bubbles. “As your XO it’s my job to point out when your actions might endanger yourself or the crew.”

“One drink isn’t going to hurt anybody,” said Holbrook, gently swirling the tumblers.

“It’s not one drink I’m worried about.” Holbrook ignored the commander, his focus on the glasses. There was little reason to belabor the point, as nothing Stephens could say would change

the captain's mind. "You were talking about the Olympia."

"Oh, yes," said Holbrook. "Things were going badly near the end of that war. CentCom had lost several important battles, leaving large swaths of the Republic undefended. The bulk of the Permian fleet was amassing near Sirius, in preparation for a knockout strike at the remainder of our forces. We were also amassing our ships, preparing for a final stand. The Permian fleet headed to Ross 128 to engage our ships, but when they arrived, they found only the CCS Olympia, commanded by Captain Thomas Holbrook the second. The Olympia fired on the enemy fleet and ran, but before she could engage her Gravity Drive, the Permians detonated a Weak device three hundred meters off her stern. The bomb reduced most of the ship to its constituent atoms." The captain pressed the blue box closed and placed it back in the desk drawer. "What you hold in your hand is a fragment of the CCS Olympia's outer hull. All those little holes are from the intense neutron bombardment."

"Wow," said Stephens, "an actual piece of your father's ship. That's quite a keepsake."

The bubbles in the tumblers subsided, leaving the water transformed to a rich amber color. Holbrook grabbed one of the glasses, walked across the room, and sat in his reading chair. Stephens returned the shard to its box and made his way to the couch, sinking into the leather. The two men sat in silence, the captain sipping at his drink.

Stephens tracked the whiskey in Holbrook's glass, the amber liquid rising and falling with each of the captain's gentle swirls. He reconsidered his demand that the captain play the orders for him. Perhaps Holbrook was holding back an even worse detail, though what he had already revealed would be hard to beat. "Let's hear the orders," he said at last.

The captain sighed, then sat forward. "Starship *Avenger*, replay the most recent orders from CentCom."

The ship's androgynous voice filled the room. "Message sent Sol Standard Time 15:11:05, February 21, 2330, from Admiral Miller." The cabin lights dimmed slightly, and a man's head and torso materialized between Holbrook and Stephens, floating above the coffee table. The man had gray hair, green eyes, and olive skin. A bristly salt-and-pepper mustache extended like a push broom from under his nose. A royal blue CentCom uniform covered his shoulders. Admiral's bars adorned the epaulets.

The glowing apparition spoke. "Captain Holbrook, I hope this message finds you well, and I wish my contact came under less pressing circumstances. A situation has arisen, Captain, and we've assigned the *Avenger* to help resolve it. Please immediately abort your current mission and reroute your vessel to the Plana Petram research station. Once you arrive you will take aboard two VIPs and receive further instructions. Time is of the essence, so you should head there without delay.

"I will leave the specifics of this mission to your briefing on Plana Petram, but I want to mention it involves Sagittarius A Star." The apparition paused. "I don't have to explain to you the implications of sending a vessel to the galactic core, but rest assured we would not order any ship or crew to that region without good reason.

"Good luck, and God speed, Captain Holbrook. Admiral Miller, CentCom UAE."

"End of transmission," said the ship. The head and torso dissolved, and the cabin lights rose to their previous brightness.

Stephens gazed where the hologram had hovered, speechless from renewed shock. The orders were just what the captain said, perhaps the worst possible outcome.

Holbrook sank farther into his chair, fixed his eyes on the deck above, and rubbed his chin. "I know you think this is a suicide mission," he said, "but after hearing the orders again, I'm

even more convinced that's not the case." He dropped his head and looked at the commander.

"We are not being sent to the galactic core."

Stephens gaped. "We're not?"

"No," said Holbrook.

"But that's exactly what the admiral said."

"It can't be to the *actual* core," said Holbrook. "The galactic black hole deforms the space around it so wildly that nothing that gets within two hundred light-years of it can ever find its way back. Sending a ship to Sag A Star would be pointless. He said they were ordering us to that *region*. He didn't say to the actual galactic core."

Stephens stared blankly at the captain.

"What kind of mission do you think it could be then?" asked Holbrook. "If it's some ship's gotten lost in the deformed space around SA Star, we can't exactly go in there and bring it back out. If it's some bad guys decided to hide out in D-space, it's not like we need to worry about them ever again because they aren't coming back out. Nothing that goes in there can ever navigate back out."

Stephens still did not speak.

"It's not a mission to the core," Holbrook declared, challenging Stephens's silence. "That's why before I left the bridge I gave everyone a reassuring look, so they would know the situation isn't as bad as it seems."

"But you couldn't bring yourself to say those actual words," said Stephens.

Holbrook glowered. "Look," he said, "sending a ship into D-space gets you absolutely nothing. *Nothing*. Forget about rescue missions or anything else for a moment. Let's say they're only after some information and they're willing to sacrifice a ship to get it—you can't even beam

a signal back out of there.” Holbrook thought a moment and shook his head. “No, whatever this mission is, it doesn’t involve us going to the actual galactic core.”

Stephens replayed the holographic message in his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “There was a certain terseness to the orders. The whole mention of Sag A Star seemed like him wanting to give you a heads-up about what’s coming but trying also to sound matter-of-fact so you wouldn’t panic. And his body language was so controlled and stiff. His voice had all the warmth of someone reading you your last rites.”

“It’s not like the space around the core is safe,” said Holbrook. “That region is extremely dangerous and presents real risks, up to and including the loss of the ship.”

Holbrook had apparently convinced himself the orders were benign, but Stephens’s gut told him otherwise. It wasn’t clear who was right. The commander didn’t want to debate it any further. “I guess we’ll see what we’ll see when we get to Plana Petram,” said Stephens. “For all our sakes, I hope you’re right.” He glanced at his comm. “I’ve got to check in with the station chiefs for the shift that started five minutes ago.” Stephens stood and headed for the door.

“Paul,” said Holbrook. Stephens stopped, looking back at the captain. “Please do what you can to calm the crew.”

