

Fleet of the Forgotten Sample Dan Thornton

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FLEET OF THE FORGOTTEN

SAMPLE

Exiles War

Book One

Dan Thornton

Prologue

Outer Asteroid Belt

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-pilot’s chair while Foster locked himself into the newly vacant seat.

Foster studied the diagnostic display. “The combustion chamber’s 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 and slapped 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, there appeared 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 sudden screech of the master caution alarm made both men jump in their harnesses. Between the pilot and co-pilot chairs, a flat panel with a row of red indicators sprang to life. The rightmost lights blinked in time with the 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 year’s worth of ore slowly spreading out in a long tail. Tattered tangles of metal interspersed amongst the partially processed rock were all that remained 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 beeline toward the *Bison*. It registered in Foster's mind that it was the ore. Solid chunks of asteroid iron flared 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 hauler's 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.

Chapter 1

On Earth, amidst the manicured lawns of the Interplanetary Security Alliance Fleet Academy, Ryan Anders tightened his grip behind his back, the stiff fabric of his uniform pressing against his knuckles. His gaze swept past the white-walled classroom buildings and pristine sidewalks toward the horizon. Beyond the Academy's sterile perfection, just barely visible in the haze of morning light past the outer security fence, he could make out a squat grey apartment block surrounded by a squalid slum. Like so many others, it was a standard government design: cold, dark, utilitarian to a fault. It was too distant to see clearly, yet clear enough to stir a memory. A different block. A different life.

The whine of turbofan engines grabbed his attention. Overhead, a grey short-haul shuttle banked sharply, circling the campus once before angling toward the northern landing field. Ryan tracked its movement until it disappeared, then exhaled, forcing his focus back to the present.

Around him, his classmates gathered in tight clusters, their voices a low murmur of anxious speculation. The entire class had been ordered to muster at dawn in the green space outside the chow hall, an unusual and unwelcome surprise. The Academy—where the North American Federation trained its next generation of fleet officers—was built on discipline, routine, and hierarchy. Mysterious impromptu gatherings on the Green had everyone's hackles up.

Three years of relentless study brought Ryan and his class to the edge of graduation. In a few short weeks, they'd receive their first assignments and their official ranks before shipping out to the fleet. It was a moment he should have looked forward to, but instead, he felt only relief. The campus was becoming overcrowded. Each new class swelled in size, their numbers doubling, then tripling. The war drums were beating somewhere, even if no one dared say it aloud.

His gaze swept across the assembled cadets. They were the sons and daughters of politicians, corporate moguls, and high-ranking officers.

Legacies. Their uniforms were custom-tailored, their brass buttons polished to a mirror shine—probably by some overworked household staffer who was little more than an indentured servant. They clustered in their usual groups.

The corporate kids, or "corpos," stood in one corner, their conversation a mix of smug one-upmanship about weekend getaways, private shuttles, and luxury vacations. Across from them were the politicals, or "pollys"—children of the ruling elite. Unlike the corpos, they not only had richly tailored uniforms but were also bedecked with commendation ribbons and chevrons on their sleeves for "volunteer service." Technically, any cadet could earn them, but in practice, only those with a powerful political sponsor ever did.

Then there was Ryan's group—the Citizen Officer Corps. The lottery winners. The afterthoughts. Years ago, the program had been a public relations stunt to prove that the system wasn't completely rigged against the working class. Back then, each Academy class had a dozen citizen cadets. Now, there were only three. The rumors whispered through the Academy halls lately hinted that next year, there would be none.

Ryan shifted his stance, his fingers flexing behind his back. He could feel eyes on him. The corpos and pollys didn't even try to hide their disdain. It didn't matter that he'd worked harder than any of them just to be here. The moment he stepped onto this campus, the system had already decided his worth.

The rich kids liked to joke that even the fleet needed someone to unclog toilets—which wasn't entirely untrue. Regulations dictated that all leadership positions aboard spacefaring military vessels had to be filled by Academy graduates. Less glamorous departments—maintenance, supply, waste management—still needed officers, and the lottery program conveniently filled those gaps—for now, as automated and AI controlled systems were rapidly taking over.

Ryan had always considered himself lucky. Not only had he managed to secure a scholarship to university, but against all odds, he had won one of

the coveted spots at the Academy. It was a miracle, really, considering his past.

“What’s the matter, Anders? You look like you smelled something.”

