

## Chapter 1

Captain Isaac Valdar squinted against the blinding light pouring into his bridge. His ship, the *Breitenfeld*, bucked beneath his command chair and slammed him against his restraints. He'd expected—and been promised—a smooth jump, but his ship's engines had never functioned as advertised.

"Engine room! What is going on?" Valdar shouted. White light bore through his helmet's visor and seared his shut eyes. His temples throbbed with each pounding heartbeat as updates flooded into his helmet from his equally overwhelmed bridge crew.

"We're stuck in the wormhole, sir!" Ensign Geller's voice thundered in his ears as the young officer screamed his answer. "Let me answer your next question. There's no way I can shut it off."

An electrical conduit above Valdar's head burst open in a hail of sparks, the shorn wiring flopping against the ceiling like a wounded snake.

"I want a solution, not an excuse, Ensign Geller," Valdar said. "Something tells me we're on borrowed time."

"Captain," Commander Ericcson, the ship's executive officer, slapped her palm against a display. The flood of light from the tortured space beyond the bridge's view ports nearly washed out the display's wire diagram of the *Breitenfeld*, lit up with red damage reports, with more alerts coming in by the second. "Captain, we're being twisted apart. We've got hull breaches on seven decks and..."

The blinding light faded away and the tremors racking the ship subsided. Valdar turned his head away from his XO as a deep gray field materialized beyond the ship. The very substance of space-time fizzled around the ship and Valdar felt his body grow heavier and heavier, as if he was accelerating through a high-g maneuver in a fighter.

"Are we back at Bastion?" Valdar asked. The hosts at their last jump point had kept his ship in a null zone during their visit to ensure they could never give away the location of the Alliance's headquarters by accident or intent.

"The wormhole is nearly dissipated," Geller said. The young deck officer's breaths were labored, like a great weight was on his chest. "Readings are coming in ... That can't be right."

Rain lashed against the bridge's windows and a bolt of lightning struck the rail cannon battery at the prow of the ship.

“We’re in an atmosphere,” Valdar said. Blood drained from his face as he realized he had very little time—and even less of a chance—to save his ship.

“Engineering, all ahead full! XO, cut the grav plating. We’re getting pulled by this planet and the ship,” Valdar said. He grunted as he raised his overly heavy arm and let it slam against a control panel on his command chair, shattering the glass over the ABANDON SHIP alarm.

“Geller! Figure out which way is up and point us that way,” Valdar said.

A deafening roar like the first rumble of an exploding volcano broke through the ship as the engines kicked to life. Valdar’s ship was meant for the void, a void without sound. Hearing his ship fight for her life brought a slight smile to Valdar’s face. The enormous pressure against his body faded away as the ship’s gravity plating stopped pulling double-duty.

In his tinny voice, Lafayette, the cyborg Karigole alien working alongside his crew in the engineering room, said, “Captain, I shunted power from the jump drive into the grav plating and reversed the graviton polarity for effective buoyancy in—”

“The plating isn’t designed to maneuver the entire ship! It’ll break from the deck and ...” Images of blades of grav plating whirling through his ship like the business end of a blender came to his mind.

“That’s what I told him!” said Lieutenant Commander Levin, the ship’s lead engineer.

“And if either of you would have let me finish, I would have explained the very simple physics between the gravitational harmonic resonances between—”

Valdar cut Lafayette off with a push of a button and snapped his head around to look at his XO.

Ericcson shrugged her shoulders. “The ship’s holding together.”

The clouds enveloping the ship thinned, melting away to reveal a pale blue sky.

“Skipper,” Geller said, “so long as we’re free from the gravity well—and not flying straight into the ground—I can get us into a stable orbit.”

“This is the ... third time my ship’s engines have done something they’re not supposed to,” Valdar said. “Are we even in the right system?” The Ibarra Corporation retrofitted the ship with a supposed Alcubierre drive meant to take the ship from Earth to Saturn in a few short weeks. When activated, the engines formed a time-dilation bubble around the *Breitenfeld* that removed it—and the rest of the Saturn colonial fleet—from the passage of time for thirty years. After the ship’s mission to the dead planet of Anthalas was complete, an AI hidden in the new

jump engines sent the ship to the world of Bastion instead of Earth, without the knowledge or consent of Valdar and his crew.

“I won’t know until we can do a pulsar triangulation,” Geller said.

“Comms,” Valdar looked to the platinum-blond lieutenant strapped into his work pod, “the Dotok know we’re coming. Anything on the hailing frequencies their ambassador gave us?”

“Scanning, sir,” he said.

“XO, damage report,” Valdar said. The blue sky ahead of them darkened and pinpricks of starlight materialized in the deepening hue of open space.

“Minor damage to the outer hull. Flak emplacements two and nine report a break in their ammo feeder lines. Deck officers say they can have them operational in another ten minutes. The jump engine is offline while it recharges,” she said.