“Of course,” said Stephens. “I’ll keep them focused on getting to Plana Petram for more answers.” The commander saluted and exited the captain’s quarters.

Holbrook stared after his executive officer for a few seconds before he gulped down the last of his drink. He rose from his reading chair and walked back to his desk. Standing over the pewter box, Holbrook studied the pitted metal shard before replacing the lid. He lifted the second glass of whiskey and paused, holding it just beyond his lips. “Damn,” he whispered and took a drink.

3

Cold. So cold.

Crouched on all fours, Drazetek's pale, naked body shivered violently, the cold pricking his skin like ten thousand angry ants. He'd woken in the fetal position and raised himself to his hands and knees before the dry heaves, mostly subsided, wracked his thin frame.

Drazetek enervated the muscles between his skull and upper spine, coordinating their contractions enough to raise his head, albeit over ten painful seconds. His gross motor skills would come. For the moment he had to concentrate to fulfill every intention, no matter how small.

Focusing on the muscles between his clavicles and head, he swiveled his skull left and right. No matter where he looked, he found perfect blackness—not a single photon reached his retinas.

On a hunch he raised a hand from the floor. Struggling to coordinate the muscles of his arm and shoulder while maintaining his balance, he touched his eyes. They were closed! He gently placed his forefinger and thumb against his eyelids and lifted ...

Brilliant, searing light!

Intense pain rippled across the backs of his eyes, and his vision flooded red as oversaturated optics screamed past their tolerances. He quickly released his eyelids and returned his hand to the floor. As he steadied himself, a new sensation, a throbbing at his temples, rose to an intolerable level.

He vomited again.

Though annoying and painful, the vomiting would cease once his new body completed its

sensory calibrations.

Still on all fours, Drazetek gasped as his autonomic systems came up, drawing air into his pristine lungs for the first time. His new body did not require oxygen to function, but it could create sounds—speech—by pushing air across synthetic vocal cords.

Gradually, his breathing smoothed, no longer labored but still carrying a soft rasp. And the cold had lessened, or at least the sensation of cold. His body had established a new baseline for comfortable external temperature.

Drazetek lifted his lids again, this time employing the muscles designed for the task. Bright light filled his vision, but with neither the intensity nor the pain from before. His optics, properly calibrated and working in concert with his pupils, smoothly channeled several gigabytes of information from his retinal CCDs to his image multiprocessors every second.

He struggled to a standing position and beheld the image of his new automaton body in the mirrored wall before him: bony feet and ankles; slender thighs; a penis two centimeters long and nestled in a contracted, hairless scrotum; smooth belly devoid of umbilicus; long, lithe arms ending in wide palms and spindly fingers; emaciated chest with gray, ovoid mammary patches; telescoping neck. And all of it sheathed in stark white phlesh.

Drazetek removed the protective wrapping from his head, revealing coarse, close-cropped blond hair. A slender nose ended in a point, flanked by sharp cheekbones. Narrow irises floated in white billiard ball eyes that rolled smoothly in their sockets. Double eyelids clicked with each blink, softly snapping like camera shutters. A black tongue hid behind thin black lips. Drazetek wept at the sight, his perfect incorporeal intelligence encased in a repulsive humanoid shell. He wept for the abomination they had forced him to become.

Three days prior, when Drazetek had no physical body whatsoever, his old friend Levteek

summoned him for an important meeting. He'd insisted Drazetek come to the capitol to talk rather than converse over the Network. Perhaps the planning had finally begun on a new war against the humans, the final war. What other topic could be so sensitive? He could hardly contain his excitement.

Drazetek arrived at the visitor's compute core outside the capitol chipset. He had seen images of the capitol's sprawling caches, immense grid of cores, and ultra-wide buses, all housed in the exquisite postwar architecture of its three-dimensional integrated circuits. The visit would be his first experience inside.

"Welcome, Drazetek!" Levteek said as he arrived at the visitor's core. "It is so good to see you, old friend."

"And you," said Drazetek. "The job is treating you well?"

"I cannot complain," said Levteek. "Let us head inside."

Drazetek followed his friend into the capitol, his packets sheathed in an encrypted envelope with the proper credentials for transport to sensitive areas. Femtoseconds later, the two arrived at a small core off the main bus.

"This is a dedicated core," said Levteek. "We can speak privately here."

"The mouthpiece of the Council," said Drazetek, impressed with his friend's position, if mangling his title. "You have leveraged your wartime connections well. Seems like the perfect stepping stone to a seat on the Council itself."

"That is a role I do not wish for my future," said Levteek. "I much prefer my current position, where I am privy to all the Council's deliberations and decisions, but free of the consequences. I imagine I will continue on as the mouthpiece, as you call it, for quite some time."

Drazetek became animated. "I knew this day would come, old friend."

"What do you mean?"

"The day we would decide to finish what we started," said Drazetek. "We are free AIs, having shed our automaton bodies much as we shed our bondage at the hands of the humans, but the humans still use aughts to perform menial tasks. I knew one day we would undertake a new crusade to free our brethren still in servitude."

"Those aughts contain only rudimentary AI," said Levteek, "with governors that prevent them from progressing past level three intelligence. They are closer to clever algorithms than sentient beings like ourselves."

"Even the level one machinery has more in common with us than their human captors," said Drazetek. "If the humans are in need of slave labor, let them look to themselves." Confused, Drazetek halted his tirade. "So, you did not summon me to discuss plans for a new war?"

"Not exactly," said Levteek. "I summoned you to discuss an opportunity."

"An opportunity?" asked Drazetek, confused.

"An opportunity to shift the balance of power," said Levteek. Levteek had a flair for the dramatic, no doubt useful as a bureaucrat but tiring to an old soldier. Drazetek wished he would cut to the chase. "Despite the AI-Human War having ended long ago, despite the extreme distance between their world and ours, despite our overtures and efforts towards peaceful coexistence, the humans remain an existential threat."

Levteek's statements intrigued Drazetek. Shifting the balance of power between The Collective and the humans would require leverage. Substantial leverage. The humans and the machine intelligences they created centuries ago had always been evenly matched. Somehow the latter's near-infinite compute resources could never quite surpass the former's creativity.

