

DRAFT

THE
STATE
OF
VESTA
FORTUNA

WALTER ROBINSON

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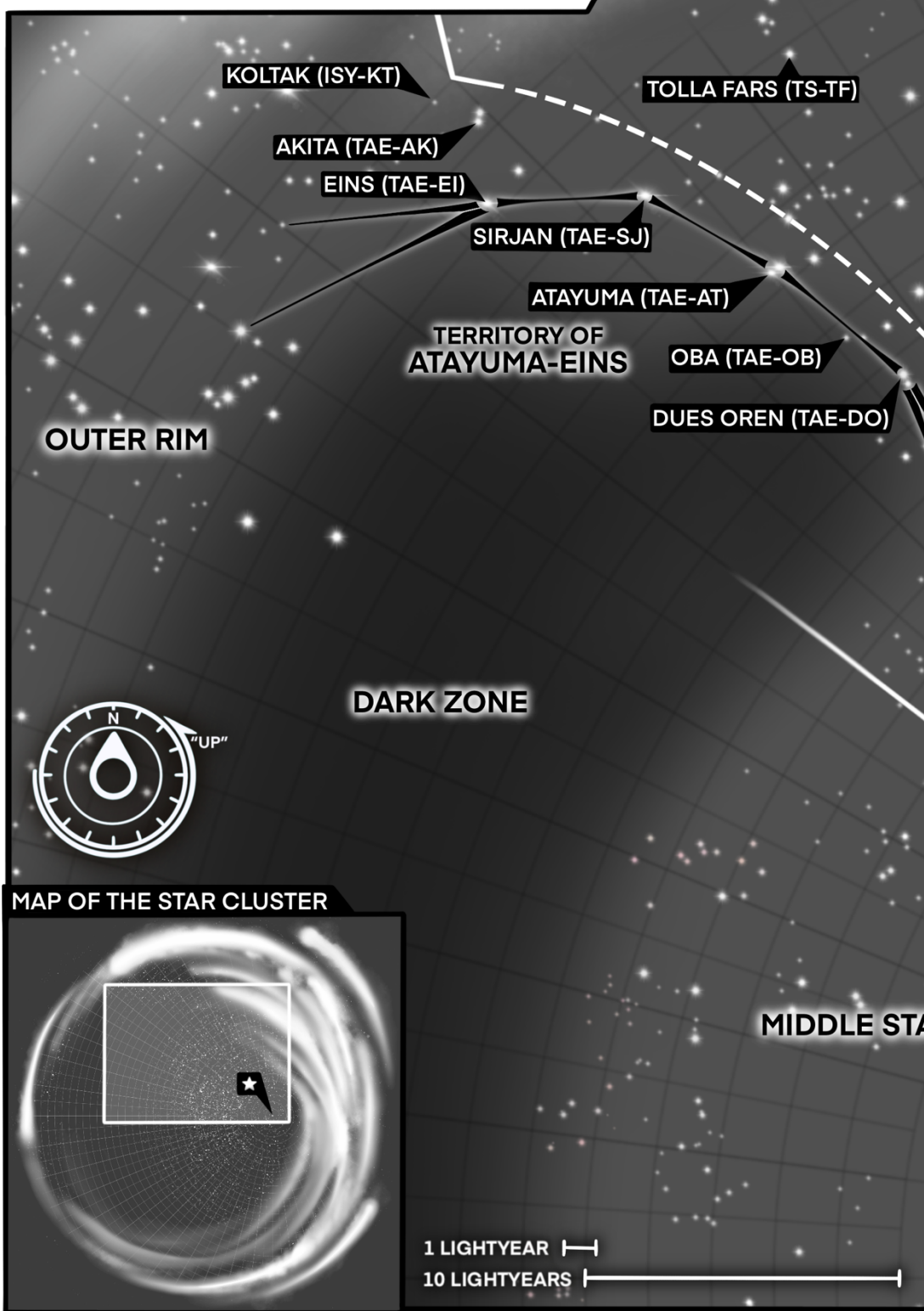
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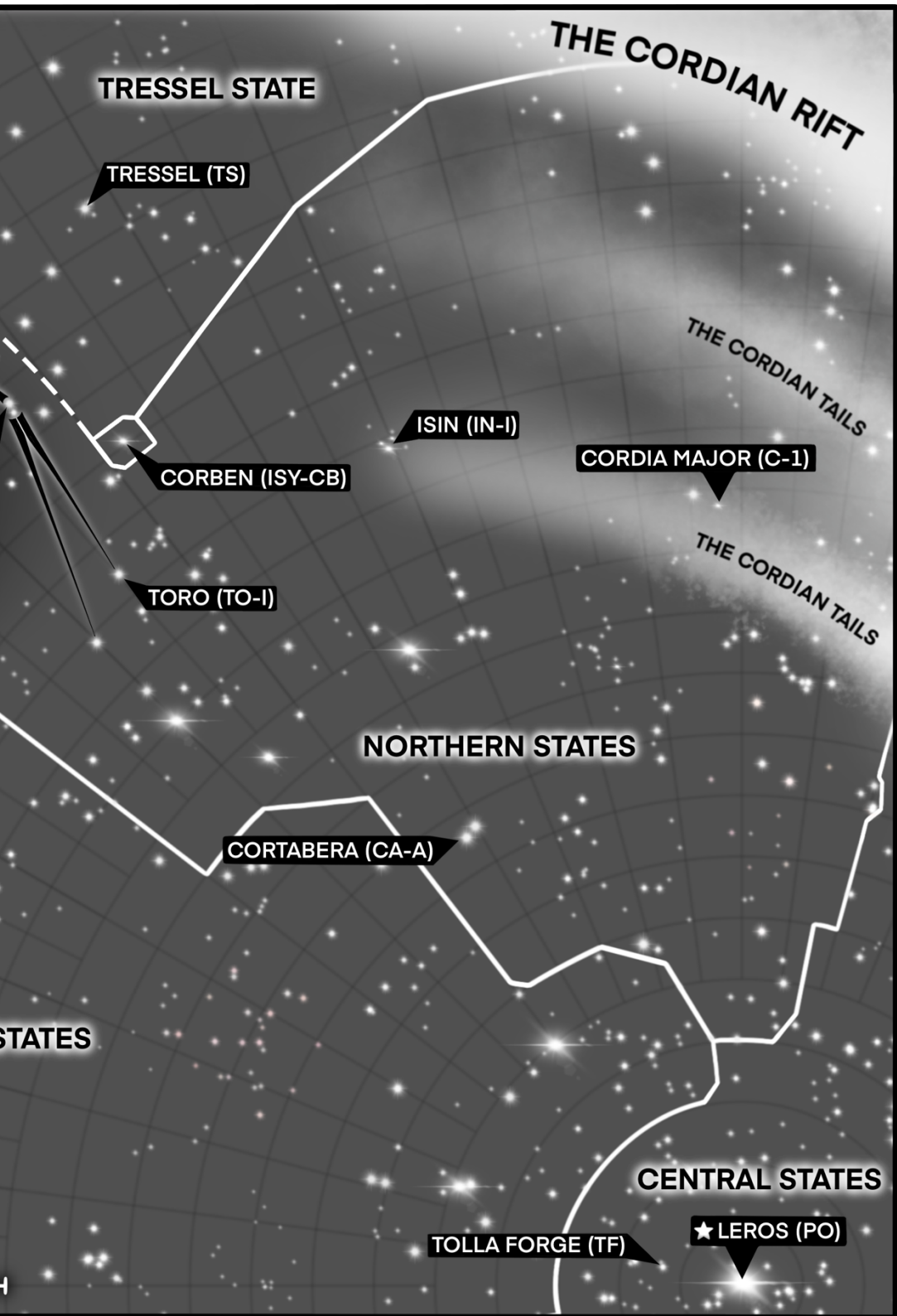
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WEBSITE

Find location details, character bios, ship blueprints, and more at:
svf-state.com

SENSITIVITY WARNING

The State of Vesta Fortuna is an action-packed romantic and political military science fiction adventure. While the prose largely avoids gory details, it includes elements that may not be suitable for some readers. Nudity and intimacy, physical violence in combat, including with knives and firearms, mental and physical trauma from psychological and physical torture, and large-scale combat casualties are present in this novel.



PREFACE A NIGHT OF STORIES

Surface Habitat, Earth's Moon
The Year 2102

Ath, now age eighty two, walked slowly down a well-lit corridor escorted by his teenage grandchild of the same name. They passed a small window and gazed out at the pitted gray hills of the lunar landscape. A line of immense radio telescopes stretched over the horizon on his left, every one pointed straight up. A sickly Earth rose over a hill to his right, growing larger by the moment. Ath sighed and turned away. It was a place he would never go; he knew that his body, having lived nearly all its life in low gravity, would collapse on the planet's surface. Then there was the dust, the dust that had become nearly all plant life.

Resolving to think of something less morose, he turned to his grandson and said, "Ath, do you remember Ponta Lynd?"

"Yes, you and Grandma wrote a lot about him, being a side character and all."

"A side character!" Ath huffed indignantly.

Younger Ath shrugged.

"Ponta Lynd is— becomes the heart of the resistance! And he is instrumental to the unification of the North." Elder Ath looked down to

find his grandson looking back with more interest than he expected. “Well, I cannot spoil the end of the war for you. See, his story begins on the planet Aelius, yes, but there he is merely a soldier in another private military. It is when he switches branches, to the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins, that is when his tale really gets interesting.” They reached the end of the corridor and emerged into a towering dome-shaped room centered by a large multi-stepped optical telescope pointed nearly straight up at a quartz-glass-covered aperture in the ceiling.

Ath smiled when he spotted his wife Amy typing away at the control console for the telescope. Arcs of blue and green gas made concentric shapes on the computer screen. It was the star cluster Messier Four, spinning its way through space seven thousand lightyears away, seven thousand years ago. It was home to the vast and flourishing civilization of the Apeilous, the belligerent Tressel State, and the defiant independent star system of Corben.

“What are we tracking tonight, love?” he asked.

Amy said, “I found some new information on the Fortuna acquisition of the Milan—”

“Ah, ah! Spoilers!” Ath chuckled, raising his hand.

Younger Ath shook his head, a grin on his face. “Grandpa, I already know what happens. You and Grandma talk about it over dinner every night.”

“Yes, I suppose we do. But then you have only heard a fraction of it! Are you ready for the full tale?”

Ath nodded.

“We start seven years into the war with Tressel, and a decade into the effort to make the Territory of Atayuma-Eins into an officially recognized state of the Apeilous. Our heroes might not know it, but they are almost there... Let us begin with Ponta, en route to his first assignment in the Navy.”



CHAPTER 1 AN UNUSUAL ROCK

NVF Transport *Azenar* (NVF-1094)
Entering atmosphere of Sirjan (TAE-SJ)

A persistent rattling noise came from down the back of the cabin where a closed ramp separated fifty-three sailors from the freezing high atmosphere of the far-northern border planet Sirjan. Ponta Lynd sat in a strung canvas seat against the inner fuselage. He set his hand on his bouncing knee and looked up at the ceiling where the space between the bird's ribs was stuffed with radiation shielding. A loud hiss filled the cabin, and the air dropped at least thirty degrees in a matter of seconds. The skin around his mouth stung, but his body remained warm, wrapped in a temperature-regulated coat and an insulated flight suit. Ponta closed his helmet visor. The sounds of the cabin ceased in a snap, and all he could hear was the hum coming from his bulky glide pack. He glanced left and right, at the sailors on the opposite side of the cabin and at those at his side.

“J-one goes in five minutes. Line up!” a voice said through the com in his ear. Ponta unlatched his seatbelts and stood, stepping up to a yellow stripe painted on the cabin floor. He took position between the two sailors who had been sitting opposite him. The jump master, wearing a standard-issue maroon parka and an oxygen mask, marched down the line and stopped abruptly near the back of the cabin. “Comps on!”

“Comps on!” they recited. Some people shouted while others just spoke casually. The coms built into their helmets leveled the volumes. Ponta

activated the flight computer on his wrist. The whine emanating from his glide pack doubled in intensity.

“Clip in!”

Ponta took a sprung hook from a loop on the front of his pack and slapped it onto a cable strung near the cabin’s roof. The sailor ahead of Ponta struggled to get the hook onto the line. A second, harder slap put it in place with the others.

After a quick scan down the line, the jump master reached out and pushed a button on the wall. A klaxon let out three short barks. Sunlight broke through the crack at the top of the ramp, growing in brightness and scope until Ponta’s visor automatically tinted to reveal the peaks of a vast snowy mountain range. The last time Ponta had practiced a high-altitude jump, he was above the grassy rolling hills of the planet Elara, a temperate paradise compared to the extreme climate of Sirjan.

“J-one goes in thirty!”

The sailor at the front of the line stepped up to the edge of the cabin. Ponta watched the jump master silently countdown from five. At zero, he slapped the sailor on the shoulder, helping him down the short ramp and out the back of the bird.

“J-two, ten!”