“Captain,” said Utrecht, the ship’s gunnery officer, as he placed green pins onto his plot board, “turret spotters reporting explosions and weapons fire directly above us.”

“Get me a visual,” Valdar said. He flipped a screen up from the side of his command chair and mashed a gloved finger along the frame to turn it on.

“I found a live frequency,” the comms officer said.

“Good, everything all at once,” Valdar muttered. “Open it,” he ordered.

“*Clin mar the’ki! Clin aouran thal!*” came a hoarse, panicked voice.

Grainy footage of a distant Dotok ship, a carrier with angular sides and a light beige hull, popped onto Valdar’s screen. The carrier’s point defense turrets fired at dark shapes swirling around the ship. A lance of yellow light sliced across the side of the ship, leaving a trail of fire and gouts of atmosphere. Xaros Drones and snub-nosed fighters swirled around the Dotok ship in a dogfight bigger than anything Valdar had seen since the assault on the Crucible orbiting Ceres.

Valdar rewound the feed and zoomed in on the source of the laser, a Xaros drone, the stalks on its body of shifting metal brought to an apex glowing with power. A Dotok gun crew found its mark and blew the drone to pieces, the hunks disintegrating away.

“Definitely in the right place,” Valdar said. He keyed open a channel to the flight deck. “Gall,” he said to the *Breitenfeld’s* wing commander, Marie Durand, using her call sign, “get everything you can into the sky. The fight started without us.”

“I thought the Xaros were supposed to be on the outer edge of the system,” Durand said, the whine of her Eagle’s engines bleeding through the open channel. “You have positive contact with the Dotok? If they don’t know we’re coming, we may have a fratricide issue and I don’t know how to say, ‘God damn it don’t shoot me,’ in their language.”

“We’re working that out,” Valdar said.

“The only channel I have with the Dotok is nothing but chaos, sir,” the communications officer said. “I don’t understand what they’re saying. But from all the screaming ... it doesn’t sound good.”

“Gall,” Valdar said, “get up there and start killing drones. They’ll figure out what side we’re on pretty quick.”

Durand grumbled and closed the channel.

“Open a channel to the Dotok,” Valdar said. A chime sounded in his helmet and the comms officer stuck her thumb in the air. “Dotok fleet, this is Captain Isaac Valdar of the Atlantic Union ship *Breitenfeld*. We are launching fighters to assist. I also brought some pretty damn big guns to this party. Where should I point them?”

A hiss of static answered him.

“Sir,” Utrecht said, “we’ve got a sky full of unknown contacts. Check your screen.”

A live feed from his forward rail gun battery showed a half-dozen ships of Dotok construction, each twice the size of the *Breitenfeld*. Dark lines of basalt ran along the hulls as golden flecks of light glittered from within the dark vise. Each of the ships disgorged life pods, trails of fire tracing back from hundreds of pods falling toward the planet Takeni.

“They’re abandoning ship?” XO asked.

“You don’t punch out of a battle you’re winning,” Valdar said.

“Being ... *Breitenfeld*?” came over the Dotok channel.

“Yes, this is Captain Valdar of the *Breitenfeld*. Is this Admiral Yon’Kai?” Valdar asked. Valdar’s screen snapped to a Dotok man, his string-thick silver hair pulled into a top knot, the right half of his face stained with dried blood. The flame-blackened bulkhead and swaying ceiling panels filled the background of the video.

“Help,” the Dotok struggled to say. An explosion on the alien’s ship rattled the feed, and lines of static broke across the screen as the Dotok yelled commands Valdar couldn’t understand. “*Breitenfeld*...here?”

“That’s right, son. We’re here to help,” Valdar said.

The video cut out before the Dotok could respond.

“I’ll get him back,” the comms officer said.

“Bogies inbound,” Utrecht said. “Six drones just broke off from the Dotok ship and are on an intercept course with us.”

“Six? I’m insulted,” Valdar said. “Work up a firing solution for the compromised ships. Let’s show them we mean business.”

“Aye-aye, skipper,” Utrecht said with a grin.

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Durand took a deep breath then squeezed every muscle between her knees and her neck as her fighter shot over of the *Breitenfeld’s* flight deck, accelerated to attack speed by a magnetically driven catapult. The g-forces grayed out her vision despite her attempts to keep enough blood in her head where she needed it to stop from passing out.

Her Eagle spat out of the ship, the blur of the flight deck replaced by the haze of Takeni’s last bit of atmosphere. A dusty, mountainous world spread out beneath her.

“Everyone, call out once you’re clear of the ship and come to two-seven mark zero-nine. Form up on my wing,” she sent to her fighter squadron, a dozen more Eagles hot on her heels.

“Any idea who or what we’re fighting? Or is that too much to ask?” Mei Ma asked over the IR net.