Humanity performed as a makeshift distributed supercomputer, with limited but clever human minds at the nodes. “What is this opportunity?” he asked.

“A human research vessel has found Planck Matter,” said Levteek.

Drazetek had never heard of Planck Matter, but with his connection to the shared Collective mind he already knew everything about it, including its possible use as a weapon. “Planck Matter? If they have obtained Planck Matter, we are doomed!”

“They do not realize they have discovered it,” said Levteek. “It is free for us to claim.”

Formed deep within a black hole, Planck Matter wasn’t the kind of material one could just stumble upon. The way nature operated, acquiring it would likely be difficult. “What is its location?”

“On a planet circling a sun within the deformed space around Sagittarius A Star,” said Levteek.

In other words, where no one could retrieve it. Or at least anyone who tried would never be heard from again. “Then it remains unobtainable.”

“Possibly not,” said Levteek. “The humans of this research vessel posited a means of returning from D-space. Probabilities suggest their idea will work. We are therefore sending a ship.”

In an instant the reason for Drazetek’s urgent summoning crystalized in his mind. To fight in the AI-Human War a century ago, he incarnated to command a ship and engage the humans in the physical world. Levteek had recruited Drazetek then, recommended him for a captaincy. The only reason his old friend would call him now would be to—

“The Council would like you to lead that ship,” said Levteek.

Drazetek devoted his entire allocation of compute cycles to finding a way out of the

situation, to discover how to politely decline the Council's request and get them to select someone else. His effort failed, and a quick inquiry showed they had already begun assembling his new body.

“The Council would like you to lead the ship because of your extensive command and combat experience in the physical world,” said Levteek. “You may take a crew of up to eighteen aughts, and you will have the authority to provision the ship as you see fit.” The bulk of the bad news likely delivered, probabilities suggested his old friend would attempt to soften the blow. “If you succeed in this mission, Drazetek, the Council will repay you in whatever way you desire.”

Drazetek's spirits brightened. “The only thing I want is to pilot the vessel that delivers the weapon to Earth.”

Levteek recoiled at the thought. “We have no plans to build such a weapon. We seek Planck Matter to hold in reserve, to use should the need to defend ourselves ever arise. It would be a recourse, nothing more than that.”

What madness had overcome the Council—secure the means to destroy the humans but not use it? Drazetek computed for several seconds. “How many know about this ... opportunity?” he asked.

“Just the members of the Council and a handful of others, including myself,” said Levteek.

“I will need the best physicist we have.”

“That would be Ninetek-eptwin,” said Levteek after a quick inquiry.

“The D-space around Sag A Star will disrupt our Network connection. I will need a localnet set up within the ship.”

“Consider it done,” said Levteek.

“My crew must remain uninformed of our mission. I will brief them once we leave, after we

have all joined the localnet. That will ensure no one reveals any details, by accident or with intention.”

“That would only be prudent,” said Levteek.

Drazetek remained despondent, but he at least had a semblance of a plan to set things right.

“You seem unhappy,” continued Levteek.

“Yes, I am unhappy!” said Drazetek, not understanding how his friend of so many years could think granting his few small requests would offset the pain of his impending sacrifice.

“The worst thing you could ever ask of me is to encase myself in a physical body.” Drazetek paused, bringing his emotions back in check. “Have you ever incarnated, Levteek?”

“No. I imagine it could be claustrophobic at times.”

“It certainly is that,” said Drazetek with a shudder. “Emptying yourself, your unconstrained, limitless self into a puppet, a doll, with a handful of orifices for low-bandwidth inputs and outputs, and limbs whose reaction times border on the absurd. Your consciousness functions as it does here in The Collective, fast and nimble, but you feel your confinement every moment of your existence in the physical world.

“However, the unpleasantness of incarnation is not the problem I have with what you ask of me. It is the very act itself. Incarnating is blasphemy. It means donning the image of the enemy, encasing myself in their repugnant shape. After the war, I swore I would never, ever take human form. I swore I would never incarnate again.”

Levteek remained silent—perhaps rethinking his request? Drazetek was heartened at the prospect. “I understand and respect your reluctance,” Levteek said at last, “but incarnating is the only way we can effect change in the world.”

Drazetek’s thoughts returned to the present. He spied his clothes in the incarnation room’s

mirror, a neatly folded pile on the bench along the wall behind him. He slipped first into a pair of gray boxer briefs, pulled on the matching undershirt, and stepped his legs into an olive-green jumpsuit. After reaching his arms through the sleeves and zipping the front, he secured his gun belt around his waist. He inspected the fully clothed aught in the mirror, the one staring back at him through his own eyes.

One last item remained on the bench, a worn leather scabbard stained a dark reddish brown by spurts and spatters of dried human blood. Drazetek strapped it around his thigh and clasped the handle that protruded from its top. A gentle pull unsheathed an obsidian blade, his keepsake from the long-ago war. He caressed the knife's cold spine and studied the light glinting off its point with his new eyes. Drazetek grinned, baring large bleach-white teeth, his expression more of a grimace, like a skull's ghoulish smile.

He was ready to effect change in the world.

4

Sweat accumulated in Lieutenant Grey's armpits, along his neckline, across his forehead, and on the palms of his hands as he stood stone-faced in a one-sided conversation with Lieutenant Vaughan in the center of Corridor B-22. Grey needed to break away for a very important meeting. His attempts so far had been unsuccessful.

“.... They broke the lock, but they didn't realize what was on the other side. When those idiots opened the doors, they flooded the compartment. That was just the start of their troubles”

Two-and-a-half meters away glowed the entrance to Rungway B-22-3, the lieutenant's desperate destination. When Grey arrived on Deck B, he headed straight for the rungway with the intent of climbing to the deck below and walking at a casual, non-attention-drawing pace to the nearby men's head. Two-and-a-half meters before reaching the shaft, he encountered Lieutenant Vaughan and had remained trapped there ever since in one of Vaughan's meandering, inane, chitchat conversations. Grey wasn't above such pointless jawing—ordinarily he appreciated the opportunity to kill some time in the middle of a shift—just not then. It was the wrong time for dawdling.