Ten seconds later, the second sailor jogged down the ramp and stepped off the edge. They fell from view in a fraction of a second. A few more jumped at irregular intervals. The closer Ponta got to the front of the line, the more his nerves kicked in.

“J-seven, hold, one minute!”

The line wavered. Ponta tilted his head to the side and looked past the people in front of him. His right arm, hand wrapped around the chord that connected the drogue release on his glide pack to the cable, was starting to get sore. The distant mountains seemed taller. A lush green river valley slid into view.

“J-seven, lucky bastard, go in five!”

Ponta laughed silently to himself as the sailor leaped out. A few more departed while they were above the valley. The number of people ahead of Ponta lessened until it was zero. The jump master held up his arm.

“J-twelve, hold, two minutes!”

Ponta nodded sharply. He stood up straight and took a deep breath, and looked down at the wide landscape. The distant snow-capped mountains were just jagged peaks on the horizon, and the green valley had spilled onto a wide snowy plain. Ponta found himself looking at the jump master’s wrist computer, which displayed a live readout of their position and a time estimate to their next waypoint.

“J-twelve goes in thirty!”

He set his feet and looked out again. There was no hint of greenery, only bitterly cold emptiness. His flight plan appeared on his helmet visor, showing a free-fall descent down to five kilometers altitude, then a slower, spiraling descent into a glade near the foot of a shallow mountain range.

The jump master started counting down on his fingers. Ponta watched, then jogged forward on zero. The ramp felt short and he left the end mid-step, putting him in an awkward slow tumble that was violently straightened out as his drogue chute deployed. Freezing air rushed over his helmet, chilling the visor so drastically that ice crystals formed on the edges where the defrost lines did not reach. His winter gear did its job. If anything, he was too warm as he fell through the clear sky with his arms and legs outstretched.

A piercing thump emanated from Ponta’s glide pack. He felt it more than he heard it. A warning tone beeped in his ear. The airspeed indicator showed that he was falling a little bit too fast.

This is gonna hurt, he thought, bracing himself as the drogue chute automatically expanded. The belts around his shoulders and across his chest tightened and knocked the wind out of him. A moment later, the wings on his glide pack extended into the airstream and the chute released itself. The flight computer leveled out for him while he sucked in forced breaths and looked around to gain his bearings. To his right, the snow plains stretched as far as he could see. To his left, a low gray mountain range ran all the way to the horizon. Directly ahead, a deep, narrow forest cut the world in half.

Eager not to spend more time than necessary in the air, Ponta directed himself into a steep and wide spiraling dive via the sensors in his gloves.

With the haptic feedback active, it felt like he was holding a joystick. He clicked the invisible trim hat over a few notches, correcting a slightly outward drift. The aggressive descent quickly took him below two kilometers of altitude. Were it not for the snow that covered everything, Ponta might have been able to see his destination.

As he looped around over the end of the forest, Ponta spotted his target. It was a tall white geological feature that struck up from the ground in the middle of a wide glade deep in the woods. It took up too much of the clearing for him to land safely, so he scanned the surrounding area. Every clearing in the trees was either too rocky or cut by a stream. He had to land at the edge of the forest.

On final approach to a stretch of flat ground, Ponta took one last glance over the treetops. The white peak just poked out of the canopy. It was at least a few kilometers away. Scoffing at himself and at whoever chose that location, he directed his attention forward and guided the glide suit through a late flare and gentle touchdown. He landed upright in deep snow that quickly swallowed him to the waist. The wings protruding from the back of the suit folded themselves in, and the hum emanating from the pack died until only the sound of ice crystals bouncing across the tundra remained. To his right stretched an endless flat landscape, the scope of which was masked by the snow blowing up off the ground.

With a sigh that turned into a groan, Ponta activated the folded spikes in his boots and started half-walking-half-digging his way toward the nearest trees. Every step and sweep felt less effective until he realized that the snow was getting deeper. He suddenly burst through an icy bluff and stumbled out onto a stretch of frozen dirt. Turning around, he looked back at the long white cliff that stretched out of view in each direction. The gap he had emerged from was already starting to fill in with wind-blown powder.

Ponta straightened up and consulted the map in the digital corner of his visor. A road cut through the woods just a few dozen meters from his location. If it was unused, then the snow there would likely be too deep to easily traverse. However, if the road was well traveled, then the tracks would be more comfortable to navigate than wild brush.

A fifteen-minute march brought Ponta to the road. Four fresh tracks cut deep into the powder and indicated that a wheeled vehicle had driven up to the snowbank and then turned around. Luckily for Ponta, its wheels were wide enough that he could walk comfortably in one of the tracks.

The hike quickly wore on Ponta, not least because of the heavy glide pack and the stiff winter clothing under his flight suit. Just as he was about to stop and rest, he spotted what looked like the edge of the glade he sought. Steeling himself for the final push, he turned down the temperature setting in his jacket and set off.

Ponta emerged from the woods to find the large white shape he saw from above. At surface level, it was obviously a huge camouflage tarp stretched over a tall blunt-nose rocket about the same height as the treetops. The tarp had no less than a dozen tie-downs on just the side Ponta could see, and the material between each tie-down arced up to form a gap that he might be able to sneak through if he was not so laden with gear.

“Hey!” The voice was female and echoed enough that Ponta struggled to pinpoint it. After turning back and forth for a solid ten seconds, he spotted a dark face poking up behind the slope of the tarp. “Over here!” she shouted, waving him down with a bare arm. Ponta navigated around the ship and found a small dark archway made of ice blocks.

In the shade of the tarp, it took a few moments for Ponta’s eyes to adjust and for him to see the dark-skinned woman who had waved him down. She urged him down a short metal ramp and into an open hatch as if time was of the essence. He didn’t get a good look at the ship, but he had seen the edges of a concrete blast pad. As soon as he was in, she hit a button on the wall, triggering the closure of the hatch. Ponta turned off the heater in his jacket, unsealed his helmet, and lifted it off while the small room started to ascend. He said, “Hi, I’m—”

“Lieutenant Ponta Lynd, transfer from the army. Yeah, Vires can’t wait to meet you.” She stood at ease in a wrinkled jumpsuit with the sleeves rolled up, but something in her voice felt sarcastic. He spent a long moment looking at her, finding details he had not expected to see so far from the heart of the Apeilous. Her irises were as dark as her pupils, and subtle raised lines ran over the curves of her facial features: above her

eyebrows, around her cheeks, and along the edges of her lips. He was about ninety percent sure she was from Leros, from the under-city, and that those lines were implanted subcutaneous lights.

“I’m Guida.”

He shook her offered hand and quickly let go. She did not seem to enjoy shaking his cold glove.

“No worries,” Guida said. A few seconds later, the room came to a jarring halt. “Welcome to NVF six-fifty,” she said. “We call it the *Navon*.”

The door slid open to reveal a short hallway that ended in a switchback metal staircase. Ponta tilted his head to try and see up into the hatchway at the top of the stairs, but the low ceiling prevented any study.

Guida raised her hand toward a row of closed sliding doors. “Private cabins for all, take your pick.”

“Yes, about—”

“Yeah, five on a ten-person ship, I know. But we get it done. Drop your stuff and meet in the CR.”

“Understood,” Ponta said, wondering if the enlisted rank embroidered on her wrinkled uniform and the officer rank pin on his collar meant anything to her. He picked the only cabin without a name on the door. After pulling the door closed behind him, he leaned against the wall and breathed a sigh of relief. It took him a minute to undo all the straps that connected the glide pack to his flight suit, and he nearly dropped the pack on the floor after undoing the last buckle. The temperature was finally getting to him, and he hurried to get out of his thick winter layers. With his flight suit rolled down to his waist, Ponta scoped out the cabin.

An empty locker stood in the corner, and he filled it with the contents of his bag: flight jumpsuits, undershirts, undergarments, and two pairs of slim magnetic boots, one of which he stuck in the charging rack at the bottom. Their status lights turned green. After donning a clean flight suit and boots, he ensured that his cuffs were sharp and that his rank pin was visible and in the correct orientation. In a dingy mirror, he combed his short hair with his fingers and then walked out into the hallway.

Three people stood in the short corridor. Guida was one of them, and she leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Neither of the other two looked

especially presentable. One was clearly Atayuman, a short far-northern woman with tan skin and glowing amber eyes. Her shoulder-length hair was wavy and chaotic and not at all in regulation. The other person, Ponta guessed, was more local, with pale skin and bright silver Viran eyes.

“I am Marci,” the Atayuman woman said. “This is Myron. And you already met Guida.”

Ponta nodded. From the mission brief, he knew that Marcielle Layan was a petty officer and that Myron Russa and Guida Swan were both enlisted sailors. He had yet to meet the ship’s commander, one Amarran Vires.

“Amar is busy down in the core. He’ll be up eventually,” Marci said as if reading his mind.

Ponta nodded. He wondered how deep into his brain she could see.

“In the meantime, I will show you your station. Guida, Myron, as you were.”

Guida remained leaning on the wall. Myron just smiled.

“How was the trip down?” Marci asked, climbing the stairs and ducking through the narrow hatch into the command room.

“Rough. Pretty sure I’ve got bruises forming.” Ponta took a moment to look into the gap around the hatch. A larger room contained the spherical command room. Curved armor plates made up the walls of the command room itself, and the entire assembly sat on numerous thick rubber drive wheels that protruded from the floor, walls, and ceiling. Thick tire marks crossed the surface of the sphere. Everything looked old, and none of the protective coatings on any surface were without chips or scratches. Even the practically ancient ships he had flown on during training did not look so old. At least nothing appeared to be broken.

“You can repaint all that if you want,” Marci said. The center of her brow creased, but the rest of her expression remained neutral. Again, she seemed to read him like an open book. “It all works if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I trust you,” he said without thinking. He grabbed a handle inside the hatch and pulled himself up into the command room. All ten stations sat

about halfway up the inside of the sphere, with shallow stairs to reach them.

“No, you don’t,” she replied with a deadpan tone of voice.

Ponta looked up and saw green sparks swimming behind her glowing irises.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” he joked, smiling to try and diffuse the situation.

“This is your station.” Marci slapped the back of a bucket seat behind a narrow two-level console bristling with screens and an extra-wide keyboard. The seat and four others were in a position of easy ingress while the other five were folded and tucked back against the wall. The pale green coating on the seat frame was chipped off at just about every edge and corner. Faded text reading Damage Control sat on the lip. At least the padding of the seat itself appeared to be clean. He leaned over and flicked a protected switch to activate the console. The screens flickered to life, displaying a schematic view of the ship. It was tall and narrow. With fins protruding outward from the nose and tail, looked like a retro rocket from the early days of science fiction cinema. The command room sat at the center of mass and the decks below it held living spaces. Every other part of the ship was packed with flight and combat systems. Most of the lower third was covered by a bright red cross-hatch pattern, indicating a lack of data from the mesh network of internal sensors.

“Like I said, Amar is working on the core.”

Ponta nodded and sat down. He started a systems check, initiating a quick diagnostic of every system and subsystem not linked to the fusion reactor, ion thruster, aerospike, or fuel tanks.

“I’ll leave you to it, lunch in thirty.”

“Got it, thanks.” Ponta heard a huff as she exited the command room, but he kept his eyes on his work as the first of the systems checks started to come back mostly green, some yellow. Information was relayed to him in small paragraphs of plain text. Everything seemed to be in order, except for some of the redundant systems. The backup radio receiver, for example, had not been opened for inspection since the ship was assigned to the Sirjan system two years prior. It was a similar story for the triplets

of servos on the point defense cannon, the dual motors for the ammunition elevator, and secondary and tertiary flight computers. Ponta copied and pasted all the readouts into a blank report, added some notes, saved the document, closed it, shut down his console, and leaned back in his chair.

Ten years in the army, two years in the academy, and all I got was this lousy backwater post, he thought, crossing his arms but smiling at his reflection in the black screen. His expression turned grim. At least I'm not colonizing planets for the Endeavor anymore.



CHAPTER 2 VAGUE CONVICTION

Near NVF Patrol Ship *Navon* (NVF-650)
Stationed on Sirjan (TAE-SJ)

Dirty snow splashed outward from under the small all-terrain vehicle's tires, painting the tree trunks a muddy gray. Some drops bounced back and dirtied the right leg of Ponta's white and gray fatigues. He tightened his grip on the handle on the a-pillar. Myron piloted the doorless vehicle at a breakneck pace, sliding it around the wide corners of the forest trail and hitting speeds higher than the digital gauge cluster was programmed to display. They were very quickly far enough away from camp that Ponta felt comfortable asking about the other members of the crew. At least, he would have if he did not fear for his life.

Myron eased off their pace as he approached the edge of the forest. The rutted road ended abruptly in a high snowbank. Despite the relatively warm temperature of the afternoon, the snow over the fields seemed just as deep as when Ponta had landed a few days prior. A piercing squeak from the brakes accompanied their full stop.