The voice was unmistakable. A slim cadet stepped out from a cluster of his taller peers, a smirk tugging at his sharply defined features. Cadet Slaunder—heir to Mazim, one of the largest multinational defense contractors in the system. His father had only recently slipped out from under a corruption probe, and Slaunder carried himself with the arrogance of someone who knew money could buy anything, including the law. He was also conventionally handsome, with a chiseled jaw and sharp blue eyes that turned heads. His perfectly tailored uniform and expensive, custom-made shoes—just a little too thick in the sole—hinted at a quiet insecurity he’d never admit. From the first week at the Academy, he’d latched on to Ryan, relentless in his harassment.

Nose in the air, his eyes swept over Ryan with the practiced disdain of the privileged.

“He’s probably just smelling his future career,” one of his toadies croaked. “Good luck unplugging those toilets grub!” another added.

They brayed like donkeys, and heat flared in Ryan’s chest.

He took a breath, about to fire back, when a gentle hand landed on his shoulder, short-circuiting the anger surging through him.

“Don’t give them the satisfaction, Ryan.”

The soft but firm voice belonged to Anna Rodriguez—one of the only people in this place he considered a true friend. Another lottery placement. Another outsider.

Slaunder, emboldened by Ryan’s lack of response, made another snide quip to his friends, but Ryan barely heard it. Anna’s fingers tightened on his arm, guiding him away.

She tilted her head, studying his face, and a stray curl of dark hair slipped from beneath her garrison cap. At barely five foot three and 110 pounds, she was dwarfed by Ryan’s six-foot frame, but he’d seen her take down

men twice her weight in hand-to-hand combat class without breaking a sweat. Six older brothers had trained her well.

“Don’t tell me he’s actually getting under your skin?” she asked.

Ryan shrugged, trying to play it off, but the weight in his chest had nothing to do with Slaunder.

He was relieved that graduation was a few weeks away and wanted to focus on what came next—but instead, his thoughts kept circling back to his past. He tried to keep his mind in the present, in the here and now, but it wasn’t working. Stray thoughts, glimpses of his painful past, would come unbidden like flashes of lightning in the dark. The struggles of his poor family, his father’s disapproval, his mother’s death. They left him exposed, and a familiar, suffocating darkness swept over him in those moments, urging him to lash out.

On top of everything else, Ryan never understood his place in the world. He always felt like he was destined for something more, something bigger than scratching out a living in the slums where he grew up.

Behind Anna, another cadet walked up, offering a small wave. It was David Kim, the last of the lottery cadets in their class and the closest thing Ryan had ever had to a best friend.

“Not like you guys to be running late,” Ryan said, forcing a change of subject.

“We don’t have servants to tidy up our bunks like some people,” David replied dryly, his Korean accent barely noticeable. He adjusted his cap, brushing his thick black hair back into place, but his nervous glance toward the corpo kids didn’t go unnoticed. Their laughter quieted, but their sideways glances and whispered conversations meant trouble wasn’t far behind.

Ryan clasped both David’s and Anna’s shoulders, pulling them farther away from Slaunder’s group. “Whaddya say, pal? Any heads-up on this meeting?”

David’s slight stature and quiet demeanor made him a target for the Slaunders of the world, but it also allowed him to go unnoticed around the

staffers. “Nothing at all, Ryan. The barracks chief seemed to be as surprised as we were.”

“Maybe you two are finally getting recognized?” Ryan said.

Anna and David were both top of the class in different areas, and, had they not been born to working class parents, would probably be class leaders and able to take their pick of the very best fleet assignments.

Ryan was another story. Hard sciences and mathematics had always been a struggle, but thankfully, his command and combat scores gave him an overall passing grade. This wouldn’t have been the case if not for the mediocrity of most corporate and political candidates dragging down the average.

As David and Anna joked about the possibility of receiving some kind of recognition, Ryan couldn't help but think that whatever was happening wasn't going to be good... at least for them. The world wasn't a fair place. The strong preyed on the weak, and the weak preyed on each other. In fact, they found each other during their first week at the Academy precisely because of that.

He’d been minding his own business, getting the lay of the land, when Anna had come sprinting into the hallway, wild-eyed. She blurted out that someone named David was in trouble—backed into a dark corner by five corporate cadets who were laughing as they detailed exactly what they planned to do to “his kind.”

Ryan had no intention of getting involved. He’d learned the hard way that stepping in usually ended badly for people like him. Before he could say as much, Slauder flew out the door—clearly trying to stop Anna—and ran straight into Ryan. The impact sent the shorter cadet bouncing off Ryan’s chest and sprawling to the floor. His limbs flailed gracelessly, and the look of stunned outrage on his face was so ridiculous that Ryan burst into laughter.