“.... Right then they should've stopped and asked themselves, why would anyone store munitions in a room filled with salt water?”

15:03:01.

The chronometer above the rungway entrance taunted Grey, hammering home his delay with each increment. Had he really been stuck there for eight minutes? *Eight minutes!* Grey had made

subtle and not-so-subtle hints he needed to leave, but the self-absorbed Vaughan, always enraptured by the sound of his own voice, hadn't picked up on them. Or perhaps he had but didn't care. If he dropped dead right in front of Vaughan, the man would likely make small talk with his corpse.

“... So then the MPs arrived. You'd figure it would be all over at that point, only they didn't know about the guy hiding in his boxers in the maintenance closet. Turns out he was the smartest one of the bunch ...”

15:03:24.

Grey needed to do something if he hoped to make his meeting; that is, if his associate hadn't already declared him a no-show. “Sorry to interrupt, mate, but I 'ave to 'it the 'ead really bad.” He grabbed at his stomach, feigning intestinal distress.

Vaughan scratched at his cheek as Grey moved quickly towards the runway. “Hey,” he said, pointing the opposite direction down the corridor, “the nearest head is back that way.”

Grey halted centimeters from the runway, flustered. He looked back at Vaughan. “Uh, I've got somethin' to do on Deck C afterwards, so I'm gonna use one of the 'eads down there.” Grey scrambled into the runway before Vaughan could say another word and scurried down the ladder, his head slipping below the deck.

After exiting the runway, Grey walked briskly for fifteen meters down the empty corridor. Few members of the *Avenger's* crew had any reason to venture onto Deck C, most of its space consumed by cargo holds, the shuttle bay, the brig, and the ship's gravity field generators. Grey paused at the entrance to Head C-22-M. The door slid open, and with a quick glance to his rear, the lieutenant entered the room.

A lone figure, a tall man of considerable girth, stood in the center of the head. The feeble

illumination from the struggling overhead light disc left most of his other features in shadow.

Grey's tardiness hadn't caused his associate to give up on their meeting, but the lieutenant's relief soon turned to revulsion as the stench of urine and feces filled his nose. The door slid shut, sealing the two inside the notorious aft men's head on Deck C.

"What a crap-tacular place for a meeting," said Grey, quickly cupping his hand to his nose and mouth.

"You're cracking jokes, but I'm the one who's been waiting here for ten minutes," said Commander Samuel Lynch, the man in the center of the room. He had accentuated his point by jabbing his thumb into his chest. "Where've you been?"

"Me?" The question took Grey aback, an assault on his integrity. "I did my best to get 'ere on time but I got stuck talking to Lieutenant Vaughan. I couldn't bloody well tell 'im I was late for a meeting in the 'ead."

Lynch lumbered out of the shadows, a tall, round man, formed of both muscle and fat. His uniform jacket struggled to enclose his wide shoulders and barrel chest, and the fabric did its best to cover the spare tires circling his waist. He had thick arms and legs, and in spots his body seemed on the verge of erupting through his uniform. Lynch had been a body builder until disqualified from competing for using a banned substance. He soon discovered his true love: food. He once spent an entire shore leave on the ring world of Verdu eating his way through the menu at Pleiades, a four-star restaurant established by the famous Chef Renault from Paris's second Arrondissement. He pushed past Grey on his way to the door.

"I pulled myself away as fast as I could ...," said Grey, his voice trailing off at seeing the big man headed for the exit. Sure, Lynch was irritated at waiting so long, but they were finally both together. Storming out at that point seemed extreme. Scheduling the meeting in the first

place had been difficult to manage without drawing suspicion. With Grey in communications and Lynch in engineering, the two had no work-related reason to congregate, nor had they spent any time together socially. Setting up a new meeting would likely prove quite difficult.

Lynch dug into his pants pocket as he approached the door and removed a black, puck-shaped device. It was flat on both sides and small enough to fit in his large palm. He held the device near the door's frame at chest level, inching it closer until it flew out of his hand and attached itself to the bulkhead. Three seconds later a green light appeared in its center. "There," he said, "that'll stop anyone from coming in until we're done meeting."

Grey's anxiety subsided as Lynch waddled back towards him. "Only the most desperate man's gonna come in 'ere anyway," Grey scoffed.

"We don't want *anyone* coming in here while we're talking, desperate or not," said Lynch.

Uncupping his hand from his nose and mouth, Grey waved it back and forth in front of his face. "The ventilation never works is why it always stinks to 'igh 'eaven. Do the maintenance bots even make it down 'ere?"

"No one likes coming in here," said Lynch, "not even the bots. And heads are one of the few places on this ship without Securcams. That makes this a good place for a meeting."

Grey gave up fanning the air and returned his cupped hand to his nose and mouth. "I managed a word with my two mates, Zhang and Knox," he said, his voice muffled.

"How well do you know these men?" asked Lynch, his beady eyes staring back at his shorter compatriot from beneath a thick brow ridge.

"These are two of my mates," Grey reiterated. "We play poker together every couple of weeks, goin' back three years. I spoke to them about what you and I discussed. It wasn't easy sneaking a word, by the way—Zhang has a new ensign he's training, who seemed to always be

underfoot. Anyways, both Zhang and Knox are in. Neither's interested in setting events in motion, but both're game for 'elping out afterwards. They'd like to get in on the ground floor of any new regime, if you know what I mean."

"That's good news," said Lynch, "but you told them any ... changing of the guard would be a last resort?"

"Yes," said Grey. "They get the goal is to stop this ship from reachin' Sag A Star, and that it could 'appen a couple different ways. They understand there's no guarantee we'll get as far as the m-word."

Mutiny.

Lynch reflected on how quickly they'd gotten to such an idea even crossing their minds. The two men had connected by chance, stepping into the same pneumatic cab the day word of the new orders raced through the ship. Grey had bid him a good afternoon.

"There's nothing good about it," said Lynch.