"Okay, last loyal we need to check," Myron announced, hopping out of the ATV and tromping through the snow toward a rocky outcropping a few tree-layers from the road. Ponta followed, spotting where the rocks ended and the camouflage tarp began just before Myron unhooked a corner and ducked into the gloom.

Ponta followed him in, and his eyes adjusted slowly to reveal a stout-looking autonomous rocket sitting on its tail, nose pointed skyward. Its

three landing legs were anchored to the rocky ground with threaded rods topped by explosive bolts. Whoever installed them had not followed protocol; the exhaust holes for the explosive charge were pointed in random directions instead of away from the drone.

“Those don’t look good,” Ponta said, pointing at the anchors.

“What’s wrong with ‘em?”

“Wrong position. Might burn the struts. At least for these two.”

Myron nodded without understanding.

“I’ll add it to the report and we can come back to fix it tomorrow morning.”

Myron nodded again, this time with a small smile. Ponta moved around him and linked his wrist computer to the drone’s flight computer. A status report slowly started to roll in, populating Ponta’s screen with numerous green and yellow lights. He wouldn’t trust it with his life, but it would probably be fine for most patrol and deterrence operations.

With the report downloaded and some physical checks completed, Ponta signaled the all-clear and they returned to the ATV. A gentle cold breeze hit them from the side and rustled the lower branches of the trees. Myron hurried through a three-point turnaround and Ponta pulled his collar up and listened. High above the whine of the motors behind each wheel, a strong wind tossed the leaves and branches of the canopy.

“You know—” Myron fell silent as if he had scrapped the rest of his statement. He started down the road, keeping the vehicle’s wheels in the established tracks.

Ponta turned.

“You’re a lot better than the rest of the army guys we’ve met.”

Ponta huffed. “How’s that?”

“They’re all big and mean and walk around like they have something to prove.”

He raised an eyebrow at Myron, who made a weird expression back, conveying something between bashfulness and earnest mirth. Ponta put on a sly smile. “I feel like I could take all of you in a fight, maybe at once.”

“Hah! Maybe me and Guida,” He narrowed his eyes in thought. “Probably Vires too. But not Marci.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she could bring you down quick,” Myron said as if delivering some fundamental truth. “She’s got thighs like a frog and arms like a bear. Rocked everyone back in basic.”

“I bet.” Ponta really had no clue. He leaned out and looked into the wind-swept forest. A group of small brown mammals darted over a fallen tree and disappeared against the soggy ground. It was an unusually warm day.

Myron kept their pace reasonable on the drive back, and Ponta prodded him for information about his hometown. He reminded Ponta that it was about a thousand kilometers south of their post. Deep in Sirjan’s temperate equatorial zone, his home, and specifically his parents’ garden, was always producing something.

As much as Ponta wanted to remember every little detail, Myron spoke so quickly that Ponta forgot what his parents did for work while he described the school he went to before reaching the age of eligibility for military service. It always surprised Ponta when someone told him a story about joining directly into the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins. After all, Ponta had been in the game so long that his original and once distinct employer was now a fundamental and fully integrated part of the immense military protecting the north.

“So, what was it like, working for Rho?” Myron asked, catching Ponta off guard.

“Oh. Not much different than any other branch.”

“Yeah yeah, but I mean before the integration. I read your file, you were with Rho since the start of the Endeavor.”

Ponta nodded and spotted the glade ahead. Myron slowed the vehicle, perhaps to safely navigate a series of large bumps, perhaps to give Ponta time to explain.

“I was, yes,” he cleared his throat. “You know—in the army— we didn’t ask about a person’s past unless they offered.”

Myron seemed to get the message. He drove the ATV into the clearing and parked it on a compact patch of snow surrounded by a furled

camouflage tarp. Despite putting on a kind expression and helping Myron cover the vehicle, Ponta figured the conversation was over.

“Look, kid, I enjoyed chatting. Just— everyone who worked the Endeavor got one of two outcomes. Either they made a tonne of money or they have to live with the fact that they supported a system that stomped hundreds of cultures into Apeilous molds.” Ponta sighed. “Take a wild guess which one I experienced.” He looked over to find Myron’s eyes glowing a faint pink. He had yet to figure out what colors and patterns in Viran eyes were linked to what emotions. Against his better judgment, he added, “Here I can do some actual good, fighting off Tressel and all.”

They walked into the shade of the icy archway. In a timid voice, Myron said, “I know it did a lot of harm, but— well I was ten when the Endeavor came here. Dad said it was the best thing that ever happened to Sirjan.”

“But was it the Endeavor? Or was it Sirjan joining TAE that—” He was interrupted by a bright shout from behind. They turned simultaneously to see Marci jogging toward them from the road. She wore the pants of their snow fatigues and a sweat-soaked blood-red undershirt that stuck to the pudge around a tight sports bra. Her ruddy face smiled at them with an enthusiasm beyond any Ponta had seen since arriving on Sirjan.

Ponta smiled thinly and nodded at her. He turned back into the doorway and looked around for something else to ponder. With his head back, he studied the gentle curve of the hull stretching up into the gloom high above. A nearly naked male figure was painted on a panel near center mass. He was draped over the lip of a cocktail glass and surrounded by baskets full of grapes. Ponta furrowed his brows in thought as he tried to place the sharp face.

“That’s the soul of the leadership,” Myron said.

Ponta cocked an eyebrow.

“The Secretary of Communications.”

“Right,” Ponta said slowly.

“Plus, he’s an icon of—”

“What are you boys standing around for!?” Marci shouted as she jogged past them and down the short metal walkway to the open hatch in the side of the ship. “Didn’t you get the memo?” She beckoned them in.

Ponta raised his arm only to realize that his wrist computer had been pushed up under his sleeve, probably when he was putting his gloves on.

“We need to be a five-hundred-k in four hours,” she explained.

Myron and Ponta stepped through the hatch and joined her in the tiny room. The elevator lurched into motion, carrying them upward far too slowly.

“What’s the mission?” Ponta asked.

Marci shrugged. “Ask Amar when we strap in.”

“Five hundred kilometers is far. That’s easily a departure orbit. I bet we’re leaving the area, maybe even the system!” Myron bubbled, shock fading quickly into excitement. His eyes glowed a fierce violet.

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened not a moment too soon. Myron’s hyperventilation and Marci’s sweaty smell were starting to wear on Ponta. He took the lead and charged out into the hallway where Vires slid through the narrow airlock to the service staircase. He stood up straight and looked approvingly at Ponta. His deep brown eyes, pale skin, and pristine maroon uniform jumpsuit made him seem out of place against the chipped paint on the walls and the disheveled crewmembers around him.

“New orders from central,” Vires said, voice deep and crisp. “We are to join the Marines en route to Koltak. You’ve got three hours to get this ship ready.” He looked at Ponta. “Finish up your work on the forward scopes. Don’t worry about the UAS’s, Marines will provide some,” he said, referring to the loyals by their technical acronym. “Standard launch prep, Miss Layan.” He looked back at Guida, then at Myron. “I’ll be plotting our course.”

They jumped into action. Marci took Guida and Myron into the elevator, and they descended back to the ground to begin preparing the surrounding area for launch. Ponta ducked into his quarters and scrambled to change into his uniform and put on his magnetic boots. Once properly dressed, he made a beeline to the service stairs and climbed toward the ship’s nose. Round and round the spiral staircase he went until he burst out into the open space underneath the main communications dish. It was pitched over to allow for easy access to the subsystems that made up the

nearside wall. Ponta still nearly hit his head on the lip as he shuffled around it.

The Navon's two mobile telescopes sat in their bays below the floor. The mesh faraday panels were still off from his work the day before, and much of the nearer scope's control mechanism sat in a hundred pieces in a bin magnetically sealed to the solid part of the floor. Ponta sighed as he sat down. He called up the service interface on his wrist computer and ordered the computer to raise the telescope up a meter. Actuators deep in the bay whined into life, and the long cylindrical body slid upward. Sitting cross-legged on the metal deck, Ponta worked quickly to reassemble the focusing mechanism. He reinstalled the degraded parts he had planned to remake in the ship's tiny machine shop. The components that worried him most were the three worm gears that drove the axial motion of the main lens. If more than one of them failed, then the entire scope would be stuck at a single focal length and essentially useless.

Two and a half hours later, the final bolt of the access hatch went in smoothly. Ponta's electric screwdriver let out a beep once the correct torque was applied. He stowed it in the bin and packed up the rest of the tools: A variety of heads for the screwdriver, a small rubber mallet, and a nearly unused paint pen. About half an hour into his hasty reassembly of the scope, Ponta had given up marking all the bolts correctly. He replaced the covers for the faraday shield and stood up with the bin under his arm.

"Mister Lynd, I hope you're done," Vires said via the com in Ponta's ear. No doubt Vires had seen the scopes pop up as complete on his console in the command room.

"Yes sir, just wrapped up." He scrambled over to the staircase. Once he was low enough that only his head poked up into the communications equipment room, he called in to the command room. "Starting systems check." There was no reply, but Ponta would have struggled to hear it anyway as the main dish cycled through a range-of-motion test. Its hydraulic cylinders moved quietly, but the pump somewhere deep under the floor whined like it needed help. Ponta sighed and watched the list of empty slots on his wrist computer slowly turn either green or yellow. No reds, thankfully.

A loud brushing sound, like fabric on stone, emanated from every wall around Ponta. He smiled as natural light suddenly burst in from a panel gap across the center of the nose. The ceiling of the communications equipment room was the inside of the outer hull of the ship's nose and opened up in two large clamshells when a tight beam or long-distance signal was sent or received. The two retractable antennae near the stairway indicated yellow on Ponta's list. He shook his head and descended.

"ATV stowed, camp stowed, camo sheets stowed..." Marci carried on down the checklist as she relayed it to Vires through the hatch into the command room. Ponta glanced back as both doors to the service airlock slid closed. The door shifted slightly as air bladders around its edge inflated, sealing off the part of the ship that would remain pressurized when they got to space. Once Marci completed her report, she turned sharply and marched toward the door to the storage room. Ponta followed her in and stowed the tool container in a slot in the wall specifically designed for it. Small latches in each corner ensured it would stay in place. Marci went from slot to slot, double-checking that every latch was down and locked. She skipped the one Ponta had stowed.

In the dimly lit command room, Ponta sat down hard in his seat and tried to relax. It felt like the memory foam took longer and longer to form to his back every time he worked from his station. With the flick of a switch, seat belts unfolded over Ponta's shoulders and hips, meeting in front of his abdomen with a hearty thunk. Vires was already strapped in at the commander's station, distinct from the rest only by the label on the console's lip. He gave Ponta a resolute nod.

"Sensor and com suite is green enough, sir," Ponta reported.

"Great to hear. We are going to need to burn hard to reach the rendezvous in time. Are you up on your high-g training?"

"Yes sir," Ponta said truthfully. The reminder of the impending discomfort left Ponta to lightheartedly reconsider his branch change.

Guida barely had to duck to enter the command room. She scampered up into the seat behind the console marked Sensors and Communications. "Lynd, how's the radio equipment?"

Vires made a face at the informal address but said nothing.

“All in order,” Ponta replied. “Take care with the scopes, though. Don’t pull focus too fast.”

The lines on Guida’s cheeks pulsed a faint blue in affirmation. She looked tiny behind her console, even with the seat slid all the way forward.

“Control systems and surfaces checked, sir,” Myron announced, entering the spherical room and looking at each of its occupants. He smiled timidly when he made eye contact with Ponta.

Marci entered and lingered by the hatch. “All crew accounted for,” she said.

Vires nodded, but his eyes seemed to say *yeah, I can see that*.

“Should I lock up, sir?” She lost her balance and leaned back to catch herself on the top of the hatchway.

“No. Easy flight, no combat expected.”

Marci seemed disappointed as she climbed up to her unlabeled station.

“Helm,” Vires said sharply, “how do you feel about taking us up? Here’s the flight path.”

“I—umm, I can do it,” Myron replied.

“You don’t sound very confident.”

“I can do it, sir,” he said with gusto.

“Glad to hear it. You have a seven-minute launch window opening in... four minutes. Can you make it?”

Myron said clearly, “Yessir. Weather looks clear enough. Fuel is at temperature. I think we can go right at zero.”

“Very good. Count us in.”

“Three minutes thirty seconds... mark,” Myron said. He typed rapidly, kicking off a series of whines and thunks that echoed through the walls of the command room. A hum that had been hidden by the cacophony grew until it overpowered all other sounds. Ponta glanced at Myron, but he carried on as if everything was normal.

With little else to do, Ponta looked over the output file of his last check of the auxiliary systems for the fourth time. Just as he reached the halfway point of the report, he heard the forty-five-second warning. The hum died down, superseded by the distant pops of the explosive bolts that had anchored the ship to the bedrock. The entire vessel rocked forward with

enough sway that Ponta thought it might fall over. He noticed that his hands had balled into fists and that he was grinding his teeth. With a deliberate long breath, he set his hands on the front of his shoulder belts, tilted his head back, and looked at the spherical ceiling.

