

# **Fleet of the Forgotten (Sample)**

*Exile's War - I*

**Dan Thornton**

## *Somewhere near Asteroid 2073 AQ12*

The clang and clatter of objects striking the hull of the commercial mining vessel *Bison* woke its surly captain with a start.

He slapped the red button near the head of his slowly rotating bunk bringing it to a stop and easing the centrifugal forces acting on his body. As weightlessness returned and he regained his bearings he growled into the com panel.

“Jackson, what the fuck are you doing, mate? I told you to keep an eye on the scopes!”

The crackling speaker made the reply almost unrecognizable until Captain Foster, using his free hand, slapped the grill several times.

“...Cap, nothing on the scopes at all.”

“I’m on the way up, slow us down for God’s sakes, we don’t need another hole in the hull.”

He flipped the com switch to standby, making a mental note to tell one of the mechanics to fix the damned thing.

He gently pushed off the grab handle and got one toe on the side of his bunk, pushing his body toward the hatch in a practiced ballet of zero-g maneuvering.

“Swear to God, that idiot,” he muttered. Jackson was a solid hand with the remote tractors they used to ferry ore from the asteroids they mined to the cargo containers, but behind the controls of the hauler, he was impatient and hotheaded.

Gliding up the small, cramped passage, he used his outstretched hands, tapping the sides of the bulkhead. The contact slowed his glide bringing him to a stop at the bridge hatch. The *Bison* was a large ship, but it was mostly cargo and utility spaces, affording very little room or comfort to the crew.

Beeping alerts grew louder along with a steady stream of curses as he approached.

When he passed onto the bridge Jackson was clearly struggling.

“Cap, I can’t bring the piece of shit thrusters online. I’m getting a 209 error. What the fuck is a 209 error.”

They were in the thick of a particularly dense part of the asteroid belt. Normally, they would burn from one large rock to another, sometimes a million kilometers apart, but here a strike not so long ago left several large, and hundreds of smaller chunks of rock orbiting nearby—along with a lot of small rock and dust.

It was a rare find and if harvested correctly, one that could cut the length of their cruise down from twelve months to ten—sending everyone home early with full pockets. That was if Jackson didn’t get them killed before then.

“I swear if you mangled that array, it’s coming out of your share. Do you know how much they charge to fix one of those?”

Jackson slapped the release on his harness and pushed over to the co-pilots chair while Foster locked himself into the newly vacant seat.

Foster studied the diagnostic display. “The combustion chambers fouled. Whoever ran that thing last time ran it rich.” He looked at Jackson.

“I ran it normal! Ten-minute burn, totally by the book.”

“I did it by the book...” Foster mocked him. “You have to lower the mix by hand on the forward thrusters, you know it runs rich asshole.”

“I hate this tub,” Jackson said, crossing his arms.

Captain Foster overrode the thruster safety lockout with a practiced hand and fired the forward thruster array. He let it burn hotter than normal allowing all the carbon deposits to dislodge from the chamber. When the temperature warning lights started to squawk, he did a silent ten count before shutting the array down.

“Right on the money,” he said slapping Jackson on the arm.

Jackson wasn’t looking at him, his face slack.

“Cap...” he said, his voice colored with concern. He pointed out the window of the command deck.

Foster looked in the direction Jackson pointed, not seeing anything but a large, slowly rotating asteroid.

“What the hell are you getting at?” he said before a shadow engulfed a smaller asteroid just to the starboard side of the larger rock.

“Not a shadow,” he thought slowly moving forward in his seat until the harness went tight against his shoulders. Whatever it was, it was gigantic, larger than some of the largest chunks of the asteroid they were heading toward. Many times larger than the *Bison*, which was no small brig.

He couldn't quite make out the shape of the thing, the little sunlight this far out cast harsh shadows across everything, making the dark object confusing... but it was slowing down.

A feeling of unease settled over Foster. Too many years of dealing with dangerous jobs on the frontier had amped up his sense of self-preservation, and unknowns immediately raised his hackles.

“Log that and... send a message to the company, I want them to know where we are... just in case.” He looked at Jackson, who was staring out the window slack-jawed. “Now!”

As Jackson snapped to his duties, he cinched his acceleration harness tightly across his shoulders and chest. The musty smell of old nylon and years of grease and grime was comforting. He pondered for a second, watching the huge shadowy object intently, his brain trying to make sense of what the thing was.

“Trying the satellite network.” Jackson tapped the button on the communications screen, each time it spun a small pixelated logo that looked like the head of a buffalo before returning to the word “Send.” “Shit no luck, it won't connect...” He slammed his fist down on the armrest. “I lost the nav beacons and the satellite ping! Got nothing at all now.” He tossed his hands in the air.

