

Chapter 4

A damp early morning breeze blew in from the bay and through the hanger as Celia took her pre-flight walk-around. She traced her fingers across the brushed gray duranium skin of the J-67, marveling at her luck. Any butterflies she felt earlier were replaced with birds of war. The Dragonfly was three times bigger than the Tempest and looked like a private luxury craft, not a Corps war machine. The J-67 was smooth, sleek, like a classic sculpture. It was a blank canvas ready for whatever may come; she felt a kinship with the ship.

The Dragonfly was equipped with a proper cargo bay and ramp at the stern, and they would need it for all the extra gear Hamilton and Ph'avell brought along. Celia checked off the last item of her pre-flight list and saw on her command intel holo screen that the crew were all on board. So she made a perfunctory prayer to Hamii on his holy day that luck would be on their side and walked up the cargo ramp. Corps ship interiors were all the same gray enameled metal. But the Dragonfly's cargo bay was finished in warm gray paneling and dark trim. Celia wondered if all ForceCon ships were like this. While relatively large, the cargo bay was packed full of Ph'avell's gear cases and more strapped down on top of her father's off-roader. *What the Hells?*

The ground crew exited the internal and into the cargo bay with their tools and lev loaders. Celia checked her readout and realized they hadn't any time to move Fred off the ship.

"Chief, my thanks for helping...." Celia stood at ease before the Crew Chief.

"Cadet, the Mission Supervisor, asked no questions regarding the status of the J thirty-four." The Chief fidgeted with the tools on his belt, "You are now in command of one of *only three* such craft; anywhere. If anything happens to it, we will become intimately familiar with far worse people than Major Skandii. So, return it without a scratch, so we can both have long careers." The Chief disembarked as she tried to salute him.

Celia added 'no scratches' to her to-do list and closed the cargo ramp. The main airlock resembled a fancy locker room more than a passageway with a door at either end. It had sixteen crew bays, clad and trimmed in the same gray and darker gray material, along with two upholstered benches. Ph'avell had already

staged five ForceCon enviro suits in the bays, each parked with a holographic crew ID. Unlike the patchwork ones Celia had trained with, these looked tough enough to handle a neutron blast.

The Dragonfly's central hub was a perpendicular corridor with the same dark gray floors that made her boots chip with every step. To the left was the Team Room, packed with Ph'Avell's gear, while Hamilton's Med Lab mirrored it in antiseptic in contrast on the far right. Before her lay three options. Straight ahead was a short walkway into the galley, another thing the Tempest did not have. To its left, a stairwell descended to the engine bays and crew quarters. The idea that they could actually lay down on a bed for rest during the mission seemed sinful. Finally, the stairwell to the right led straight up to the bridge. The airlock sealed with a hiss behind her; there was no going back now.

Celia listened to the quiet activity within and reflected on the sheer madness of the morning. How could so many things go wrong? She wondered if she would step onto the bridge to exuberant congratulations for passing the secret test—*fat chance*.

Her boot crossed the threshold, and instead of bunting and cheers, the young crew worked at their leather-upholstered duty stations around the small oblate amphitheater of the bridge. While not nearly as big as a command carrier's bridge, it was far fancier and large enough for the warhawks fighting in her stomach.

Four duty stations ringed the rear of the bridge. The Executive Officer and Operations Officer on the left, while the Communication and Science Officer were stationed to the right. The command chair sat on the next level down. It looked more like a club chair than a Captain's station. Despite its cushioned opulence, it looked like a lonely spot. To the front of the bridge were the main view-screen, pilot, and gunner stations; another level lower. Not a single switch or lever to be seen; all stations were clean plains of customizable touch panels.

"Captain on the bridge." A voice barked out, and Celia turned to see Maxtron saluting from the XO's station. The rest of the crew followed suit while Major Skandii remained seated at the comms station, manipulating dozens of holoscreens filled with code with her four arms.

"Carry on." Celia returned a salute.

"We're on schedule for our zero-seven-thirty liftoff, Captain." Maxtron was the picture of an Executive Officer. She wondered where this version had been hiding for the last three years.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Care to give us the mission run-down?" Celia said.