“Dotok tech is on par with ours, Glue,” Durand said. “If it looks like a Xaros drone, shoot it.”

“Simple. I like it,” Ma said.

Durand pulled her fighter up and toward the raging battle. The rest of her squadron, eleven Eagles flown by pilots with several drone kills to their credit, formed into two six-plane echelons, Durand at the lead of one, Mei Ma the other. The pilot from the former Chinese People’s Liberation Space Navy had proven to be a capable and excellent pilot, despite her earlier attempts to kill Durand back when Earth still had nation-states.

Sunlight reflected off the approaching Xaros, their stalk tips already glowing with deadly power. Durand flicked the safety cover off her control stick and felt her Eagle shudder as the

Gatling cannon swung out from its weapons bay and spun to life. She fed power to her thrusters, adrenaline sending her nerves on fire as the enemy approached.

“All right, boys and girls, standard jab-cross engagement just like we’ve trained,” Durand said to her squadron. “Glue, Blue flight, engage at long range. Try to tag any you can. Red flight, with me. We’re going to knock these bastards into pieces. I wish you all shit.”

“Roger, Gall,” Ma said. “Save some for me.”

The Xaros drones maneuvered around each other, writhing like a scrum of snakes as they dove toward the human fighters. Durand felt a tinge of fear caress her heart as they neared. Drones always held an evenly spaced formation when attacking; they weren’t capable of adaptation and new tactics.

“No promises, Glue.” She kept steel in her voice, the time for doubt long past. Violence of action would have to overcome whatever the Xaros had planned. “Stagger and engage on my mark...Mark!”

Durand and her half of the squadron punched their anti-grav thrusters and popped above Ma’s Eagles, clearing the line of fire, and accelerated. Ma’s fighters opened up with their Gatling cannons, spraying hypervelocity bullets toward the approaching scrum of drones. The drones flew apart like shrapnel from an exploding grenade and lurched toward Durand and the fighters on her wing.

Durand had a heartbeat to fire off a burst before a drone shot over her cockpit, hook-tipped stalks reaching for her. She punched the maneuver thrusters on the tail of her fighter and sent her ship into a flip. She squeezed the trigger before she could see her target, tracing a wide arc of shots as she came around. Her rounds found the drone as its stalks gleamed with ruby light.

Shells tore off the drone’s stalks and smashed into the back of its body, sending it tumbling through space like a flipped coin. Durand lined up a burst and blew it to pieces.

“Splash one!” she announced.

“Is it me, or are they faster than usual?” Kyle, a new transfer to her squadron, asked.

“Got one on me!” came over the IR, the voice reedy with fear.

Durand’s comms flooded with terse warnings and announcements. She craned her neck around, looking for her next target or a fighter in distress. Ruby beams snapped through space and a fireball erupted.

Durand cursed and accelerated toward the explosion.

“Kyle gone, no ejection seat,” Hornsby said. Durand saw his fighter closing on the drone that had killed Kyle. Durand arced her fighter toward the drone, waiting for the range to engage.

The drone’s stalks shifted to its rear as it jinked around Hornsby’s shots. The stalks converged to two points, both gleaming with energy.

“Hornsby, break off!”

“I’ve got him.” His voice shook in tune with his firing cannon.

“I said—”

The pursued drone fired twin energy beams. Hornsby banked his fighter and dodged the first beam, but the second cut straight through his cockpit.

Hatred flared through Durand as she fired her cannon. Rounds fanned through space and knocked a chunk out of the drone. She sped straight for her target and put a burst dead center, blowing it into neat halves that burnt away within seconds.

“Nag, Glue, status,” Durand said to her remaining pilots. She risked a glance at her display panel and saw a red X crossed through a pilot in Ma’s flight. Cittern, he’d been with Durand since the first day she’d set foot aboard the *Breitenfeld*.

“I’m fine,” Glue said. “Filly took a shot through her canopy. Her commo’s down but she isn’t hurt.”

“Gall, this is Glue. Last of the drones are destroyed. We need search and rescue for Hornsby?”

Durand brought her fighter parallel to Hornsby’s Eagle as it tumbled through space. There was a gash through his cockpit, and all that remained of Hornsby was an empty flight suit, rent from shoulder to waist and dark within. Xaros disintegration beams annihilated flesh, leaving nothing but a red mist when they connected with anything alive.

“Negative, Glue. Mark his ship for recovery once this fight is over,” Durand said.

“Gall, this is *Breitenfeld* actual.” Valdar’s priority transmission cut off Ma’s response.

“This is Gall. Six Xaros drones destroyed,” she said.

“Gall, we’re in contact with the Dotok ship. You need to target the escape pods from the compromised Dotok ships,” Valdar said.

