

Chapter 7

The crew gathered information, assessed the situation, planned various landings, and tried to contact someone in their chain of command. Maybe it wasn't as bad down there as they feared? If they could just establish communications with someone down there, then they could act. She was fidgeting with her grandfather's timepiece, then Celia realized she hadn't contacted her father.

Dad, we got here as fast as we could. What can we do to help? @CVickersLCDR

The message status flashed red in her outbox, and she looked at the lifeless planet on the main screen. *C'mon....* Celia wasn't surprised that the network was down. Still, her inbox was filled with junk messages trying to sell her on the latest product, a clear example of the power of commerce. The message status switched to green and disappeared. The new Gen9 system was smart enough to find a way; now, she had to do the same.

"I see heavy damage from explosions in Nueva City." Hamilton leaned back, "Long-range imagery shows that the Union Capitol building, Royal Palace, and Sterium Base have suffered extensive damage."

If Celia's message made it to her father, maybe he was safe?

"If we're looking for leadership options, we may need to look elsewhere," Ph'avell said.

"There's no excessive radiation, no spectrographic chemical signature, or artificial thermal dissipation. But whatever happened down there has happened repeatedly."

"Then what's doing this?" Celia inquired.

"I can't pinpoint a weapon category from this data. But, it's happening across the globe along with the great seismic activity."

"Any luck contacting the Corps, Major?" Celia said.

"Negative. There were a few isolated requests for support, but the encrypted Corps network remains inactive. Open network messages continue to appear on social sites in bursts. Media outlets do not report anything determinate, though

they are replaying random extremist communiques in Thandarian, calling it a Rezzamist attack."

Hamilton zoomed the holo-vis in on countless small ships packed into low orbit.

"Looks like civilian ships," Maxtron stepped beside the command chair.

"They're not designed for interplanetary travel," Celia said.

The main holoscreen shifted and showed the fractured dome of the Senate Capitol atop smoking rubble. Then a stack of message blocks appeared to confirm that Sterium Base was leveled.

"There's no evidence of *any* OPFOR activity down there. Plenty of private posts that confirm the devastation has pushed masses of people along the waterfronts. If there are armed attackers in the city, that's the ideal soft target."

A transparent overlay showed how the two river branches and the bay encircled most of Nueva City with water. Numberless green markers indicated the locations of people, and red markers depicted damage and fire. The city was predominantly red, with a green ring.

"Hells," Jacey added.

The holo-vis pushed into the waterline where people climbed onto any form of transport to ferry them across the bay and apparent safety. The image slid across the water,

"Seems the collection point is one Corps hospital ship," Ph'avell said.

"Then, we need to go there." Maxtron pointed.

The map and image shifted back to the city center, where small clusters of green dots speckled the predominantly red map.

"But hundreds of people trapped *in* the city," Ph'avell said.

"Why don't we just join in with the ferrying crafts?" Maxtron interjected.

"And write the others off?" Ph'avell replied.

"They could be bait for extremists to lure in rescue forces?" Maxtron said.

Ph'avell's fur puffed up.

"I thank you for the cautious council, Gentlemen. We'll go to the hospital ship, but we won't go empty-handed." Celia dug her elbows into the chair arms, "Those people will die if we don't try, and I can't live with that."

"I've located a TexCom in our system from your father." Major Skandii's vocal emulator squawked with excitement.

A string of text showed on the holoscreen.

_—Δ...Δ..••••—re-TURN——unsafe• get —.... @RAdVickers

The chair cushions seemed to push her out. Did he just send this, or was this old? Celia opened the comm channel.

"Tell me where you are, and we'll come for you." Celia's words appeared as text in a dialog box, blinked for a while, then shifted into the thread.

Celia dared not look away and break the spell. She felt Maxtron edge closer to her as the bridge seemed to close in.

_—Δ...Δ..••••oO dangerous—— save—... @RAdVickers

He was alive. The words wobbled and shifted through a well of tears. Celia didn't want to be selfish, but she couldn't ignore her desire. She looked to her crew for something. Support? Disapproval? She wasn't sure.

"Let us come get you." Celia sent the message and turned, "Major, can you locate the origin of his signal?"

Nobody turned from the screen as line after line of undecipherable text filled the thread until.

_—Δ...Δ..••••'ll be alriGht—— PleΔΔse st—... @RAdVickers

The random text became an endless line of dashes, and Celia wiped the tears away. Her legs buckled when Hamilton's massive hand rested on her shoulder. She found her footing in his cautious smile.

"Did you find anything, Major?" Celia said after a cleansing breath.

"Negative, Captain." The newly appointed Communications Officer said.

"It doesn't matter, we came back to help, and that's just what we're doing to do." Celia zoomed in on a cluster of green dots and locked in a grid coordinate.

"I could submerge the Dragonfly in the bay, activate the shields, and release the water on the landing zone to make it safer at our LZ's," Jacey suggested.

"Great idea, Ensign." Celia sat down. "Take us in."

The Dragonfly dove in an aggressive entry angle and dashed its way through the thickening crowd of vessels risking the frozen vacuum of space. The ship rumbled and buffeted against the ever-increasing atmospheric density of re-entry as flames filled the bridge with a cold light. The launch restraints kept Celia snug in the command chair until Jacey adjusted the ship's angle, and the rumbling abated. The surface of the Dragonfly flashed with the fire as it coursed its way through the atmosphere.

"I've never seen blue flames before," Jacey said.

"The upper atmosphere appears to be denser." Hamilton checked multiple holoscreens, "There's a massive amount of silica out there."

"Sand?" Maxtron asked.

"More like glass," Hamilton concluded.

Why was the sky filled with microscopic beads of glass? The ship hummed as they descended at Mach 11. Then, like a finger touching a cymbal, the vibration ceased. Below, the capital city was shrouded in plumes of dark smoke, and massive steam geysers boiled out of the bay. The damage extended along the coast and inland as far as the eye could see. Everything looked as if it had been shaken loose.