Maxtron looked carved from stone as he stood to address the crew.

"Following our liftoff from Sterium Base, we set course through the Shaheen asteroid belt to Sector forty-two dash-F. We'll transmit an encoded sequence and await the cargo delivery location. After delivery, we will vector to Cordia-6 and conduct an infiltration and data acquisition exercise." Maxtron paused.

These were not the original mission orders, and Celia felt a cold fire climb up her spine. The team determined a more efficient sequence to give them extra time to adapt and overcome the inevitable mission curveballs. Cadet commanders were not *encouraged* to change mission evolution sequences. They waited for a beat, but Major Skandii remained focused on her screens, so Celia nodded to Maxtron.

"Following Cordia-6, we'll travel to the Hermellian Gas Rings for sample collection before returning to Sterium Base." Maxtron relaxed.

"Excellent," Celia stepped down and slid into the gunner's seat.

The illuminated display revealed no payloads or rounds in the weapon systems but saw the fully charged ion drives and ready to take them into space. Celia observed the young pilot's creased brow and how his hands danced across the control panels.

How are we looking? @CVickersLCDR

Jacey looked over with a mix of surprise and excitement as if she materialized from the ether.

We're looking great. Uh, I mean, we're on schedule. I'd take these tests every week if there came with a Dragonfly and Gen9 TexComs. @JCortEgn02

Celia smiled and considered what a commander's voice sounded like.

"Is my ship ready for liftoff?" Not even close.

"We're ready to go, Ma'am." Ensign Cort sat tall with a smile.

"Thank you, Ensign." She walked to Hamilton, "Everything set, Doc?"

"I really didn't need to bring half of my gear. The ship's liquid diamond quantum core computer can..." Hamilton stopped when Celia raised her hand.

You ready to do this? @CVickersLCDR

He pressed a few buttons and nodded.

"Major, we are prepared to go." She tried to keep her voice deep.

The Major regarded her as the pressure-suit made that relentless sound.

"You may proceed, Cadet Captain." The Major saluted with one arm as the rest continued to work.

Celia held her breath as she sat in the command chair. An array of holoscreens appeared around her, displaying crew telemetry, ship data, and live video of the ground crew detaching the Dragonfly's umbilical. There was a gentle rocking as the Dragonfly rolled into the morning light and onto the busy tarmac of Sterium Base.

"Tower, this is VF-1202, requesting launch approval," Jacey said.

"VF-1202, we have you queued for Zero-Seven-Hundred." A voice spoke.

"Doc, can you set up the holo-vis system?" Celia scanned the system menu.

All of Major Skandii's hands pulled away from their work as she looked over.

"You know, I helped develop an optical sensor they based the... Bongo! Found it." Hamilton sat forward, "Just call up the AI system."

Celia felt like she was grabbed off the street and put on stage without a script. She shot Hamilton a look, and he stared back for a moment before a look of recognition washed over his face.

Oh, uh... The AI's name is VOZ. @HMerriweatherLCDR

Thanks. By the way, it's bingo, not bongo. @CVickersLCDR

"Hello, VOZ?" Celia said.

Hello, Captain.

A neutral, potentially feminine voice emanated around them.

"Please activate the holo-vis system?"

Activating.

The bridge shimmered and shifted, then disappeared. Celia saw the crewmembers with a ghosted version of the bridge around them. It looked like they were all floating four meters in the air. It was nothing like any augmented reality she had experienced before. The outside was clear and adjusted to wherever she looked.

"This is incredible...." Major Skandii stood up from her chair as her hands knit together over and over.

"The system iso-locates each user's position via TexCom and renders the unique feed live to them." Hamilton puffed up.

"Marves, but will it polish my boots?" Maxtron loomed behind the command chair.

"Try this. Look at anything across the airfield," Hamilton spoke, "now, pinch-zoom in."