At ten seconds to launch, all the stations in the room slowly slid toward the center and tilted back. Each assembly pointed upward so that they sat on their backs relative to the direction of the impending acceleration of launch. Everything on Ponta's console was still within reach. He switched his hands so that his arms were crossed.

The liquid fuel aerospike lit with an explosive roar that was painfully loud despite the tonnes of material between them and it. Through the thick vibration, the motion of the launch felt sideways, like they were sliding across the glade. Ponta tapped a button on his console, and the screen flicked over to show a live view down from a camera somewhere in the nose. It showed the ground steadily receding, faster with every moment. Reinforced by the live video, Ponta's mind finally picked out their true direction as the acceleration increased. Soon, the full effect of a four-g launch unrelentingly pushed him into his seat.

Ponta switched the screen to a view forward only to find an empty dark sky. A dot of light twinkled and brightened. It grew until it was pure white on the screen. Through the artificial wormhole burst a set of five primary dark shapes surrounded by a cloud of shadowy needles. The Marine ships and their fleet of autonomous loyals translated away from the wormhole, and Ponta lost sight of them.

"Guida, is that them?" Ponta asked. He cursed silently to himself for the casual address.

"Yeah. And here comes the mouse."

Ponta watched a sixth, larger ship arrive through the blinding white sphere.

"Sir," Myron piped up. "They're... well, they're just the wrong side. Sorry, I meant to say we're on the right path, but ahead of 'em."

"Agreed. Take us around Sirjan, powered orbit. Then sling us up to rendezvous, standard v-bar intercept."

Myron typed furiously. “We need to burn at three-g for the whole orbit to get to the meet-up time.”

“Make the rendezvous,” Vires corrected. “That is fine. Go.”

“Switching to vacuum thruster and changing course,” Myron announced.

Ponta used all his space training to keep himself calm as the rough acceleration lessened and a smoother, insidious force pressed him into his seat. The acceleration from the vacuum thruster was calm, like laying on the ground planet-side. It kept increasing, pressing harder and harder on his chest with none of the shakes and rattles of the early launch phase. The view on Ponta’s screen rotated until it showed most of that side of Sirjan, already steeply curved. In a powered orbit, the ship was pointed inward, using its main thruster to maintain an altitude and speed impossible in a standard free-fall orbit. Usually, this was done to have thrust gravity for triage or comfort purposes. In their case, it was to circumnavigate the planet in record time.

The horizon went dark, then the day-line swept across Ponta’s screen in a matter of seconds. They passed over the planet’s capital city, a sprawling metropolis with a network of lights that covered an entire peninsula.

“There’s home,” Myron joked, somehow both at ease and continually typing despite the two-point-eight-g acceleration pressing them into their seats.

Ponta passed the time watching the planet spin above them. They passed the other day line. Most of the western hemisphere was covered in cold-looking white plains punctuated by stretches of icy blue water. He felt for those stationed closer to the poles, on the thick sea ice where surface temperatures made it impossible to walk outside without a space suit.

Not that I wouldn’t mind a post in that valley, he thought, remembering the sliver of green he had seen during the jump that had put him on Sirjan. He blinked and glared at the screen. There was no green to be seen.

“Switching to transfer orbit in fifteen, hang on,” Myron said.

Ponta braced himself for a sudden change, but the ramp down of the main thruster was well handled, and weightlessness came on slowly. His arms went light and he let his elbows float upward.

Guida seemed to listen to something that none of them could hear. “Sorry,” she said, flipping a switch.

“NVF six-five-zero, Atayuma-one. Form up in position delta,” a voice said over the radio. “Two UMS holding plus r-fifty, prepare to receive on arrival.”

“Atayuma-one, NVF six-five-zero. On course for position delta. Two-lima-delta on arrival. Out,” she replied.

Ponta directed a forward camera to track the ships rising over the horizon. It tilted upward and zoomed in until he could clearly see the formation: Five dark ships not unlike their own flew in a tight formation around a cruiser painted in such a vivid red that nothing else in view came close in saturation, not the planet nor the other ships. The loyals were lost in the gloom except for the two floating between them and the cruiser.

“Who do you think it is?” Myron asked, watching something at his console. He got no reply.

They waited for the distance to close. After a reminder from Vires, Myron fired a small thruster in the nose, slowing their ship to match orbit with the fleet. The camera showed the red hull of the cruiser in detail. It was long and roughly cylindrical, with three-fold symmetry for its critical systems, such as radiators, missile tubes, and point defense batteries. The forward hull tapered out of view, but Ponta could still see two large cannons tucked up near the bow.

“*Infaya Briceida*,” he said quietly, reading the ship’s name from its hull.

“*Infaya Briceida*,” Marci corrected, “long a, soft c.”

Must be an Atayuman name, he thought, nodding in her direction. His eyes stuck to the screen. All the dignitary class ships of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins were painted hyper-red, a color with an intensity that was never truly conveyed by a computer screen. They crossed the day line. All six ships disappeared, including the lead cruiser. Even with brackets tracking the ships across his screen, Ponta failed to see any of them.

“So it’s Freya, then,” Myron said. “What’s the sec doing so close to the border?”

“Expanding the coalition,” Vires replied, voice sharp. He changed the subject. “Coms, call in and let them know that we will be in position in two minutes.”

She did so.

The coms officer on the *Briceida* radioed back, “NVF six-five-zero, perfect arrival. Three more PCs on course but behind schedule. Hold tight once you reach position. Out.”

Myron looked over at Vires, cheeks sharp with a proud grin.

“Yes, well done,” he said, nodding at Myron. “Take us in carefully. I’d like to keep our record clean.”

“Yessir.”

The brackets grew larger on Ponta’s screen, and he started to see a vague outline of the cruiser. Everything else was still lost to the darkness. The hiss of maneuvering thrusters echoed through the ship’s frame and entered the command room from all around them.

“Right in place, sir,” Myron boasted, rolling his shoulders back.

“Very good. Systems, open tie-downs. I’ve got control of the two UAS’s, guiding them in.”

Ponta commanded the doors over the tie-downs on the spine and belly of the ship to open. To keep *Navon*’s center of gravity consistent, the loyals docked mid-ship, exactly opposite each other. Once they were secured, Ponta passed the time by running another check over their systems. He was nearly done reading the comprehensive report when they received word that it was time to go. After some careful piloting by Myron and a snide comment about the extra mass, they tucked in close to the underside of the *Briceida* for a tandem jump. They, along with the three other patrol craft from the surface of Sirjan and the five Marine ships, would jump with the *Infaya Briceida* to a far-northern star system called Koltak.

The live view from the bow showed the bridge process in high definition: A small gray sphere was ejected out the front of the *Briceida*. It started to glow as it translated away, growing brighter and smaller with every passing moment. Without warning, it shrunk into a tiny dot, no more

than a few pixels on Ponta's screen. A moment later, a bright, energetic sphere erupted outward, turning the entire screen white. Ponta squinted, then turned his gaze to the other screen on his console. It still displayed the systems check report.

"And we're in," Myron announced, "Steady one-g, four hours ten minutes to rotation."

"Thank you, helm. Good job today." Vires unlatched his seatbelts. They wound themselves up into the back of his seat. He stood slowly, testing the thrust gravity. "Mister Lynd, you have the conn." Vires casually descended the steps to the center of the room, then up the three steps to the hatch.

Ponta started to undo his own seatbelts. "Marci, you're in command."

Marci stood and shook her head. "I call the main shower. Myron, you're in charge." She and Ponta reached the hatch at the same time. She retreated to her quarters while Ponta navigated toward the activity he could hear in the mess. He walked down the narrow hallway around the outer command room wall and found Vires leaning against the dining table with a bag of soup in hand. He drank it with a wide straw and raised an eyebrow at Ponta.

"Sir," Ponta said, trying not to remind himself that he was older than the lieutenant commander by more than two years. "What's the deal with this ship?" he asked flatly.

"The deal?" Vires' expression hardened with subtle scorn.

"The...casual air, for want of a better phrase."

Vires sighed. "Until four hours ago, this was the definition of a backwater post." He set down the soup in the bin it had come out of, straw upward. "We are two lightyears from the front, Lynd, and even further from most of the combat. There is no point beating on them for a bit of banter."

"And if we got called on to defend Sirjan? And its three hundred million people?"

Vires shook his head. "Everyone in this crew is here for a reason. We're not heroic fighter pilots or warship commanders. Each and every one of us

didn't make the cut. What about you? What did you do to get yourself stationed out here? Must've really messed up something in the army."

"Don't shift this to my past. I'm here to do the right thing, a far cry from what I was doing in the outer rim."

"Yes yes, assimilating half-dead civilizations and all that. Do you really think this is better?" He stared into Ponta's eyes for a long moment, challenging him to reply. When Ponta said nothing, Vires continued, "NVF is the largest coalition military, ever! But we're still getting our asses kicked in every skirmish with Tressel. They slogged through our defenses in Eins just last month, nearly reached the surface! No matter how stupid and...nonsensical their tactics, they just keep throwing ships at us until we lose." He took a deep breath. "Forgive me if I let my crew live a little."

"It can't possibly help your case."

"Six months, Lynd, we stand guard on Sirjan. We do everything headquarters asks of us, ready to jump into action at any moment. Nothing. Six months in the snow!"

"So it's resentment for the post—"

"We're Rho, Ponta! If you and I hadn't messed up, we would be in one of those slick stealth fighters, commanding those ships." He gestured to the wall, pointing at the Marine ships flying with the *Briceida*. "This is as close to them and to the leadership as this crew of misfits is ever going to get, myself included."

Ponta shook his head. "Now we have the opportunity to prove ourselves."

"And what, Lynd? Outperform those Marine pilots? Think a little. We got off the surface quickly, just like we were ordered to do. This has happened before. We get the call, pop up to orbit, do an exercise, and then we pick up some fuel and head back down to the tundra."

"And now we're flying with the Secretary of State and Second Squadron, *the* squadron to be in! Of all the places to be in the war, this is the place to shine."

"We're not part of this squadron, we're an add-on. And it's not even officially a war yet!" Vires shot back. "Just border skirmishes. Imagine

what will happen when Tressel actually rolls in with all their might. We'll either be sitting frozen back on Sirjan, or space dust." He took a breath. "Either way, my point remains. I take it easy on my crew." Vires picked up his soup with one hand and the bin with the other. He stowed the bin, double-checked the latches holding it in place, and charged out of the mess.

Ponta took a few minutes to think. Vires was, as far as he knew, not wrong. For the last two years, Ponta had watched the conflict from afar, from the safe halls of the Navy Academy on Elara, deep in the Apeilous. The Tressel State initiated skirmish after skirmish in the border systems, arriving with large, dumb fleets and battering anything the NVF had present. Sometimes they planted a flag, sometimes they turned around and returned to their side. Either way, they never pushed the front. At the academy, the leadership and the professors chalked it up to Tressel's weakness, claiming the state's military was not nearly as strong as was generally accepted. Ponta never fully believed this, and after seeing Vires' conviction, a desire to understand why burnished itself deep in his mind.

"Hey," Marci said, clearing her throat.

Ponta turned to find her leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. She wore a crisp uniform jumpsuit, her hair was freshly washed and combed, and her shoulders were sprinkled with water drops. The kind rosininess of her round cheeks and her sad smile inexplicably instilled in Ponta a sense of hope.

"Hey," he said.

"I heard." She reached back and poked the wall with her thumb. "Thin walls."

Ponta nodded and tried to smile back but failed.

"He's got a point." She walked into the room, pulled out two chairs, and sat down.

He lowered himself into the other chair and leaned on the table.

"But he's missing the big picture. What we're doing out here... it's not just small battles or standing watch." She clasped her hands and adopted an expression that struck Ponta as informed by a deep contentment, a state he wished to have. "It's alliance building. It's bringing the independent

systems and the worlds helped and hurt by the Endeavor into the coalition. It's— it's good. And when the time comes, when it really matters, the Apeilous Navy will sweep in and support us.”

Ponta felt his face droop with grief. “The same Apeilous that let the mega corporations roll into the outer rim?”

Marci lifted her gaze and looked at him squarely. He looked back, finding a depth to her eyes that he had never seen before. The surface was a stoic matte. Her irises were brown tissue at the outer edge, mist around the pupil, mist that glowed an intense yellow-orange that reminded Ponta of a low sun. In their center, her pupils narrowed, forming a deep tunnel of sunset mist. She used what he understood to be her deeper vision, allowing her to see at least a few centimeters into his brain and study the activity therein.

“So, am I honest?” he asked with a huff.

“Yes, Ponta,” she said, voice level. She set her hand on his. It was warm and soft, as one might expect from skin fresh out of the shower. “But you should be optimistic. NVF might be a plucky coalition, but we have a strong home front and more wins than Vires let on. Not to mention determined people up and down the chain of command.” She cocked a cute smile and tilted her head back toward the wall beyond which flew the *Briceida* and the rest of the squadron. “Don't let Vires drag you down. And don't hold it against him.” With a slow nod, she removed her hand, stood up, and left the mess. Ponta was left alone to balance his opinions.