A mistake.

Slauder scrambled to his feet, humiliated, before slicking his hair back and running inside; in that instant, Ryan saw the birth of a lifelong grudge.

Moments later, Slaunder was back with four large, albeit cow-eyed, corpo cadets, dragging David behind them. Ryan had two choices—fight and risk expulsion back to a life of poverty, or submit and spend the next three years under Slaunder’s thumb.

He’d never been good at making those kinds of choices. So, he winked at David and sucker-punched the nearest corpo in the jaw.

To David’s credit, he hadn’t hesitated. Within seconds, they were both swinging, fists connecting in a flurry of adrenaline-fueled defiance. It hadn’t been pretty—by the time it was over, they were both bruised and bloodied—but Anna had escaped and found an officer just in time to keep them from getting their asses kicked too badly.

Of course, nothing happened to the corpos. The Academy turned a blind eye to their indiscretions. Only Ryan and David were handed demerits for “unbecoming conduct.” He was sure he was bound for a shuttle back to the slums, but the officer who broke up the fight was called away, and for whatever reason, they hadn’t been expelled.

Anna helped them limp to Medical, and by the time they got to their barracks, they had all become fast friends.

“Here they come again,” David muttered now.

Before Slaunder and his gang made it more than a few steps, an unfamiliar officer emerged from a nearby building, the slam of the metal door echoing behind him. His purposeful stride and crisp uniform, conspicuously adorned with a bright blue aiguillette, marked him as Academy command staff. This froze everyone in place.

Elizabeth Miller, their class leader and one of the most politically connected cadets at the Academy, snapped to attention. “Cadets, form up!”

The students fell into their usual formation—political cadets in front, corporate-sponsored recruits behind them, and Ryan, David, and Anna relegated to the rear.

“At ease,” the officer ordered, his voice raspy but sharp. The cadets relaxed into a more neutral stance—hands clasped behind their backs, legs

shoulder width apart, eyes forward.

Ryan studied the man. He was older, with visibly white, closely cropped hair beneath his command cap. He carried himself with authority, but not the haughty air of a polly or the loose dismissiveness of a corpo. A long scar ran down the left side of his neck, disappearing beneath his gold collar insignia. Below that, a thick stack of ribbons adorned his breast. One stood out above the others—a dark red Unit Combat Commendation with three bronze stars. That meant this man had earned it in real battle. Four times. Whoever this officer was, he'd seen more action than most would in a lifetime.

“Good afternoon, cadets,” the officer said, his voice steady, measured. “I’m Commander Young, ISA Fleet liaison.” He glanced at the tablet in his hand, swiping once before continuing.

“No doubt you’re wondering why I’ve called you to muster before class. I’ll get to that. But first—credit where it’s due. I’ve reviewed your latest fitness reports, and I’ll admit, I’m impressed... though also a bit troubled.”

His gaze swept the formation, pausing briefly on Ryan before moving on. “It seems there’s been a fair amount of friction and some insubordination in your ranks.” He let the words settle before adding, “...but these things have a way of working themselves out.”

Ryan’s stomach dropped. Had Slauder followed through on his threat? Had he finally found a way to get them expelled just weeks before graduation? A glance at Slauder seemingly confirmed his worst fears—the bastard threw a quick look over his shoulder, smirking. A spark of rage ignited in Ryan’s chest before he could force himself to stamp it down.

Young continued. “Now, I know you’re all looking forward to your upcoming graduation ceremony. Unfortunately, some of you won’t be attending.” His tone was serious.

Ryan’s jaw clenched. His face burned as his worst fears seemed to come true. Was he about to follow in his mother’s footsteps and blow the opportunity of a lifetime? His fists curled, an overwhelming urge rising—to break Slauder’s smug face before anyone could stop him.

A subtle touch on his arm. Anna. Her hand barely brushed against his, but it was enough. Without looking at him, she gave a small shake of her head.

Ryan exhaled slowly, releasing the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"The following cadets will step forward," Young said, motioning to his right. "Cadet David Kim. Cadet Ryan Anders. Cadet Anna Rodriguez..."

Ryan barely heard the rest. His mind reeled. David and Anna? They were model cadets. Was this his fault?

Moving like prisoners to the gallows, the three stepped forward. Ryan caught sight of Slaunder, his shoulders bouncing with barely contained laughter until Commander Young continued.