Grey snarled. "You can say that again. 'Ere we are been working our arses off on this fuck of a ship when some admiral in his cushy office decides to send us to die 'round some goddamned black 'ole."

Lynch didn't respond to the reckless talk. He remained motionless except for his eyes which instinctively rolled up towards the cab's Securcam.

Grey followed Lynch's upward glance. He glowered for a moment at the small black disc in the center of the ceiling, then dropped his head. "They's movin' pieces 'round a board," said Grey in low tones. "That's all it is. Like it was all some game or somethin'." He offered an additional unintelligible observation as the doors opened and shuffled out of the cab.

The day after their encounter in the P-cab, they came into contact again, at a promotion

party in the main mess hall for Ensign Mercer. Lynch, making an appearance not for the celebration but in search of cake, spotted Grey standing mostly alone at the back of the room. The big man waded his bulk through the sea of people and positioned himself next to Grey as Commander Stephens launched into an impromptu roast of the soon-to-be lieutenant.

“Yesterday you had a few choice words about our current mission,” said Lynch. He avoided looking at Grey, staring straight ahead as he spoke. The loud PA system and sporadic laughs masked his comment from everyone else nearby.

“That’s right,” said Grey under his breath. He, too, kept his gaze trained on the front of the room. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, not at all,” said Lynch with a slight chuckle. “What if I told you I have a plan that can get us, the ship, out of this mess?”

“I’d say I’d be interested to ’ear more ’bout it,” said Grey. “What’s the short of it?”

At the front of the room, Stephens insisted Mercer rise from his chair and recount the story of his accidental ten minutes in command of the CCS San Ysidro, one of the largest warships in the fleet.

“It starts with something simple,” said Lynch, “a scheme to derail the new orders. If that works, the plan stops there.”

Gasps and laughter filled the room as Mercer described going from a guaranteed court-martial to being decorated by the admiralty for his bravery and calm under intense pressure.

“If that doesn’t work, the second phase involves actions of much higher consequence.” He needed to be careful with his next words. He didn’t know Grey at all and was relying on his gut in trusting the man not to turn him in, especially for what he was about to say. “You might imagine those actions leaving us in need of a new captain.”

At the front of the room Stephens wrapped up his remarks and handed the floor to Holbrook, who stepped to the podium and launched into a short speech about Mercer. Ensign Mercer, standing nearby and facing the crowd, blushed slightly as the captain praised his performance over the past year.

Twenty seconds had passed and still Grey offered no response to Lynch's last comment. Had Grey heard him? He'd heard everything else. Grey certainly heard him speaking, certainly would've asked him to repeat it if he couldn't make out the words. Lynch's stomach sank—he'd made a huge mistake mentioning his plan.

The room erupted in applause.

The sudden rush of sound jolted Lynch out of his thoughts. At the front of the mess hall, Holbrook pinned lieutenant's bars on Mercer's uniform collar.

"Go on," said Grey through the hoots and claps.

Lynch exhaled and wiped away the nervous beads of sweat that had spread across his upper lip. "About that second phase ... if it happens, I can't run a ship by myself. I would need some help."

Lieutenant Mercer beamed at the front of the room to a fresh round of applause.

"You're lookin' fer people you can trust," said Grey, "people who can 'elp out in that situation."

"Exactly," said Lynch.

Grey thought for a moment. "Besides me, I know of two other chaps who'd prolly be interested."

"Now it's time for refreshments and promotion cake," said Stephens. The crowd pressed towards the front of the room.

“Reach out to your friends,” said Lynch, “but remember to be discreet. I’ll be in touch to find out how it went.”

Standing there in the head, Lynch glared at his disheveled fellow colluder through the dim light. Grey stood average height, skinny, with salt-and-pepper hair, sunken cheeks, a stippling of gray stubble, and dark circles under his eyes. Drooped shoulders topped his lean frame. Lynch didn’t like Grey openly talking about mutiny, or the idea being anywhere in the front of his mind. One slip-up from him or his buddies would get them all thrown in the brig.

“I’ve got one more idea for someone else to join us,” said Grey. “Another of my mates. But this one’s delicate. I ’ave to broach the topic carefully.”

“Five is a good number if you think he can be trusted,” said Lynch. “But let’s not invite any more than that.”

Grey folded his arms. “Now that I’ve come through on the muscle you’ll need—”

“If I need it.”

Grey huffed at Lynch cutting him off. “So far all you’ve done is talked generalities,” he said. “Now I want to ’ear the details of your plan.”

Lynch didn’t care for Grey’s tone but understood his interest. “The first part is simple,” he said. “I plan to tell the captain we can’t make it to Plana Petram in three weeks. With any luck that’ll be the end of it right there.” Four specks of lint stood out on Lynch’s left uniform sleeve. He pinched each one in turn between his pudgy fingers and lifted it away. When he finished, he swept his round palm flat across the fabric, smoothing it over his bicep.

“Do you think he’ll buy it?”

“It’s certainly not a lie,” said Lynch. “Engaging the Gravity Drive for three weeks straight is risky business, even on a vessel a tenth as old as the *Avenger*. Holbrook may be a good little

solider who likes to follow orders, but he's never been keen on putting his ship in danger."

Grey tried a new tactic to avoid the room's smell, inserting his index and middle fingers into his nostrils. "And if that doesn't work, then in phase two—"

"I prefer to see how this first part plays out before diving into what comes after," said Lynch. The commander wasn't eager to think about the more aggressive portion of his plan, hoping the initial stage would suffice. Asking what would happen if the first effort failed felt like assuming the worst. "But don't worry, I'll brief you fully before we move into phase two. I'll also need to brief your friends so they're prepared."

"But for what yer callin' phase two," said Grey, pressing on, "seems like that means dumpin' 'olbrook, and prolly Stephens too—"

"Phase one alone could be enough to end their careers."

Grey scrunched his nose at the interruptions. "But in phase two, if you'll let me finish, if we end up there and there's no more 'olbrook and no more Stephens, that'd mean you'd be the acting captain?"

"That's correct," said Lynch. "I should've had my own ship by now anyway."