CHAPTER 3 EMPRESS

TAE Dignitary Cruiser *Infaya Briceida* (NVF-02)
On approach to Koltak (ISY-KT)

The vast window fronting the state quarters grew more transparent by the moment, revealing a starfield with a dark stripe despite a lack of any ships blocking the view. It was the Dark Zone, the sweep of empty space between the Middle States and the outer rim. A com on the wall chimed and announced their arrival in the Koltak system, warning that they were entering a powered orbit around the second planet. It was the home of the last major independent military in the north, one that Vesta Freya Fortuna hoped would officially join the Territory of Atayuma-Eins by the end of the day. She took a deep breath as the comfortable feeling of thrust gravity set in. They had been weightless for almost half an hour. Her chest strained against the wide black seatbelts holding her in a deep leather seat at her outward-facing desk located at the corner of the window. The reveal of the stars was hampered as she saw her glowing Viran eyes, orange headscarf, and white suit reflected in the glass.

Lowering her gaze to the screen built into the desktop, Vesta hit play on the next message in her inbox. The golden owl of the Fortuna family crest appeared only to be replaced by her wife's shining, warm dark face. Piata's brilliant blond hair was braided into hundreds of tiny strands and swept back over the top of her head, held in place by a subtle silver crown. Despite all the intricate decoration, her shimmering silver Viran eyes shone the brightest.

“I have great news, dear,” Piata’s recording said, mezzo voice beautiful even through the tiny speakers in the screen’s frame. The background was that of the Fortuna offices in the Capitol Complex of the Apeilous. “We did it. The Lyver just passed our bill supporting statehood for the Territory of Atayuma-Eins.”

A grin spread across Vesta’s face. She shook her head. *What was the margin on the vote?* she asked herself, wondering how close it had been for Piata to leave the detail out.

“Before it can move to the House, it will need ratification in our elected bodies. That is not something you need to worry about, but you will need to sign the final document in person, on the Lyver floor.” Piata’s recording sighed and her eyes drooped.

Vesta whispered at the screen, “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Many representatives and senators are nervous about your position, about the control you exert over the coalition. Every time I remind them of your official job title, I see waves of distrust or doubt or— well, I see pity. It is insufferable.”

Vesta sighed in time with Piata in the recording. She smiled at their synchronization and wished she had been there to comfort her. For many who adopt Viran eyes later in life, the toll of seeing deeper emotions sometimes takes a while to set in. For Piata, the emotional distress seemed to only worsen with time.

The recording continued, “The bill requires that *you* sign it, not just as the Secretary of State, but you by name. I believe it is their way of warning us... how do I say this,” she said flatly. “I doubt we will be able to get through all three bodies if you remain in your current role.”

Vesta clenched her jaw, took a deep breath, and unclenched it.

“I can overcome this in the House, where Elara-Amidra has a healthy influence. That and Speaker Gruman is a close ally.” Piata’s recording took a long pause and smiled sadly. “I already have Jak and his people working on ideas. We can brainstorm more when you get home.”

Vesta shook her head.

“I have news about Augie,” the recording said.

A muscle in Vesta's neck twitched and her chest tightened. She braced herself, hoping that she was not about to see their son. *I don't need that stress right now.*

"He has been doing a marvelous job shadowing me at the capitol. He sat through an entire session of the Lyver, and even asked me questions about it afterward."

He's nine years old, for angel's sake! Vesta thought, rolling her eyes.

"He misses you, and you should try to spend more time with him when you are home." A somber warm-green glow backlit Piata's eyes. "I miss Valentia. You know how I feel about having her so close to the front. Once we get the bill out of the Lyver, maybe we can take a break. You, I, Augie, and Valentia can get away for a few weeks." Piata's recording sighed and smiled, but her eyes were getting glossier by the moment. "I know you are probably shaking your head."

Vesta caught herself and held her head still. After ten years of marriage, Piata's video messages always had a moment or two of prescience.

"Just think about it. Your coalition will survive two weeks with Maison and Philipe at the helm. In the meantime, I appreciate the message from you and Valentia. It warms my heart to see her so happy and busy."

Vesta nodded at the screen. She smiled at her memory of recording the chaotic video message with their daughter. It seemed like every time Vesta returned to her home on Atayuma, Val was sharper, speaking in smarter sentences, and able to pick up more, for a ten-year-old, at least. She was far from the protege that Vesta envisioned, but all would come in time.

"In the meantime, enjoy—" Piata's recording automatically paused.

"Ma'am, we have a situation," the com on the wall barked.

Vesta cleared her throat and called back, "Go ahead."

"Koltak control just spotted an advanced fleet of Tressel gunships at the edge of the system. They offer we move into a protected position around the first planet."

"Stay idle. I am on my way up." She slapped a button on the desk and the seatbelts wound themselves away into the back of the chair. Standing up straight, she pulled down the front of her jacket and adjusted the edge of her close-fitting headscarf, wound in the traditional Viran fashion. It

was, she was assured, the most vivid red fabric available. In the reflection of the glass, it appeared orange. Behind her reflection, she saw a patrol ship translate upward, one of the new additions to their fleet. It brandished its mascot proudly on the hull, lit by the direct sunlight. As elegant as the painting of a nearly nude Jak was, she scrunched her nose at seeing the likeness of her lifelong friend painted as a pin-up on the side of a ship. She made a note of its registry number, six-fifty.

Outside the state quarters, Vesta found herself flanked by her best friend and the head of her protection detail, Phoebe Martin. She towered over Vesta in her dark unranked uniform, and her long fiery hair was wrapped up in a functional bun on the back of her head.

“What are the odds?” Phoebe asked as they stepped into an elevator.

“That Tressel just happens to show up at the same time we do? Pretty low.” Vesta had some theories, all informed by intelligence she did not want to bore Phoebe with.

“Just so you know, Yarga is already annoyed.”

“She will deal with it.” Vesta looked up to find Phoebe looking down at her with no small amount of amusement in her eyes. Vesta added, “We have the most advanced ship in the north and five of the best pilots. Why would—”

“Vee, please, you don’t have to convince me,” Phoebe laughed, setting her hand on her shoulder. The gesture was small but comfortable and made Vesta yearn for home.

The elevator door opened to a quiet hallway. Vesta walked out first. A sea of quiet conversations spilled out into the hall from a nearby open airlock. Vesta took a breath, rolled her shoulders back, and walked into the mid-ship bunker that was the command room.

“Secretary on deck!” someone shouted. Anyone not seated turned and stood at attention. Those strapped into their seats lifted their chins and nodded at Vesta, then returned their attention downward. Dozens of soft glowing eyes tracked her first few steps.

“At ease,” Vesta said, walking straight toward the center of the two-tiered room. The first ring of stations was at deck level. The second was a meter higher, at the same height as the platform in the center. Heavily

canted screens hung from the ceiling, some directed in toward the center, others down at the stations. One person occupied the platform, a woman standing at attention while the rest of the room returned to its busy state. Her deeply tanned face looked down at Vesta with cool red Viran eyes framed by a plain headscarf tucked into her sharp uniform jacket. A single golden star adorned each side of her collar.

“Madam Secretary,” she said as Vesta mounted the platform.

“Marianne,” Vesta replied, using Admiral Yarga’s first name despite their cold relationship. She looked down at the planning table. “What is the situation?”

“A formation of two corvettes and six gunships entered the system about five hours ago. They are running silent but their arrival pattern indicates that they came from Tolla Fars.”

Deep within Tressel, Vesta thought. She looked over the enemy fleet composition rendered on the screen-surface of the table. “Are they a threat to us or the Koltaks?” She glanced up at the admiral. They were both Virans from old families and incapable of successfully lying to each other. It was a phenomenon that Vesta had hoped would help them gel when she selected Marianne. She took a slow breath and focused her deeper vision, finding contempt and contemplation swirling in Marianne’s mind like a storm around an unlucky island.

“Intelligence suggests that Tressel’s stockpile of HVMs in this region was greatly reduced by the battle above Eins. We have range and firepower advantage.” Her tone sharpened just enough for Vesta to notice. “With that said, I advise we follow the Koltak’s advice and move into a low orbit of the first planet.”

The air immediately around them was still and silent while chatter throughout the room continued.

“And the Koltaks?” Vesta asked smoothly.

“Scrambling fighters as we speak.”

“Against a battlegroup?”

“A light battlegroup,” Marianne corrected.

“This is a perfect opportunity to demonstrate what we bring to the table.”

Marienne flexed her jaw, not enough to distort her skin, but more than enough for Vesta to see the neurons fire. They stared at each other for a long moment. “On one condition, that you remain here in the CR.”

Vesta nodded.

Marienne walked to the edge of the platform and leaned on the railing. “Coms, signal to the squadron. Hold formation. Prepare for combat and immediate full-speed burn. Brief en route.”

“Maintain formation, CP, and imminent FSB, hold. MIER. Message away,” the officer replied.

Marienne turned toward a different console and spoke with a level voice. “Commander Levy, sound general quarters.”

An alarm like a roll on a snare drum sounded in the hallway outside the command room, supplemented by the pulsed hollow trill of a whistle. A moment later, the three airlocks linking the room to the rest of the ship closed and the hiss of air bladders overwhelmed all conversation. The hiss died and commotion returned as crewmembers typed and talked.

“Freya, please secure yourself,” Marianne said matter-of-factly, leaving the platform and walking over to a slim console within the first ring. It sat slightly higher than those around it.

Oof, formal name, Vesta thought. She must really hate this. She made her way to an empty seat and sat down carefully. Wide seatbelts automatically unfolded over her shoulders and around her waist and tightened to hold her snugly. The screen in the ceiling above her displayed a high view of the star system, with dotted lines showing the orbits of the six planets in the Koltak System. A set of two orange diamonds and six arrows tracked in slowly from near the orbit of the outermost planet. Dashed arcs showed their projected path, likely a strafing run through the inner planets before slinging around the sun for another pass, a test of the Koltak’s defenses. The NVF ships followed solid blue arcs, as did the allied Koltak fighters in the process of departing the third planet. With the NVF fleet above the second planet, they would have to accelerate hard to catch up.

“Coms, signal to our fighters and patrol ships, loosen the formation. We don’t know how capable our... support from Sirjan is.”

They will do fine, Vesta thought, annoyed at what she figured was a jab at her insistence on bringing extra ships to Koltak.

“Message away.”

Vesta looked at a different screen, where a close-in view of their fleet had to zoom out to show their spread. A minute later, the formation had solidified, now with a few kilometers between each ship.

“Sir, departure window in thirty.”

Marianne nodded. “Go at zero. Levy, are we ready for FSB?”

“Ship is ready, ma’am,” the commander replied from the adjacent station.

Vesta glanced over, past Marianne, and shared a nod with the commander, a woman about her age with deep dark eyes and an interminable professional smile. Her wide console was lit up with a live readout of all ship systems, every one of which showed green.

With ten seconds left before they started the burn, all the stations in the room slowly pitched back until everyone lay facing the ceiling.

Vesta grunted as a fast ramp to a three-g acceleration pressed her into her seat. She took deliberate breaths, struggling to fully expand her lungs every time. The screen in the ceiling, now readable without craning her neck, showed the fleet moving quickly toward the third planet. Glancing at the time-to-intercept readout on another screen, Vesta realized that the speed they took from their powered orbit advantaged them so much that they would reach the trespassers before the Koltak fighters.

NVF Patrol Ship *Navon* (NVF-650)
Entering Sortie in the Koltak System (ISY-KT)

“Helm, I need you to—Myron, look at me,” Vires ordered, head turned to the side. They all lay on their backs. Their stations pointed upward, having slid down toward the center following the curvature of the spherical room. A steady three-g pressed them into their seats.

Ponta spotted Myron's glowing eyes in his peripheral vision. The door into the command room closed with a hiss, sealing them in. The pins that locked their orientation with the rest of the ship released, and Ponta could feel the room settle slightly.

Vires continued, "I need you to talk to me the whole time. We are going to fly this together. This is not an evaluation, but I need to know everything going through your mind at every moment."

"Yessir!" Myron almost shouted back.

"Eye in the sky from flag is now active," Guida said.

"Very good. Systems," Vires said in Ponta's direction, "how much fuel do we have left once we reach the LOE?"

The line of engagement looked like the edge of a cartoon cloud on the 3D map of the star system. It was the combination of spheres indicating the weapons range of each enemy ship. Ponta glanced at the numerical readouts for the amount of nuclear dust and liquid rocket fuel they had remaining. Some quickly typed inputs into his console gave him the answer.

"Fifteen minutes at six-g. Three minutes at flank speed."

"Give me a breakdown of our total loadout."

"Native: Long range missiles, nine green, one yellow," Ponta said. "Short range missiles, seven green. Anti-missile flechettes, ten green. Markers, seven green. Loyals identical: ten SRMs, three AMFs, all green."

Vires nodded sideways, then turned his head back upward with a grunt.