"Cadet Percival Slaunder. Cadet Maxime Dubois. Cadet Elizabeth Miller."

Ryan blinked, the names catching him off guard. Elizabeth? He flicked a glance at her, but her face remained a practiced mask of control. Slaunder, however, looked downright frightened at first before quickly hiding his feelings behind a facade of arrogance.

"The rest of you, fall out and return to your regular class schedule. Dismissed!"

A stunned silence followed as the other cadets hesitated, then began dispersing. Slaunder's posse exchanged furtive whispers and glances before they scurried off.

Commander Young waited until the last of the cadets walked out of earshot. Then, in a measured tone, he turned to them. "At ease. I'll get straight to it—you six will not be attending the graduation ceremony."

Confused glances shot between the cadets before Elizabeth Miller snapped to attention. "Sir?"

"Stand at ease, Miller. Let me explain."

Young continued, "You've been selected for immediate fleet assignment. Due to extenuating circumstances, command has chosen to accelerate

your graduation. You'll be on the next shuttle to the Forge, where you'll receive your final duty stations."

Miller stood at attention again, voice firm. "Sir, with all due respect, I must point out that Cadets Abbas and Chen are eminently qualified for fleet assignment. Cadet Petrov as well—"

Young raised a hand, cutting her off. "I made several of these recommendations myself, based on your academic and simulator scores. I don't agree with every selection, but I know how to follow orders." He arched a brow, his tone making it clear the discussion was over.

Miller hesitated, then squared her shoulders. "Understood, sir."

Young nodded and consulted his tablet. "When I call your name, step forward... Cadet Kim."

David stepped forward, standing at attention.

"Cadet Kim, you have been recognized as your class's top navigator. For your performance, you are awarded a meritorious commendation and hereby given the rank of Ensign in the ISA Combined Fleet. Congratulations."

Young handed him a small, polished wooden box containing his new collar insignia and shook his hand. David stepped back and they exchanged salutes before he returned to formation, his face shining with pride.

"Cadet Rodriguez."

Anna stepped forward, eyes locked straight ahead.

"You have been recognized as your class's top tactical specialist." Young glanced at his tablet again, then smirked. "Impressive scores, Cadet. You would have given Captain Armstrong a run for his money back when we went through the Academy together."

Anna's spine somehow straightened even more. A small, triumphant smile flickered at the edges of her lips before she forced it down.

"For your performance, you are awarded a meritorious commendation and the rank of Ensign in the ISA Combined Fleet. Congratulations."

She accepted her insignia with a crisp salute, face neutral, but the glint in her eyes betrayed her excitement.

One by one, Young called the other cadets forward, awarding each the rank of Ensign. Finally, only Ryan and Elizabeth Miller remained.

“Cadets Miller and Anders, step forward.”

They moved simultaneously, though Miller edged slightly ahead, positioning herself directly in front of Young. She wore a smug, expectant expression.

Young withdrew two additional boxes from his pocket and studied them both for a moment.

“Cadets Miller and Anders, you have both demonstrated exceptional performance in command simulations, survival training, and hand-to-hand combat.” He let the weight of his words settle before continuing. “Each graduating class produces one Lieutenant Junior Grade. However, this time command has made an exception.”

A beat of silence.

“Both of you will graduate with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.”

Ryan blinked, barely processing the words. Beside him, Miller stiffened. Her smirk morphed into a barely concealed frown.

Young handed them their insignia and gave a firm nod before snapping off a salute.

“Congratulations, Lieutenants.”

When they fell back into formation, Ryan felt like he was going to faint. The world seemed too bright, his vision swimming as he struggled. He forced himself to take a slow, deep breath, willing his pulse to steady.

Not being summarily expelled was unexpected, the promotion was shocking—but more than anything, it left him confused. He’d ranked second in the command simulator, true, but Elizabeth dominated the written exam with her encyclopedic knowledge of ISA Fleet regulations.

Now he was headed to the fleet as a Lieutenant JG? Was he delusional or was the other very large shoe about to drop?

“Now,” Commander Young continued, his voice cutting through Ryan’s racing thoughts, “fall out and return to your rooms to collect your things. A jumper will be standing by on the airfield to transport you to the spaceport at 0900 hours. Dismissed!”

The six cadets snapped to attention before pivoting sharply on their heels as a unit, heading toward the barracks and then naturally separating into their social groups with the pollys leading the way.

Slauder glanced over his shoulder at Ryan, making eye contact. A hard scowl drew down the sides of his mouth.