“You want me to *what*?” Escape pods and life boats were sacrosanct, never to be fired upon. Even in the darkest days of the Second Pacific War and the decades of skirmishes that

followed, neither the Chinese nor the Atlantic Union had ever knowingly attacked a life pod adrift in the void or sea.

“You heard me. There are three inbound to the *Breitenfeld*. Those are your priority targets. Valdar out.”

Durand shook her head and caught sight of three escape pods burning through the atmosphere toward her ship. She glanced up at the friendly Dotok ship, still in a life-and-death struggle with attacking drones.

“Glue, you get that?” Durand asked.

“I monitored.”

“Get your flight to the Dotok ship and lend them a hand. When that ship is in the clear, take out any escape pods within range. Glue, signal to Filly to follow you. We need to get her back to the *Breit* anyway. Let’s go.”

As Durand dove toward the *Breitenfeld*, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Glue and Nag following. She turned back to her ship and did a double take. On her starboard side the sky was alight with escape pods burning through the atmosphere like flaming comets. There must have been hundreds already within the planet’s atmosphere, converging on a deep, jagged canyon that cut across the surface like Valles Marineris on Mars.

“There’s so many,” Ma said. “There’s no way we can reach them by the time they’ve made landfall.”

“Worry about what we can see, touch and kill, Glue,” Durand said. The three pods streaking toward the *Breitenfeld* descended in a line, one already dangerously close to the ship. Glowing tracer rounds from the *Breitenfeld*’s point defense batteries rose toward the nearest pod.

Durand gunned her engines and accelerated toward the trailing pod.

“*Breitenfeld*, cease fire on point defense. Those bullets become real indiscriminate once they leave the barrel,” Durand said. She trained her Gatling cannon on the pod, a bare gunmetal teardrop shape, its heat shield already glowing from friction with the thin atmosphere. She had the shot—it was a sitting duck compared to the Xaros drones—but she hesitated.

“Please let this be the right thing to do. *Gott mit uns*.” She pulled the trigger and the escape pod tumbled like a bird killed mid-flight. Durand shot past the target, a tear in her eye. She found the next pod ... and saw the *Breitenfeld*’s massive rail cannons slew up.

“Brace!” Durand’s warning went out a split second before the strike carrier’s main batteries blasted shells past her. Even in the wisp-thin atmosphere, the crack of the shells shattering the sound barrier and the turbulence from the shells’ passage assaulted Durand like she was in the heart of a thunderstorm.

She shook her head to try and clear a tinnitus whine from her ears and pulled her fighter out of a spin.

“A little warning next time, *Breitenfeld*?” Durand sent over the open channel. She saw the closest escape pod, its retro-thrusters flaring like miniature suns as it neared the ship. “One of the pods is ... landing? *Breit*, a pod is landing on the upper hull between the rail batteries. I don’t think we can reach it in time.”

“I can get it,” Choi Ma, call sign Nag, said. “You get the other one.” Glue’s Eagle broke off and made a beeline for the *Breitenfeld*.

“Got it,” Durand rolled her fighter until she found the other pod. She banked away and set an intercept course. She twisted around and saw Glue taking careful shots at her target. Her cannon shells peppered the pod while the missed shots continued on and struck against the *Breitenfeld*’s hull.

“Try not shooting our own ship, Glue. That sound reasonable?” Durand asked.

Glue answered in Chinese, her tone full of frustration as she overtook the pod and roared past the ship’s bridge. The damaged pod wobbled as the retro-thrusters cut out and it fell into gravity’s clutch. The pod slammed into the ship and embedded within the hull.

Durand winced and turned her attention back to the last pod. She powered up the rail gun that ran the length of her fighter and angled her shot to avoid the *Breitenfeld*. The rail gun robbed her of momentum and as it fired, it thrust her against her restraints. The rail shot blew the pod out of the sky. She skirted the edge of the burning debris field and brought her fighter back toward the ship.

“*Breitenfeld*, you going to tell me why it’s so important to destroy these life pods?” Durand asked.

A shadow crossed over her cockpit. She looked up and saw a dark shape falling toward her. It slammed against her fighter and then tumbled toward the planet like a sailor with a ball and chain sinking into the ocean.

Claws raked against her canopy, leaving deep cuts as they tore across. A face straight from her nightmares leered at her. Abyss-black armor plates protruded from pasty white flesh, and bright yellow eyes trembled with rage as the thing opened its mouth. Fangs and black tongue gave way to a banshee's scream.

It jammed its claws into her canopy and pulled a clenched fist over its head. Sunlight glinted off smooth armor plates as its scream continued.

Durand slammed her fighter into a barrel roll. The creature held on for two complete rolls before it lost its grip and centrifugal force flung it away. The planet and space spun around as she fought out of her spin. She managed to right her ship and pulled up toward the void.

Her breath came in short, terrified gasps as her heart pounded in her ears.

*“Breit—Breitenfeld, I don't know what that was. But I think they're on our ship.”*

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