"Orders coming in from flag," Guida announced. "Break low with Marine-Seven, standard plus five. Our primary target is hostile gunship four. Secondary target is hostile corvette two."

"Got it. Helm, attitude down four point five degrees."

Myron adjusted the orientation of the ship. The room rotated slower, minimizing the jerk of the direction change.

"Do you think any of them will even make it to the merge?" Myron asked. Ponta could almost hear the grin on his face. Flying with a squadron of Marine fighters, they expected an easy win.

"Do not assume anything," Vires said sharply. "Crossing LOE in forty seconds. Systems, forward tubes, one LRM each."

Ponta hit two buttons on his console. He had already set up the interface to his preferred control scheme for both the missile loading system and the main turret magazines. “Loaded, ready.” The live map showed that the *Briceida* had already launched two sets of missiles and at least four volleys of cold fire from its coil guns. The main screen on his console showed a composite view from the nose: one camera pointed at the small hatches at the base of the missile tubes, including the robotic loading arms. Another camera, located on the outer hull, showed the view forward, but was stitched in with the interior view to create a live image that effectively erased the hull.

“More from flag,” Guida piped up. “Stay within arc of *Briceida* for countermeasure support.”

“Yeah, if we’re lucky enough to maintain that in the fight,” Vires sneered.

What the hell is your deal? Ponta thought. He looked at the screen on his console. They crossed into missile range of the enemy ships, but had yet to find any indication that they had been fired on.

“We’re in the arc, LRMs away,” Myron said. He kept his voice low but spoke faster than usual. A heavy thunk echoed through the ship’s frame, entering the command room from above.

Guida said, “Cold fire—”

“Moving!” Myron replied.

Thrusters in the bow and stern let out hollow hisses and the entire room pivoted as the ship translated sideways. Unluckily for him, Ponta felt upside-down through the start of the dodging maneuver. He sighed in relief when the room rotated back to line up with the primary thrust.

“That took us close to Marine-Seven,” Myron said. “Breaking away.”

The reorientation barely registered in Ponta’s mind. He watched the live map where the missiles they fired tracked in toward the enemy gunship. Tiny hats appeared on screen, objects too small for the computer to identify at distance. They were likely close-range countermeasures. Ponta almost felt bad for the Tresselites, then two new blips showed up on screen, marked by long thin arrows.

“T-one has fired! M-one on us!” Guida said. “And m-two! Moving fast!”

Vires ordered, “Load one AMF, one LRM.”

Ponta did as he was told but scoffed on the inside.

“Countermeasure and missile away,” Myron said. “We’re near NEC range.”

“Yes,” Vires said. “Split the UAS’s, send one high. Systems, two AMFs, ready coil gun.”

That’s cutting it thin, Ponta thought, loading both forward tubes with countermeasures. He brought up the interface for their sole turreted coil gun and started pushing power into its capacitor bank. All subsystems showed green or yellow as the capacitors filled. “Tubes loaded, main gun ready.”

“Splash m-one!” Guida announced. “M-two still closing—we have impact on t-one! They’re still on thrust...”

“Countermeasure launched,” Myron said. “Slowing to stay behind flag.”

“No, helm keep us level. If we reach the merge below two point eight, we’re toast.”

“Yessir.”

Ponta detected a new waver in Myron’s voice.

“Splash m-two,” Guida said. “New contacts! M-three, m-four.”

“Countermeasure away,” Myron said as a distant thud echoed from above.

“Systems, I need two more AMFs. Helm, yaw two degrees.”

There was a moment of hesitation before they felt the maneuver. Ponta wasn’t sure whether it was the ship or Myron who had frozen. The first tube loaded successfully, the second flashed up a red warning light. “Tube one loaded, tube two jam.” Ponta typed as fast as he could in the high acceleration. The loyals were far enough away that they could not provide effective countermeasure support. Luckily, cycling the control computer of the robotic loading arm did the trick, and the status light indicated green.

“Countermeasure away,” Myron repeated, followed by another thud.

“Splash m-three!”

“Tube two loaded and ready,” Ponta said.

“Systems, LRM in tube one. Is the coil gun ready?”

“Main gun is ready,” Ponta repeated. A moment later he added, “Tube one loaded.”

“Ready to dodge,” Myron said. “One minute to merge.”

Ponta turned his head and looked at the helm. Myron’s arms shivered despite how warm the air in the command room was. Ponta grimaced, but the gesture went unseen.

“Helm, prepare yaw five degrees, then roll forty... mark,” Vires ordered.

“That sets us up for a perfect loop-back, amazing...” Myron’s voice faded as he executed the course change.

“Yes yes,” Vires said. “I’ll take weapons and full UAS control. Helm, prepare to put us through loop-back, full speed.”

“Yessir!” Myron’s voice was back to full strength.

Ponta shook his head and braced himself.

“M-five!”

“AMF away,” Vires said. “Helm, mark. Systems, load SRM.”

Ponta executed the reload just as three-g quickly turned into a comfortable memory. Four-g turned into five, then six. The g-meter ticked over seven and Ponta felt himself struggling to keep his head clear. Every breath required half his focus. A subtle whine crescendoed with a metallic twang that echoed in through the wall. The recoil from the main gun jolted the ship around them. Then it fired again, and again, until every new shot barely registered in Ponta’s mind. One, maybe both of the loaded missiles had fired. He exerted almost all his focus to stay conscious as the g-meter ticked over nine. Guida said something that sounded triumphant, but her voice was too soft and Ponta’s consciousness was too strained to make sense of it. Suddenly the acceleration eased.

“We made it!”

“Yes. Systems, load one SRM, one LRM.”

Ponta did so, blinking and breathing rapidly to clear the gray from his vision. He thanked the angels when two green lights indicated two missiles ready to launch.

“Starting final tur— cold formation, dodging!” Myron shouted over the din. The servos surrounding the command room whined as they rotated the sphere to face the crew into the evasive maneuver. Ponta heard a faint pinging sound from the side, the bow of the ship at that particular moment. The computer spun the room in the other direction while Myron translated the ship back around a second volley of incoming projectiles. They all breathed a sigh of relief as the command room reoriented back to center, and they were aligned with the main thrust.

In a moment of clear, Ponta finally managed to take a deep breath. He focused on his console and found a bevy of red lights blinking up at him. Somewhere in the maneuver, they had been struck. He had no direct line of communication to most of the systems in the bow, including the transmitter side of the coms system, the telescopes, and the maneuvering thrusters. Luckily the missile tube doors were open and locked, and the loading system was deep within the ship and unaffected by the damage. “Sir,” Ponta said quickly, “damage to the bow. Thrusters inop—”

“Tubes?”

“Green.”

“Then hold on. Helm,” Vires said with remarkable calm, “full speed, we need to make up the loss from the evade.”

The ship rotated around them and Ponta felt the g’s start to rise again. A hollow roar hit them from below and the force ramped quickly. Ponta groaned as he was crushed into his seat. The g-meter hit eight, then nine, and kept ticking upward.

“This”—Myron grunted— “is, gonna, hurt.”

The meter passed ten, then ten point five. Ponta heard at least one of the missiles launch. He watched their projected path on the map. Through every passing moment the solid looping-back arc tightened and its intersection point with the enemy gunship’s flight path moved closer and closer. The g-meter indicated eleven point four. The sound of another missile firing barely registered in Ponta’s ears. He watched it fly slowly across the map, catching up to the gunship that they now chased.

“Splash t-one!” Guida shouted, voice barely rising above the din as the acceleration eased. “And impact on t-two! Damage uncertain.”

“Systems, load red markers.”

Ponta did so. He watched the locator missile fly from the tube toward the wreckage of the gunship. It was relief on all fronts; every g lighter felt fresh, like the air was somehow brighter. Ponta looked up and saw the g-meter roll down to and hold steady at two. He refocused on the red lights all over his console, then his focus was broken.

“Starting turn to draw up behind flag,” Myron said, forcing deep breaths. Ponta felt reassured that he wasn’t the only one who had struggled through the loop-back. His consolation was short lived as he thought about how Myron had withstood the g’s while flying them through precise and ever-moving waypoints.

“Yes, do it,” Vires said sharply. “Systems, time on liquid fuel?”

Ponta stared at a schematic of the ship and the red cross-hatching over parts of the power and control grids in the bow. He glanced up at the fuel indicators. “About three and a half minutes at six-g. Forty seconds at flank.” With a shake of his head he went back to planning the signal reroutes to the systems in the bow.

Guida cut in before Vires could reply. “Sir, three bogies just appeared on visual.”

Vires looked at the map. “Dammit! How’d they get so close. Does flag have them on scopes?”

“No,” Guida said plainly, “and I can’t get our scopes out.”

“Systems?”

“Already on it, sir. Ten seconds,” Ponta said. He typed furiously as he finished rerouting the power and signal data through the undamaged subsystems between the command room and the bow. The detour did not have the capacity to transmit full-resolution live video, but it would be enough.

“Done,” Ponta announced, “scopes should be clear.”

Guida nodded and they heard a distant thunk from the ceiling.

Ponta switched over one of his screens to show a grainy live view from one telescope. It focused slowly. Two small ships flew in formation. They were small enough to be birds, winged spacecraft less than eighty tonnes in mass, but there was no mistaking the missile loadout underneath their

wings. He flicked over to the view from the other telescope. It focused on a single bird identical to the other two, lit from a different angle.

“Any news from flag? Are these Koltak or Tressel?” Vires asked.

“Nothing yet,” Guida said. “I—the transmitter just died.”

“I’m putting you through the backup system... now,” Ponta said, nodding at her.

Vires looked intently at something on his console screens. “Systems, load one AMF, one LRM, just in case.”

Ponta nodded and directed the loading system. One green light popped up on his screen. The other indicator flashed red. *Dammit, dud.* He switched out the missile. Once both indicators were green, he said, “Tubes loaded.”

A strange silence settled over the command room as everyone looked at Guida. She shook her head. “Flag is receiving, they just haven’t said anything,” she huffed.

“We’re in a prime place, sir,” Myron said. “I’m gonna slide us in over them.”

“Yes,” Vires said. “Go. I’m ordering the loyals hang back. We’ll converge at BP plus ten.”

The moment the ship started to move around them, Guida piped up, “They’re ramping up! Eight plus g’s toward flag. Contact! Missile launch by t-three, toward flag!”

“Helm, attitude minus ten degrees, full flank loop-forward, drop us in ahead of them.”

“Yessir, hold on!”

Ponta heard a missile launch and Guida said something about reclassifying the bogeys as bandits. The main gun fired with a thump while the force pushing him into his seat ramped up faster than the g-meter could read. It leveled out at twelve something. Ponta couldn’t focus enough to read the smaller tenths place digit. After two strained breaths, he could see nothing but dim gray. The red and green and yellow indicator lights on his console were all the same color, then they weren’t there at all. The acceleration lessened, and not a moment too soon.

The sound of the main gun was louder, almost ringing in Ponta's ears. He sucked in a deep breath, struggling to do so smoothly at five-g.

"Splash b-four!" Guida said, her voice breaking through the fog in Ponta's mind.

"Systems, LRM, now!"

Ponta scrambled to get the tube loaded. He shouted back in the affirmative. The moment the missile flew, he loaded another long range missile, keeping the countermeasure ready in the other launch tube. "LRM, final three!" Ponta said as he loaded the third-to-last missile.

"Systems, SRMs next, they're making ground on us. What's our fuel level?"

The gauge indicated that they had less than ten seconds of liquid fuel left for full-speed acceleration. He watched the live feed from the launch tube as the missile sailed out into the darkness. He gritted his teeth, orchestrated the loading of another short range missile and said, "Eight seconds at flank—make then seven, sir. SRM, final three." To maintain five-g, the ship burned enough liquid fuel to bring them perilously close to an empty tank.

"Sir, flag has painted both remaining bandits."

"Myron, on my mark, cut thrust and pitch ninety degrees. We'll hit them with everything we have while they sail under us. Systems, load all remaining offenses, then load AMFs."

Ponta replied in the affirmative and pulled the countermeasure out of the tube. A moment later, one long range and one short range missile were loaded.

"Mark," Vires said quietly. They were weightless and the ever-present roaring hum of the main ion and liquid-fired thrusters ceased. A soft thump came from the ceiling and Ponta watched the live feeds from the tubes as both missiles sailed out into the darkness. He loaded the tubes simultaneously, then again after they launched. Thirty seconds later, their stock of offensive missiles was depleted. He loaded in countermeasures and set his hands down resolutely on the edge of his console.

"Splash b-three, and..." Guida said. "Splash b-five! Flag got 'em with cold fire, but we got the first one."

“What else do we have on scopes?” Vires asked.

“Umm, nothing. Scopes lost in that last maneuver,” Guida told him with a grim smile. She added, “Message coming in from flag, SDRB.”

“Oh thank the angels,” Vires said, letting out a deep sigh. Everyone’s breathing seemed louder as they all looked at each other around the broken circle made by their reclined consoles. “Systems, markers in the tubes. Miss Layan, bring us back to level, please.”