“Relax... Percival,” Ryan said. “I won’t make you salute me every time I see you.” Ryan gave him the biggest gloating smile, which caused Slauder to stomp off toward the chow hall without a word, fists in tight balls at his side.

“He looks really mad,” David said, absently flipping the lid of the small wooden box open and closed.

“Screw that guy. In an hour we’ll be on the way to the spaceport and he won’t matter,” Ryan said with bravado he didn’t feel. He probably shouldn’t antagonize someone like Slauder, but it felt good.

“Oh my god, Ryan,” Anna said, throwing a playful punch at his arm. “I mean—Lieutenant Junior Grade Anders.” She gave him a mock salute before turning to David. “Ensign.”

David relaxed a bit and returned the gesture. “Ensign.”

Ryan let out a half laugh, shaking his head. “I thought for sure I was getting booted... or arrested.”

“Me too,” David admitted, his shoulders tightening up again. “When he called my name, all I could see was my parents’ disappointment flashing before my eyes. I almost ran away.”

Ryan and Anna both did a double take, exchanging glances. David rarely talked about his family, and when he did, it was never with anything close

to sincerity. He assumed his parents were very strict from the few jokes David had made about his childhood.

As they made their way back to the main hall to gather their things, a quiet unease settled over Ryan. The promotion, the sudden orders, the way Commander Young had phrased things—it all felt off.

He couldn't shake the feeling that trouble was on the way.

Chapter 2

Three hours later, the newest members of the Interplanetary Security Alliance (ISA) Combined Fleet sat strapped into their seats, their old cadet insignia replaced with official ranks. As was customary, they traveled in their dress uniforms, everything they owned stuffed into a large black rucksack. The military shuttle hummed around them as it was slowly raised into launch position, the whine of hydraulic motors echoing through the cabin. A dozen or so other passengers—some in uniform, others in civilian clothing—were seated, scattered around the cabin, waiting in silence.

“Have either of you ever been to space?” David asked, gripping the sides of his chair so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Anna shook her head, glancing across the aisle where two of their classmates, Elizabeth Miller and her friend Maxime, were seated a couple rows ahead. They were giggling and chatting like middle schoolers on a field trip, oblivious to the fact that they were about to leave the planet.

“Looks like some of us have,” she muttered to herself, her eyes scanning the rest of the passengers before landing on Slaunder's rigid back at the front of the cabin.

Ryan remained silent, staring straight ahead. The hissing of cryogenic propellant loading faded, replaced by the groan of supercooled metal contracting. Then the cabin went quiet as the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom.

“We've been cleared for takeoff. Stand by.”

Ryan barely registered the words, lost in a memory he rarely allowed himself to revisit.

His tenth birthday. His mother had surprised him, taking a rare break from her job as a security officer at the Federal Employment Center. She'd arrived home with a hastily wrapped box and a huge smile. Inside was a model of the *NAF Columbia*, the battleship depicted in his favorite reality show, which would soon be christened as the first true battleship in the

North American Federation fleet. Young Ryan always dreamed of joining the fleet and captaining a ship just like it and spoke of nothing else but protecting the planet from real or imagined perils to the chagrin of his parents.

He wondered what changed; his mother had always discouraged the idea of him having anything to do with the military. She never spoke about her own time at the Academy—only that she'd dropped out before he was born. Whenever he brought it up, there was only sadness in her eyes.

That day, though, had been different. They played and laughed. His mother was beaming, beautiful and happy.

That night was just as perfect. She dimmed his bedside lamp the way he liked it—to a soft blue hue, almost as if he were floating below the sea, and the shadows swam by like fish as she sat stroking his hair.

"Follow your dreams, Ry," she'd said. Her voice was heavy with melancholy. "Join the fleet, go to space... get out of this place."

As she stroked his head, he drifted off to sleep, lulled by her hum. The melody was familiar. *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

That was the last memory he had of her. The last time he saw her smile. The last time she gave him a wink and a thumbs-up, just like the captain in that show he loved. Hours later, she was gone.

Blinking back his emotions rapidly, Ryan glanced up at the cabin ceiling and, as subtly as he could, gave his mom a thumbs-up, his hand trembling.

A moment later, the roar of the shuttle's engines reverberated through the cabin. The force pressed them deep into their thickly padded seats as the ship shot skyward.

Ten long minutes passed. The outside light dimmed, replaced by the harsh white glow of the cabin lights. The engines, which had been slowly ramping down, cut out entirely, and they found themselves totally weightless.