Celia reached out and felt a bio-feedback connection when she 'grabbed' a pallet of shipping containers across the field, then spread her fingers apart and zoomed in close. A translucent control panel with some exciting options popped into view, and she selected one. After that, the entire holo-image switched to Celia's view.

"I had no idea this ship was an option." Major Skandii pinched and zoomed with the rest of the crew.

"VF-1202, you have the ball." The tower voice returned, and everyone returned to their seats.

"Tower, we're on the X, waiting for the green light." Jacey flashed the landing

lights three times.

Maxtron engaged the seat restraints, and Celia felt her body drawn tight against the command chair as red holographic shields appeared above all stations.

“Crew ready for launch, Captain.” The Executive Officer said.

“VF-1202, you are clear for launch; repeat clear for launch.” A floating timer appeared before the pilot's station.

“Let's not keep the day waiting,” Celia said.

“Grav-locks initiated.” Jacey flipped a switch and raised the thrust control.

The Dragonfly rumbled and growled in place.

Did I mention I hate flying? @HMerriweatherLCDR

Jacey released the grav-locks when the timer hit zero, and the ship leaped straight up, screaming away from the launchpad. The growl lessened as they climbed toward the clouds, then the rumble stopped as a low hum rose in pitch.

The landing gear retracted with a soft ‘clunk’ as the Dragonfly’s nose drove toward the darkening sky, pressing the crew into their seats. Celia felt the invisible tug of the seat restraint as she looked back toward Nueva City, caught in the golden fingers’ of the rising sun.

The city sat on a broad, delta-shaped plain between two diverging mountain ranges. The giant stone that split the Borge River into two forks was visible even at this altitude. These tributaries ran directly through the massive city. They entered Nueva Bay on either side of a deep peninsula, home to the Nueva City's downtown, industrial district, and Sterium Base. Just on the inland edge of the peninsula sat the Royal Palace, built upon a broad hill. The three-thousand-year-old royal residence was the Union's heart and the epicenter of galactic attention today. Down there, tens of thousands of people congregated to participate in and witness the first of seven Unity Day events across the homeworlds over the coming year. Her father and Kr'I'Traax were right in the middle of it all.

Jacey banked the Dragonfly toward the Shaheen asteroid belt, and Celia caught a glimpse of Stonegate to the South of the city. She wondered how she

would feel tomorrow as she left Terra Prime for the three-month archeology expedition? Celia's excitement to participate in the dig amplified a growing internal conflict. Attending the Stonegate and serving as a Corps officer had been *the plan* for as long as she could remember. Now, Celia's heart had lost some of that desire when Hunter broke it. Now, Stonegate seemed so small and meaningless along the edge of the continent. Then it went out of sight.

Generating an external atmosphere.

"Disengaging launch restraints." Maxtron turned in his seat, "Helm, set Objective Alpha course at patrol speed. Science, run standard sensor sweep package, let's not miss anything. Ops, keep an eye out for unmarked craft and make sure the Sh'rian Debris Field hasn't shifted on us. We need to use that as a shield for our approach as long as we can." Maxtron said.

Celia felt a little bad for how she treated Maxtron; it wasn't his fault he was here. Still, she promised to treat him fairly as she dialed in Stonegate's mission control frequency.

"Mission Control, VF-1202 is en route to Objective Alpha. Over."

"Copy 1202." A by-the-book voice replied.

"We have under an hour till we clear the asteroid belt, then a thirty-six-minute slipstream jump to Sector forty-two. So, let's prep our gear because once we get moving, there's no stopping." Celia said.

A new message flashed in her TexCom. Her father. Despite the mission com locks, his message got through, of course.

Looks like you took off. What's with the different ship registration? How does Cadet Blain fit in? Don't forget to double-check the tac plan and listen to Ph'avell.
@RAdVickers

Her brow knit together. Celia was as annoyed as she was touched.

Everything's fine... We'll talk at dinner; I gotta go. @CVickersLCDR

Celia looked back at Terra Prime as they slid away, a beautiful blue-green circle in the black. An unexpected pang pulled in her chest. She turned forward and double-checked the mission plan. *Here goes nothing.*