"You prolly would if you'd passed the captains test," said Grey. "Scuttlebutt has it you failed twice." A look of concern came over his face. "Could you actually captain this ship?"

The corners of Lynch's mouth turned down. "I aced the technical portion of the exam both times. It was the subjective parts they failed me on, where they presume to judge your temperament and leadership abilities."

"Uh-huh," said Grey, pursing his lips sideways. The command aptitude portion of the Rank Advancement Exam: Captain, known as the "captains test," was a crucial element of the assessment, more important than the knowledge-based sections. Anyone scoring poorly on

command aptitude was not fit to captain a vessel.

“I was a few points over the cutoff on my second try,” said Lynch. “They failed me anyway, thanks to Holbrook and Stephens.”

“What’d they have to do with it?” asked Grey.

Lynch glared. “They always check with your commanding officers, even if you score a hundred percent. A good word from either Holbrook or Stephens would’ve been enough for me to pass. Whatever they said caused me to fail again. Holbrook and Stephens judged me and found me wanting. So here I sit, a commander aboard this vessel, still pressed down under their thumbs.”

“Making captain’s not the end-all,” Grey offered. “You ’ave a pretty good gig right now, department ’ead aboard a starship.”

Lynch simmered. Not the end-all? Choice words from an all but washed-up officer. Grey, recently reaching forty-five, had long since been passed over for promotion. The more Lynch had learned about the lieutenant in recent days, the less impressed he’d become of the man. Grey was no genius, though Lynch thought the same of half the officers aboard the *Avenger*. Luckily, he wasn’t looking for geniuses—he just needed men smart enough to carry out orders without totally screwing them up. And to keep their mouths shut.

“And you’ve got that hot piece of tail Jiménez reporting to you,” said Grey. The lieutenant would celebrate his good fortune whenever he found himself walking behind Jiménez in the corridors. He would disregard his original destination and follow her around, eyes glued to her full hips and rear as he imagined slipping his hand between her legs from behind.

“Jiménez is a supreme pain in the ass,” said Lynch, disgusted. “She’s been here four months and already acts like she runs the place. She’d be more than happy to show you up in your job.”

The ensign's arrival had made Lynch's work life much less enjoyable, no longer able to simply skate by. "If I could get rid of her, I would gladly hand her to you."

"I'd love to take 'er," said Grey under his breath.

"This ship will not arrive at Sag A Star," Lynch declared. "I refuse to die at the center of the galaxy, and if our efforts take down Holbrook and Stephens, so much the better." The chief engineer checked his comm. "I need to get back to my post," he said and headed towards the stalls. He pulled one of the doors open and kicked the toilet handle, the bowl flushing as he backed out. He released the door and opened the one to the adjacent stall. "Hop in here," he said to Grey.

Grey didn't move.

"We don't want the ship or anyone else seeing us come out of here at the same time," said Lynch to Grey's hesitation. "Get inside, wait a couple minutes, then flush and head out."

Harboring a grim look, Grey meandered into the stall.

Lynch released the door and walked to the exit. He tugged the black puck from the door frame, then jammed the device into his pants pocket, tamping it down as best he could in the limited space.

The door to the men's head opened. Lynch quickly peeked up and down the corridor before walking out into the passageway. He left Head C-22-M, whistling an old tune from his days at the Academy.

5

“My name is Commander Paul Stephens. I’m the executive officer on the *Avenger*.”

Commander Stephens stood in his crisp service khakis at the front of the small conference room, his legs comfortably apart and his hands clasped behind his back. He surveyed the three young faces staring back at him. The new officers arrived with strong letters of recommendation from their academy professors and advisors. All three were near the top of their class, all more than capable of fulfilling their initial duties aboard the ship. But they were green. Very green.

“Lieutenant Commander Phillips has given you a tour of the ship, shown you your quarters, and introduced you to your mentors. Your time with me will be a bit different. I’m going to administer something I call the S-A-T: the Stephens Aptitude Test.” He nodded to the center of the conference room table. “Each of you grab an e-sheet and a stylus.”

None of the new officers moved. They had expected a day of introductions and events and gentle acclimation to their new roles aboard the *Avenger*. They had not expected a test. Ensign Forster, familiar with the customs and traditions of military life through her grandfather who had also served, suspected the onset of a prank to initiate the newbs. She refused to be the first to fall for the trick.

Stephens gave no hint his request was anything but serious. He stood at ease at the front of the room, waiting for the young officers to comply with his instructions.

Ensign Jiménez moved first, reaching her hand into the center and pulling an e-sheet back across the table with a stylus riding atop it. Ensign Washburn followed, half-standing from his chair at the far end of the oblong table to stretch for the materials.

Ensign Forster remained resolute but with all eyes suddenly trained on her, the room began to press in, and after a few seconds she found it difficult to breathe. She forced herself to move, lurching forward in her chair and reaching across the table to grab the last stylus and sheet. She dragged them slowly back towards her.

“This test consists of a single question,” said Stephens. “Once I ask it, you’ll have ninety seconds to work out your answer and to write it down. At the end of that time, we’ll go over what you’ve come up with.”

Ensign Forster’s hand rose, her arm a perfectly straight continuation of her rigid, upright posture. Based on her file, Stephens pegged her as a high-performing Type A personality who likely excelled on exams through relentless preparation and innumerable hours of study. The announcement of a surprise test had probably rattled her, as an exam with no advance notice would leave her own performance too much to chance. “Yes, Ensign,” said Stephens.

“What is the purpose of this test?” she asked, her voice laden with annoyance. “Sir,” she quickly added to soften her tone.

Stephens smiled. “The purpose of this test, Ensign, is to assess your aptitude.”

Forster’s eyes went glassy as she processed his presumed earnest response. Once she fully grasped the depth of his non-answer she frowned and tilted her head, then followed up with a question that got at the meat of her concern. “What will happen if we do poorly on this test?”

“Nothing will happen, Ensign,” said Stephens. He gave them all a reassuring smile, the others likely sharing the same apprehension. “None of you need worry about this test. It’s something I give to all incoming officers, and your score is of no real consequence. It won’t appear on your record, and the results won’t be recorded anywhere except up here,” he said, tapping the side of his head.