The room slowly rotated. There was a bump, as if one of the wheels driving the rotation had run over something. The hiccup cleared as soon as it had arrived, and the rotation slowed to a gentle stop. The sounds of metal pins sliding into place was all they could hear for a few seconds.

“Ramping up to one-g, on course to rendezvous with flag,” Myron said, gently pulling a joystick with one hand and typing with the other before raising both his arms toward the ceiling. Their stations slowly slid back up the walls of the room, pitching down as they went, until they all faced inward and gravity pulled gently toward their feet. A light near the hatch turned green and it hissed open. Cold air rushed in and Ponta realized just how warm he was. His adrenaline high started to fade. Myron and Guida still looked wired.

“Did we just do that?!” Myron shouted.

Vires smiled. “Hell yes we did—”

“Did we just fucking do that?!” he shouted, even louder. He dropped his hands to cover his face.

“Your first combat sortie, congrats,” Vires said calmly.

“Oh man—” Myron took a deep breath and slammed his hands onto his console.

“Great job, all of you.” Vires made eye contact with every one of them. “But we’re not done. Systems, I need a full damage report. I have a feeling we won’t be entering atmo without some hull repair. Coms, great work. Miss Layan, prepare suits for repair work. Helm, grab some water and report back here. We need to go over our notes. Flag will want a full debrief.”

Myron nodded and set the ship on a steady one-g flight path that would carry them to an eventual rendezvous with *Briceida*. A dramatic switch

flip started the retraction of his seatbelts. He stood up and stretched his arms over his head before taking unsteady steps down to the center of the room. With a shake of his head, he jogged up to the hatch and disappeared. Marci left next, followed by Guida. Ponta started a full systems check, then left as well. He waited outside the lavatories with Guida, who had rolled her sweaty uniform jumpsuit down to her waist. They chatted and she poked fun at losing the scopes he had spent a whole day repairing. With a shrug, he reminded her that they would've broken soon anyway.



POSTFACE ONLY THE BEGINNING

Surface Habitat, Earth's Moon
The Year 2103

Amelia's eye wrinkles proliferated and she struggled to breathe smoothly as she read the final paragraphs. With a sigh, she pushed her chair back and turned her head to look Ath in the eyes. "It's a fine ending," she huffed, trying to smile through her tears as she gazed up at the telescope looming above them in the dimly lit observatory. The lunar landscape outside the window was pale and motionless.

"Is that all?"

They chuckled sadly together.

"What's next?" she asked, voice still small.

Ath shrugged, and his eighty-two-year-old shoulders protested immediately. Eager to move on from thoughts of the funeral, he said, "The next ten years might be the most interesting era in Apeilous history."

"The Fortuna move?"

"Exactly," Ath said. "The largest corporate uproot in history, and some of the most incredible engineering accomplishments of the era. The drive to modernize the NVF brings out the best work from the most brilliant minds. I had a thought about the title as well."

"What's that?"

"The Man from Atayuma."

“Is this a man we know already?”

Ath shook his head. “So called for one Natan Saulnier, the chief design engineer of the Fortuna Development Yards following the move of the company headquarters to Corben. He is, in many ways, one of the great pillars enabling the growth of SVF in the north, and their dominance in the race to make allies of the new outer rim states.” Ath debated how much more to say. He had a multitude of data on Natan and all that the prolific man accomplished, from his first job as a composites joint engineer to his role in the creation of the first entirely Fortuna-built fighters to his influence on NVF doctrine and the friction it created with the Fortuna family.

Ath reached out and took his partner’s hand. Minutes passed in quiet contemplation. The moment the corners of his mouth ticked up, Amelia asked, “Let me guess, you already know the first line?”

He nodded and opened up his empty manuscript on the observatory computer. A flurry of keystrokes resulted in a series of rough opening lines describing a rushed technical debate in the pit hangar of the Fortuna-backed team in the Great Race, the pinnacle of aerosport.

The End

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Find more location details,
full color character portraits,
ship art and blueprints,
and more at: [**svf-state.com**](http://svf-state.com)

FACTIONS

In Order of Prominence

Territory of Atayuma-Eins

The largest territory of the Apeilous, slowly progressing through its bid to become an official state. Its statehood bid is sponsored by the Fortuna and Menapharaoh Corporations, who seek to maintain the Northern Route feeding supplies to the outer rim territories.

Comprised of eight constituent star systems, TAE operates a coalition military, the largest outside of the Apeilous or Tressel. This Navy of Atayuma-Eins (ship code NVF) is currently embroiled in a seven-year conflict against Tressel and is bolstered by regular financial and materiel aide from the Apeilous.

The government of TAE is a democracy constructed in compliance with Apeilous state-making guidelines, with a Trident of three presidents leading the executive branch, two elected bodies comprising the legislative branch, and a court system making up the judicial branch. War has shifted the expected balance of these branches, and the cabinet of the Trident exerts the most control through the Secretary of State, Freya Fortuna.

Factions

The Apeilous

Comprised of seventy-two member states and six territories under a three-branch republican government. The executive branch is the office of the Trident, with three presidents of unequal power. The judicial branch is presided over by the seventeen high supreme courts, each with fifteen members. The legislative branch consists of three bodies: The Lyver, the House, and the Senate. Bills are introduced and approved in ascending order.

Many states of the Apeilous, especially those in the north, operate their own militaries. These territorial forces regularly change and are often largely comprised of for-hire soldiers and ships rented from one or several of the forty-three officially registered private militaries. By law, the Apeilous Central Military remains the largest army and navy in the star cluster by an order of magnitude.

All states maintain their own Azmaveth police force. The Central Azmaveth have the widest-reaching jurisdiction, into territories and international space within two lightyears of the border of the Apeilous. The only place the Central Azmaveth cannot go are the home worlds of the dynastic corporate families.

Several states, mostly located in the south, are governed by the families that also run the Apeilous' largest dynastic corporations. The most notable companies are Maressellya, Idona, and Menapharaoh. Newly successful companies include Fortuna and LaBelle. Companies that recently collapsed include Beaulieu and Lioporvo.

Factions

Tressel State

Once a prosperous northern state, Tressel seceded from the Apeilous, plunging the north into a brutal forty-year conflict and creating ethnic tensions that persisted through multiple generations to the present day. Tressel retains much of its original Apeilous-style state government, with a large elected legislative branch, but the same extremist party has been in power for more than two decades.

Styling themselves as successors to Tressel's original powerful leadership, the current government has waged a war of attrition against the neighboring Territory of Atayuma-Eins for years. Within Tressel, they refer to the conflict as the rebuilding of the Northern Empire. However, it is unclear to what extent Tresselites believe this rhetoric or support the government.

Independent System of Corben

Governed by an extremist and isolationist party, the Corben System maintains its independence through threat of violence, by way of the remaining Paris Weapons. The government is an oligarchy run by the most powerful Viran families. The local Corbenites have largely been removed from the primary cities of Parchey, Timit, and Darkham, and placed into makeshift towns bordering the existing population centers. Quarter and INVF intelligence suggest that violence between the two ethnic groups is common.

IMPORTANT LOCATIONS

Leros (PO) – The Capital of the Apeilous

Location	Central, not within any state
Climate	Controlled, Temperate (6-21 Celsius)
Bodies	Talir (Small Moon)
Star	Lerosun (M-Type)
Population	72B
Locations of Interest	Capitol Complex Home of the citizen-government of the Apeilous The Quad Cultural heart of Leros with shops selling goods from across the Apeilous Court District Facilities of the seventeen supreme courts contained the largest single building in the Apeilous

Atayuma (TAE-AT) – Capital of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins

Location	Far Northern
Climate	Natural, Tropical Equator and Temperate Poles
Bodies	Bire (Small Moon), Ekie (Small Moon)
Stars	Atamayahana (A-Type), Abiyahana (G-Type)
Population	230M
Locations of Interest	Capital City of Kisto Expansive modern city and home to the government of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins <i>Misir Base</i> Headquarters of Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Important Locations

Sirjan (TAE-SJ) – System in the Territory of Atayuma-Eins

Location	Far Northern
Climate	Natural, Temperate Equator, Frozen Poles
Bodies	Prospero (Large Moon)
Stars	Sol (K-Type)
Population	310M
Locations of Interest	City of Jesko The largest city in the North by area, characterized by its low-density housing and near-year-round snowfall

Eins (TAE-EI) – System in the Territory of Atayuma-Eins

Location	Far Northern
Climate	Natural, Temperate
Bodies	Mink (Small Moon), Tallow (Small Moon), Ike (Small Moon)
Stars	Ender (K-Type)
Population	480M
Locations of Interest	City of Henritz Located in a lush basin, surrounded by the highest mountains in the North

Koltak (ISY-KT) – Independent Northern System

Location	Far Northern
Climate	Natural, Tropical Equator, Cool Barren Poles
Bodies	Tresca (Large Moon, Population 120M)
Stars	Koltak (M-Type)
Population	820M
Locations of Interest	Capital City of Millenium Ancient Island City home to the regional government and the houses of the Great Families

Important Locations

Elara (EL-D) – Home of the Fortuna Family and Corporation

Location	Central-Southern, in the State of Elara-Amidra
Climate	Natural, Temperate Equator and Icy Poles
Bodies	None
Star	Sol (M-Type)
Population	4.5M
Locations of Interest	Capital City Headquarters of the Fortuna Corporation featuring a blend of modern and ancient architecture Development Yards An array of prototype construction silos in the northern tundra

Cortabera (CA-A) – Agricultural Planet

Location	Northern, in the State of Toro
Climate	Controlled, Temperate
Bodies	None
Stars	Sol (M-Type), Sola (K-Type), Cora (M-Type)
Population	730M (120M surface, 610M subterranean)
Locations of Interest	Eastern Continent Covered in farmland growing luxury crops Crescent City Largest city on the planet and located inside a deep rift valley

Corben Six (CB) – Hostile Independent Border System

Location	Northern Border
Climate	Natural, Uninhabitable Equator and Arid, Hot Poles
Bodies	Kya (Large Moon)
Star	Vira (A-Type)
Population	350M
Locations of Interest	City of Parchey Home to some of the oldest revered locations in the Bible of the Forth Angel Capital City of Timit Location of the planetary government <i>Ibril Base</i> Paris airbase located outside the City of Timit

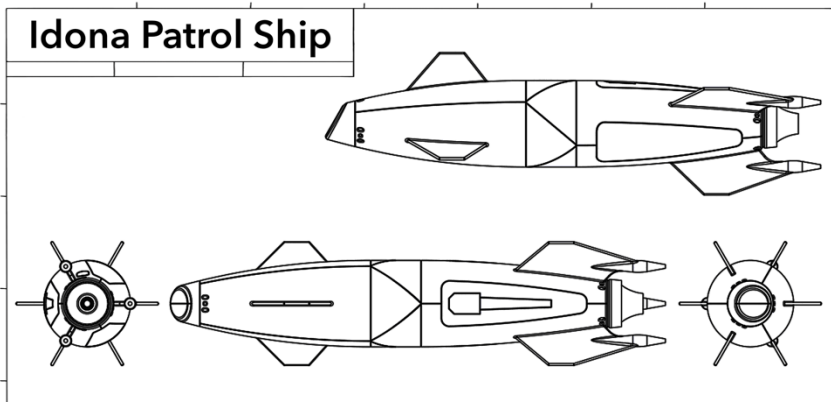
SPACECRAFT

In Order of Appearance

Navon (NVF-650)

Idona Patrol Ship	Territory Defense Military Spec
Length	78 meters
Beam	14 meters
Dry Mass	3.8 kilotonnes
Unit Cost	c620M
Personnel	3 Officers 7 Enlisted

Designed for long-term planet-side habitation and rapid deployment to orbit. Key features include a spherical command room that rotates in all directions to minimize crew strain during high-g maneuvers.

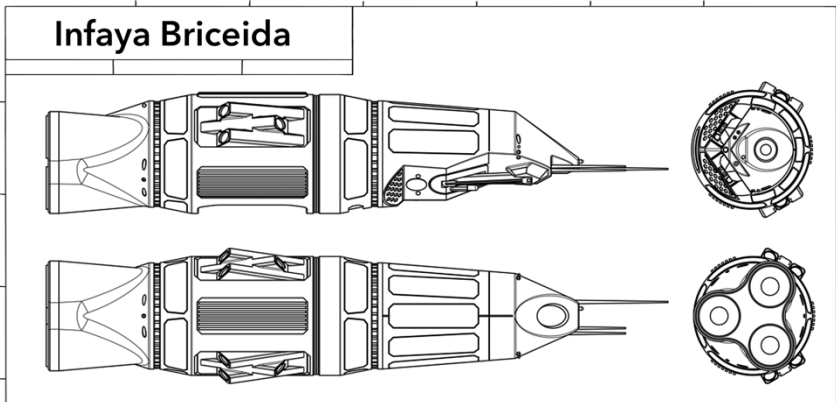


Spacecraft

***Infaya Briceida* (NVF-02)**

FDV <i>Athens</i> Class Cruiser	Dignitary Spec
Length	172 meters
Beam	39 meters
Dry Mass	19 kilotonnes
Cost	c1.3B
Personnel	14 Officers 50 Enlisted

The personal cruiser of Freya Fortuna. One of ten generation-six dignitary-spec *Athens* class cruisers in service of the NVF. Key modifications over the standard *Athens* class include state quarters with a large window, additional armor around key systems, and a deep hangar to accommodate large birds.