Captain Foster touched his own communication controls, picking up the auxiliary headset that was tethered to his chair by a frayed bit of elastic. The

wired headset was old tech, but great when they were around the massive metal asteroids that played havoc with their wireless systems. He held one of the cups to his ear and closed his eyes, listening to what should have been the ever-present background static that filled the system. There was only the slightest crackle.

“I don’t like it,” he said flipping a switch on his console and pressing a well-worn button several times, each press causing a horn to echo through the living spaces of the small vessel.

He bent over the console raising his voice. “Listen up, everyone, drop whatever you’re doing and strap in, we’re turning the ship around.”

He grabbed the maneuvering console and pulled it toward him. Fingers flew over the keys in a practiced dance. Foster decided to forgo the usual safety checks and had fuel flowing to the maneuvering pods in record time.

“Hang on.” His voice echoed through the cabins of the blunt nosed hauler.

A low roar reverberated through the structure as the thrusters fired. Bits of unseen debris clattered around the inside of the cabin as the nose of the *Bison* slewed to port slowly away from the shadowy menace.

“Point eight... point nine... that’s one G, Cap,” Jackson said, holding his arms across his chest trying to keep the straps from digging into his skin. “Cap?”

A veritable orchestra of squeaks and rattles came from every panel, bolt, and support strut surrounding them.

Captain Foster grimaced as they passed one and a half G, pushing the limits of the old tub. She wasn’t a very nimble ship pulling a half a million tons of ore behind them, but whatever that thing was had stopped and he didn’t want to goad it... or them... into a chase.

“Nice and easy.” He dropped the output of the thrusters as the nose of the *Bison* was pointed 90 degrees away from the thing.

He slowly pushed the main engines up to 10 percent thrust dragging the chain of modular containers along with them, gaining speed and hopefully safety.

Jackson craned his neck trying to see through the starboard side of the bridge windows.

“Well? What’s it doing?” Foster said after a few tense moments.

“Nothing that I can tell... it’s just sitting there.”

The screeching sound of the master caution alarm caused both men to jump in their harnesses. Between the bridge chairs a flat panel with a row of red indicators sprang to life. The right most lights were blinking in time with the screeching caution alarm.

“Did we shake one of the containers loose?” Captain Foster pushed away the maneuver panel and pulled the general computer display closer silencing the alarm.

Jackson, whose specialty also dealt with the cargo, was already on it. “Maybe,” he said, tapping a button. “The last four containers are showing red, but containers ten and eleven are both yellow.”

A shudder ran through the ship along with the renewed screech of the caution alarm as several more lights came to life on the panel between them.

“Shit, Cap, I think we just lost all the aft containers. Eight through sixteen are red.” Concern lined his face.

Foster turned to his panel and started typing in commands bringing up the topside docking camera. He ordered it to swivel around and point straight aft, and the picture made his heart sink. Behind them was half a years’ worth of ore slowly spreading out in a long tail. Tattered tangles of metal interspersed amongst the partially processed rock were all that was left of the tough modular containers. They looked like chewed-up tissue paper.

His heart leapt into his throat as he noticed that the mysterious shadow had moved in behind them, slowly, like some sea creature of legend. A flicker of light, more like a row of sparkling dust leapt from near the shadowy object making a bee line toward the Bison. It registered in Foster’s mind that it was the ore. Solid chunks of asteroid iron flaring to life as if subjected to an arc furnace before it reached the remaining containers behind the hauler.

Both Foster and Jackson looked on in abject horror as they flared red hot and started to melt.

“It’s shooting at us!” Jackson cried flinching away from the screen instinctively.

Captain Foster’s hands started to shake as his fingers caught up to his brain. He slapped the emergency cargo release. A series of explosive bolts cut the cargo away from the haul craft making it leap forward and pushing both men awkwardly back into their seats. Without thinking, he commanded the engines to full power.

While underpowered for hauling a half million tons of ore, when unleashed, the haulers engines were enough to turn the crew to paste if allowed to run full out. Thankfully for Foster and crew, the computer systems responded instantly, cutting the acceleration to a manageable five G.

“Jesus Christ...” Jackson managed to grunt out.

Foster barely heard him; his eyes locked on the rear facing camera display as another line of twinkling light caught up to the hauler.

“Maybe it won’t be that bad,” he thought right before the *Bison* disintegrated in a flash of light and heat.

## From the Author:

I’m so grateful you took the time to read this sneak peek of my book. I hope it left you with plenty of questions and a desire to turn the page! The full story is coming soon, and I can't wait for you to experience the rest of the journey. Be sure to look for the **ebook on Amazon** and the **paperback edition at your favorite online and brick-and-mortar bookstores.**

Thank you again for your interest and support.

-Dan