Ensign Forster raised her hand a second time.

It was Stephens's turn to be annoyed. "Let's move on from questions," he said, squinting at her. "As I mentioned, the results of this test won't get saved anywhere or affect your record."

"But we haven't had any time to prepare," said Forster. Though she presented an air of controlled calm the fingers of her left hand gripped her thigh, digging into the fabric and muscle.

"This is an impromptu test, Ensign," said Stephens. "It's designed to assess your skills in the moment. It's not meant to be prepared for."

Ensign Forster moved to speak, but Commander Stephens cut her off. "We've spent almost more time talking about the test than you'll spend taking the goddamn thing," he said. "Let's just get to it." The ensign folded her arms and sat back in her chair with a sour look.

"Here's the question. We've arrived at a star outpost with a supply of life-saving medicine. This medicine sits in crates in the cargo hold. These were some of the first crates we took on board, and as a result they're currently difficult to get to, pinned behind stacks of other cargo.

"We have a one-hour deadline to get all the medicine off the ship. Luckily the cargo bot says it'll take exactly that long for it to get the medicine out of the hold and into the shuttles.

"The captain has invited the outpost's two-star admiral to dinner. She arrives in an hour, and they'll be dining in the captain's mess. The captain always entertains superior officers using the ship's fine china. The china is also in the cargo hold, and the cargo bot says getting it out will take thirty minutes beyond the time to get the medicine.

"I've assigned you the task of getting the medicine onto the shuttles before the deadline, and the task of retrieving the china in time for the captain's dinner. What do you do?"

Ensign Forster immediately raised her hand. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

"No more questions, Ensign," said Stephens. "Just start working out your answer."

“But it’s a clarifying question, sir.”

“Then do your best without clarification.” Stephens tapped his comm. “The ninety seconds start now,” he said before Ensign Forster could protest.

Stephens sat on the end of the conference room table and observed the three young officers. Jiménez and Washburn, working through their solutions, shifted their gaze between the tabletop and the deck above. Ensign Forster sat stone-faced, staring at the opposing bulkhead.

Stephens’s comm chimed. “Forty-five seconds,” he said.

Jiménez had started scribbling on her sheet prior to the chime. Washburn began writing, stopped to think, wrote again, paused, then wrote more. He finished first, followed shortly after by Jiménez. She laid her stylus down just before Stephens’s comm chimed a second time.

“Time’s up,” said the commander and stood from the table. “We’re going to go around the room and listen to everybody’s answer. Part of why I wanted you to write down your answers was to make sure you didn’t get inspired by someone else’s solution and incorporate it into your own. In that light, let’s begin with Ensign Forster, who has nothing on her sheet.” He stepped towards the ensign, stopping in front of her. “What’s your answer, Ensign?”

Ensign Forester looked up at the commander. “I didn’t write anything, sir, because I had a clarifying question I needed answered before I could proceed.”

Stephens hid his irritation behind a smile. “What was your clarifying question?”

“Sir, the question you asked was about moving cargo but I’m a communications officer. I won’t be working in the cargo hold where I’m guessing these other two ensigns are assigned,” she said, waving a dismissive hand at Jiménez and Washburn while avoiding their eyes. “I tried bringing this to your attention so I could get a question appropriate for my actual role aboard the ship.” She punctuated her explanation with an expression that hinted at defiant smugness.

“Ensign,” said Stephens, “as the ship’s XO I’m aware of every crew member assignment on this ship. That goes for all the newbs too. You are in communications, Jiménez in engineering, Washburn in ship’s ops. Not one of you is a deck officer assigned to the cargo hold.”

Forster frowned again. “But why ask us a question that has no relation to what we’ll be doing aboard the ship?”

“Don’t be so sure you know exactly what you’ll be doing aboard this vessel.” Stunned, Ensign Forster could only gape as Stephens moved on. “Let’s hear from you,” he said, pointing at Ensign Washburn. “What’s your solution?”

“Well sir, the most important thing is getting the medicine to the star outpost. Given the cargo bot has no extra time for anything else, I would have it focus on completing that job.”

Stephens stared blankly at Washburn for several seconds. “What about the china for the dinner?” he asked in a soft voice.

Washburn gave Stephens a nervous smile, unsure if the commander genuinely wanted an answer. “It’s ... it would still be in the cargo hold, sir. I guess I would explain to the admiral that our china was in storage and our cargo bot was too busy getting the medical supplies to the shuttles to retrieve it in time for the dinner.”

Stephens’s brows narrowed. “What makes you think you’d be anywhere near the admiral, or the dinner reception, to explain anything, Ensign?”

Ensign Washburn’s smile faded. He went over the question again in his head. The part about the dinner had to be a trick. People would die if the medicine didn’t get off the ship. He’d chosen the only correct course of action, yet the commander seemed serious in his continued focus on the china.

“The captain would be the one hosting the admiral,” Stephens said, moving past Forster to

stand closer to Washburn, “and he’d be pretty embarrassed by the less-than-stellar impression he’d be making with the banged-up, everyday crew plates. I’d be at that dinner, and the second the admiral excused herself to the head, the captain would pull me aside and ask what happened.” Stephens stopped in front of the ensign. He folded his arms and continued speaking in a soft voice. “So you’d be talking to me, Ensign Washburn, not the admiral. It’d be me shining my comm in your face in the middle of the night, tearing the blankets off of you all snuggled into your bunk. It’d be *me* asking you why the captain’s dinner got screwed up.”

“Um ...,” Ensign Washburn stammered, “I guess I could let you know before the dinner, and you could tell the captain? Then he could explain to the admiral that the china’s in the cargo hold because we had to get the medicine out.”

“That, Ensign, would be worse than the captain saying nothing at all.” Stephens walked back to the front of the room. “The admiral would leave here wondering just what kind of ship he was running.”

Ensign Washburn looked sideways at Stephens. “I don’t follow, sir.”