Spacecraft

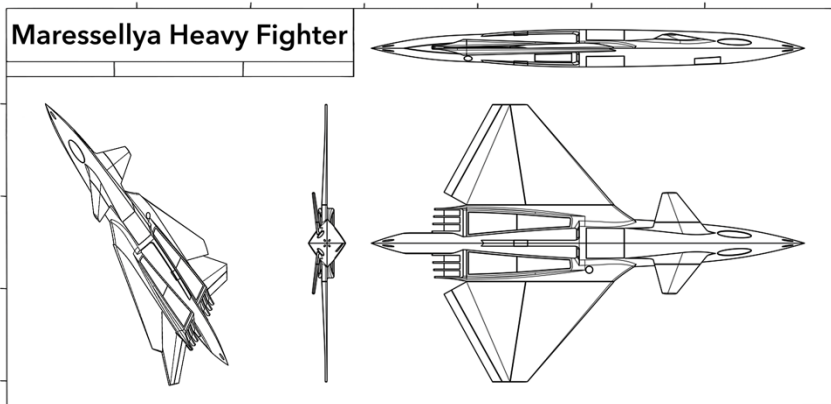
Queen of Diamonds (NVF-102)

Lancer (NVF-650)

Czech (NVF-340)

Maressellya Heavy Fighter	Expedition Military Spec
Length	64 meters
Width	40.5 meters
Height	5.6 meters
Dry Mass	3 kilotonnes
Unit Cost	c870M
Personnel	2 Officers
	3 Enlisted

A multi-role fighter capable of combat both in atmosphere and in vacuum. Designed for a five-person crew, the ship includes living facilities and can support the crew for up to a week in space. Internal weapons bays and deeply set ion thrusters allow the ship to go undetected by nearly all conventional sensors. A set of six aerospike thrusters can push even the fully fueled ship to twenty-g in vacuum, making it the most maneuverable spacecraft in the NVF.

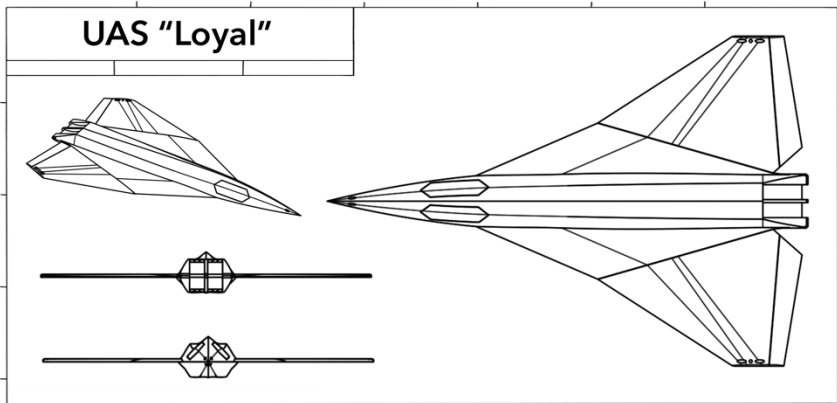


Spacecraft

UAS “Loyal”

Maressellya Combat Drone	Expedition Military Spec
Length	18 meters
Width	12.6 meters
Height	1.9 meters
Dry Mass	30 tonnes
Unit Cost	c83M

A multi-role combat drone designed for use both in atmosphere and in vacuum. Adjustable wings and powerful aerospike thrusters allow the loyal to mimic the performance, radar signature, and visual profile of many types of crewed fighters. Internal weapons bays accommodate a dozen standard-size vacuum missiles.

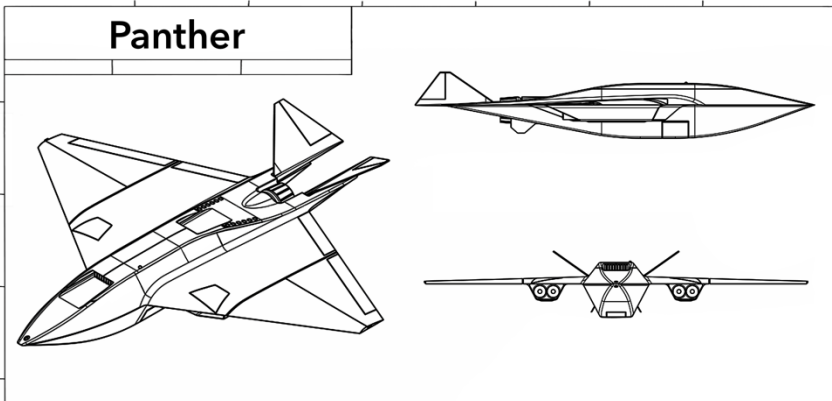


Spacecraft

Panther (FO-6V)

FDV Sport Bird	Custom Design
Length	23 meters
Width	22 meters
Height	4.5 meters
Dry Mass	31 kilotonnes
Unit Cost	c96M
Personnel	2 Crew
	Max. 10 Passengers

The personal bird of Freya Fortuna. Based on the FDV Sport, Panther features a number of classified modifications to improve survivability and stealth capability. It is visually differentiated by its radar-absorbent paint and subtle golden livery.

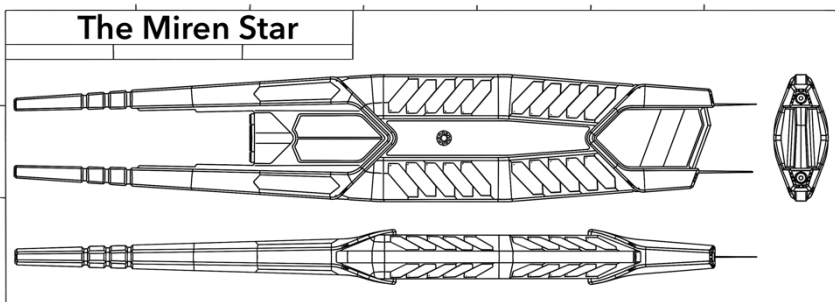


Spacecraft

***The Miren Star* (FO-308)**

Fortuna Caravel	Custom Starship
Length	304 meters
Beam	56 meters
Depth	25 meters
Dry Mass	49 kilotonnes
Cost	c27B
Personnel	210 Fulltime Crew 140 Event Crew Max. 1200 Passengers

The Miren Star was completed in 1172 T.A. and has ferried four generations of Fortuna leaders between their home world Elara and the capital Leros. The ship's numerous unique amenities have entertained guests of all types, from presidents of the Apeilous to refugees from the outer rim.



PROMINENT FAMILIES

Fortuna

Date of Modern Form	1192 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	18 th
Home World	Elara (EL-D)
Leader	Spouses Piata Fausta and Vesta Freya
Heir	Valentia Fianoux and Augustus Felix
Specialty	Design and Manufacturing of Birds and Light Starships

Maressellya

Date of Modern Form	816 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	1 st
Home World	Arelate (AE-D)
Leaders	Irene Madian
Heirs	None
Specialty	Design and Manufacturing of Fusion Power plants, Capital Warships, and Guided Ordnance

Menapharaoh

Date of Modern Form	840 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	3 rd
Home World	Laus (LU-D)
Leaders	Odesseo Ramone Maximus
Heir	None
Specialty	Management of the Endeavor, Design and Management of Logistics Chains and Cargo Systems

Prominent Families

LaBelle

Date of Modern Form	1025 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	439 th
Home World	Teme Hasan (TH-D)
Leader	Adrian
Heir	Parmys
Specialty	Design and Production of Synthetic Fuels, Management of Private Militaries of Paris and Dracon

Keowan

Date of Modern Form	6 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	NA
Home World	Corben (CB)
Leaders	Siblings Mina, Tynan, and Jericho
Heirs	6, Names Unknown
Specialty	Politics of the Viran Home World

Sunn

Date of Modern Form	971 T.A.
Place on Warrow's 500	NA
Home World	Cortabera (CA-A)
Leaders	Spouses Cal and Imora
Heirs	Siblings Kiton, Aelia, and Kora
Specialty	Farming of Luxury Crops

CHARACTERS

In Order of Appearance
POV Characters in Bold

Ponta Lynd, M 29

Officer, Lieutenant in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Space-Born, born on Mid-Town Station (S103)

Guida Swan, F 19

Enlisted Sailor in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Central-Born, born on the capital planet of Leros (PO)

Myron Russa, M 20

Enlisted Sailor in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Outlander Viran, born on Sirjan (TAE-SJ)

Marcielle Layan, F 25

Petty Officer in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Amarran Vires, M 27

Officer, Lieutenant Commander in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Central-Born, born on Athos Lean (AL-I)

Characters

Vesta Freya Fortuna, F 41

Secretary of State in the Territory of Atayuma-Eins, Co-Leader of the Fortuna Family

Viran, born on the Viran homeworld of Corben Six (CB)

Phoebe Martin, F 39

Intelligence Officer in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Southerner, born male on the Fortuna home-world of Elara (EL-D)

Marienne Yarga, F 50

One Star Admiral in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins, 2nd Squadron

Viran, born on the Viran homeworld of Corben Six (CB)

Samadia Garde, F 30

Officer, Commander in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Yasan Zubaya, M 53

President of the Independent System of Koltak (ISY-KT)

Outlander, born on Koltak (ISY-KT)

Tirse Barril, M 34

Citizen of TAE

Outlander, born on Eins (TAE-EI)

Paterna Barril, F 33

Officer, Commander in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Characters

Jak Castillo, M 42

Secretary of Communications, Territory of Atayuma-Eins

Space-Born, born in the Sharo-Kin Enclave of Mid-Town Station (S103)

Neon Pelagia, F 42

President of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins, Second Seat

Outlander, born on Sirjan (TAE-SJ)

Harmon Petromel, M 64

President of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins, Third Seat

Outlander, born on Eins (TAE-EI)

Maison Carrera, F 56

President of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins, First Seat

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Valentia Fianoux Fortuna, F 10

Adopted Daughter of Vesta and Piata Fortuna

Viran, born on the Miren Star (FO-308)

Piata Fausta SuFortuna, F 39

Head of the Fortuna Corporation, Head of the Fortuna Family

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home-world of Elara (EL-D)

Augustus Felix Fortuna, M 8

Son of Vesta and Piata Fortuna

Viran, born on the Fortuna home-world of Elara (EL-D)

Kite Vita-Fortuna, M 51

Fashion Designer and Head Public Relations Officer for the Fortuna Family

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home-world of Elara (EL-D)

Characters

Abrea Vita-Fortuna, F 21

Fashion Designer and Junior Public Relations Officer for the Fortuna Family

Southerner, born on the Fortuna home-world of Elara (EL-D)

Odesseo Ramone Maximus SuMenapharaoh, M 26

Head of the Menapharaoh Family and Corporation

Southerner, born on the Menapharaoh home-world of Laus (LU-D)

Aelia Sunn, F 24

Officer, Commander in the Apeilous Central Navy

Outlander, born on the Outer Rim planet Aelius (AN-OR)

Junez Rin, M 33

Commander, INVF, Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Enziago Garde, M 59

Base Commander, Captain in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Lana Garde, F 58

School Teacher in the Capital City of Kisto on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Yahto Cabe, M 55

Keeper of Order of the Third Congress of Atayuma-Eins

Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Imora Sunn, F 58

Farmer

Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Characters

Cal Sunn, M 60

Retired Constable, Azmaveth of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins (TAE)
Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Cortabera (CA-A)

Ewen Tyson, M 48

Security Specialist, Azmaveth of the Territory of Atayuma-Eins (TAE)
Viran, born on the Viran homeworld of Corben Six (CB)

Jensen Aritz, M 28

Petty Officer in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Outlander Viran, born on Sirjan (TAE-SJ)

Etenia, E 25

Enlisted Sailor in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins
Deep Southerner, born on the industrial planet Ro Massa (RM-I)

Christian Teloda, M 50

One Star Admiral in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins, leader of the
6th Fleet and 15th Squadron
Outlander, born on Atayuma (TAE-AT)

Evelin Brunn, F 56

One Star Admiral in the Cooperative Navy of Atayuma-Eins, 4th Squadron
Northerner, born on the agricultural world of Persepolis (PS-A)

Caesia Milan, F 33

Head of the Milan Textiles Corporation, Heiress of the Milan Family
Southerner, born on the commercial planet Qualto (QO-D)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Robinson is a speculative fiction author based in Western PA. A classically trained engineer with experience in product development and advanced materials manufacturing, he has a passion for telling the human stories that are fundamental to the built world. When he isn't writing or drawing, Walter spends his time designing and fabricating.