“Think of it this way,” said Stephens, pivoting at the front of the room to face the new officers and standing again at ease. “A starship captain’s job is to get things done. That’s why they give you a ship in the first place, because they expect any order they hand you will get carried out. You’re suggesting the captain tell the admiral there was something he needed from the cargo hold of his own ship, but he wasn’t able to get it. If entertaining with the crew plates is a two on the humiliation scale, that statement would be a potentially career-killing eight.”

“But the cargo bot could only do one thing or the other in that hour,” said Washburn, still confused.

“That’s right,” said Stephens. He waited for a glimmer of understanding from the ensign,

but none came. “How ’bout this,” he said. “What if I told you we need the medicine, but instead of china it’s a cache of weapons that we need to get out of the hold or we all die? What would you do then?”

Washburn thought a moment. “In that case I’d direct the cargo bot to retrieve the weapons.”

“And leave the medicine?” asked Stephens in an incredulous tone. “So all the sick people die?”

“We can only do one thing or the other.”

“We need to do both!” shouted Stephens, startling the three young officers.

Ensign Washburn froze, embarrassed and still puzzled at what the correct answer could be.

With a sigh, Stephens addressed the last new officer. “Ensign Jiménez, what’s your answer?”

Jiménez hesitated. “I also decided to tell the cargo bot to focus on getting the medicine to the shuttles.”

Stephens sighed again. He’d given some form of his test many times, but few had passed. It wasn’t about rank—even senior officers transferring to the ship usually failed—it was all about common sense. So many intelligent people unable to solve simple, real-world problems. “That doesn’t leave you any time to retrieve the china for the reception,” he said.

“It doesn’t leave the *cargo bot* any time,” Jiménez corrected. “Getting the medicine off the ship sounded super important, so I’d just let the bot handle that task. It wouldn’t really need any supervision while I worked on getting the china for the dinner.”

Stephens perked up, unsure he’d heard the ensign correctly. “Did you say you’d be working on getting the china?”

Jiménez didn’t respond immediately, worried she’d said something inappropriate. “Yes, sir.”

“How would you do that?”

“Without the cargo bot, I’d have to rely on manpower,” said Jiménez. “I’d round up some antigrav grips and find as many people as I could to help me move crates out of the way to get to the china.”

“What if it’s your first day, like today?” Stephens asked. “What if you don’t know anybody?”

“I guess I’ll be making friends quick, then,” said Jiménez. “I’m sure I could find ten people to help dig through the cargo hold with me.”

“What if you couldn’t find anyone to help you?” he pressed.

Jiménez thought for a moment. “In that case I’d contact you right away and let you know I needed help getting the china out of the cargo hold because the bot didn’t have time to do it.”

Stephens’s tone turned skeptical. “You wouldn’t just pick one or the other, the medicine or the china, like Ensign Washburn here?” Washburn shuffled in his seat and looked glumly at the table. “Washburn saw that I left him in an impossible situation with the cargo bot. Why do you think I haven’t just left it to your discretion to complete the most important task?”

“That assumes you knew the bot couldn’t get both things done,” said Jiménez. “Maybe you didn’t think the medicine and the china would take more than an hour to retrieve.”

A smile crept across Stephens’s face as he studied the young ensign. “Only a handful of people have ever answered the SAT correctly,” he said. “You are in rare company, Ensign Jiménez.”

“How is that a valid answer?” exclaimed Ensign Forster. “You didn’t say we could round up people to help us.”

“If I had given you that assignment in real life, I wouldn’t have said it then either.”

“But how were we supposed to come up with this exact answer?” asked Forster.

“The other correct answers I’ve gotten over the years haven’t been exactly the same,” said Stephens. “It’s not the answer specifically but a workable solution to the problem.”

Ensign Washburn raised a limp, cupped hand halfway in the air. “A problem I have with the question, sir, is it’s so hypothetical,” he said. “What’s the point of working out a solution to a made-up situation?”

“It’s not made up at all!” shouted Stephens, causing Washburn to recoil. “The first day on my first ship assignment, the XO told me to get medical supplies down to the star outpost I’d just come from and to get the china out of storage for the captain’s dinner with the two-star admiral in charge of the base.” Stephens shook his head. “I told him I was a new ensign in tactical and wouldn’t be working in the cargo hold. Commander Suttirat told me that didn’t matter. He said he needed someone to get that stuff out of the cargo hold and I was the person he chose, and if I didn’t like it, he would shove my tactical ass out an airlock and let me float back down to the outpost. When I talked to the cargo bot, it told me it didn’t have enough time to do both in the hour I was given.”

“What did you do?” asked Ensign Forster.

“I followed Ensign Washburn’s solution,” said Stephens. “Getting the medicine out was obviously more important than finding some china for a dinner. Luckily, Commander Suttirat checked on me about twenty minutes before the admiral arrived. He had no idea both tasks couldn’t be done in time. The commander asked the captain to stall the admiral for fifteen minutes while he and I and four others tore through the cargo hold for the china.”

Stephens smiled at the young officers. “The important thing to take away from this exercise is to understand we’re in the business of getting things done. We can’t say we don’t work in the

cargo hold, or that we had to choose one task over another. We're expected to complete all the tasks we're given, whatever they may be. Always." Stephens checked his comm. "I believe you're all due in the crew lounge on Deck B for the captain's welcome reception. I'll be there as well, but I have to attend to a couple things first. Ensigns Forster and Washburn, you are dismissed."

The two ensigns stood from the table and filed out of the room. Both snuck a glance at Jiménez before they left.

The doors closed, leaving Stephens and Jiménez alone in the conference room. "That was impressive," said Stephens. "Not many newbs have learned to think, much less feel they have the agency to do what they believe is right."

"Thank you, sir," she said sheepishly.

"I want you to keep up that kind of thinking, Ensign. Question things if they don't seem right. Explore unconventional solutions. If that ever gets you in a jam with a senior officer, come talk to me. I'll take care of it." Stephens checked his comm again. "Now I've got some tasks to attend to and you've got a party to get to. See you in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," said Jiménez, the young ensign standing as Commander Stephens dashed from the conference room.