Through the small windows, a much larger craft loomed into view, casting a deep shadow over their shuttle. A metallic clank reverberated through the cabin, followed by a slight jolt.

“Capture complete,” the pilot announced.

A strange prickling sensation crept up Ryan’s legs. He strained against his seat belt, trying to figure out what was touching him, before realizing it wasn’t something external—it was the larger craft’s pseudo gravity field engaging. The sensation became strongest on his fingertips and lips, a peculiar, tingling pressure. He read about it before, but experiencing it firsthand was different. Judging by the looks on his friends’ faces, it was their first time too.

When the field stabilized, his hands dropped naturally to the armrests, as if gravity had finally remembered to pull them down.

“Weird,” Anna muttered, rubbing the back of her neck. She lifted her hand up and down experimentally, feeling the slight shifts in the field. Catching sight of Ryan’s slightly pained look, she leaned in. “You OK?”

He blinked, clearing his throat. “Strange feeling, huh? How long until we reach the Forge?”

David, seated closest to the window, croaked, drawing their attention. He looked a little green and was still gripping his armrests, staring straight ahead. “The... Forge is at the L1 Lagrange point, about... a million kilometers...” His voice trailed off, his breathing growing shallow. “...past the Moon...”

He froze.

Anna narrowed her eyes. “David. Breathe.”

He didn’t respond.

She reached into the seatback pocket in front of her. “Alright, maybe just take this.” She handed him a zero-g sickness bag.

David’s eyes widened in horror a split second before he grabbed it and promptly threw up his breakfast.

Ryan and Anna exchanged cringing looks as the sounds of David’s misery stretched on far too long.

Across the aisle, their other classmates had taken notice. Elizabeth was staring at them with barely concealed disdain, while her friend whispered something, giggling. Others in the cabin ignored the sound but mostly had gone quiet.

Ryan sat back and sighed. It was going to be a long trip.

#

Sometime later, a click and mechanical whir vibrated through the craft as external shutters slid down over the windows, locking into place. Another, even stranger, sensation washed over them as the large carrier vessel engaged its slip drive, accelerating the assortment of docked craft to nearly 700 kilometers per second.

Ten minutes later, the feeling subsided, and the shutters retracted. "Incredible," Anna whispered breathlessly, drawing Ryan's attention outside.

The large carrier craft had already passed the Moon's orbital plane, the cratered surface still visible in the distance as they decelerated. Another announcement from the cockpit was followed by a metallic clunk as the shuttle was released from the hauler.

The pilots expertly changed orientation and fired the main thrusters. Momentum caused the craft to slide sideways as it adjusted course, positioning the windows closest to Ryan and his friends directly toward the Forge. Ryan grabbed David's arm, causing him to open his weary eyes and take in the view.

It was the largest structure humanity had ever built. Officially called the Earth-Moon Assembly Platform, it was a titanic construct, its form vaguely resembling a colossal, mechanical mushroom. The upper dome-shaped section, composed almost entirely of solar collectors and reflectors, faced the sun, generating power for the massive foundries below while also providing shade to the lower station against the constant solar bombardment.

Beneath the reflectors, the station's core was a vast, layered structure. An immense scaffold ringed the midsection, allowing for the simultaneous

construction of several capital ships and smaller vessels. Below that, a central tower—resembling an inverted skyscraper—extended downward like a dagger, always oriented toward Earth.

Over the past two decades, the Forge had evolved from a simple orbital foundry into a sprawling construction hub. Initially tasked with producing hulls for the ISA Fleet, it had since expanded to accommodate corporations supplying the manpower and materials to complete those vessels. Now, it launched fully outfitted warships into service.

In its current form, the station was a self-contained city packed into a massive structure. It housed living quarters, lounges, shopping areas, green spaces, and even hotels for visiting family members. Most recently, the Interplanetary Security Alliance headquarters had relocated from Geneva, Switzerland, following the addition of twenty-five new decks to the station's lower levels. Altogether, the station was home to 12,000 permanent civilian and military personnel, all living and working together.

Ryan's sharp eyes picked out the shape of one seemingly complete vessel partially obscured by the scaffold. Its stern faced them, revealing a row of four engine nozzles.

“Which ship is that?” he asked, admiring the craft as their shuttle descended toward the station.

A man in civilian clothing seated in front of him turned, glancing between the seats. “That’s the *Cosmic Explorer*,” he said with a proud smile.

“Newest ship in the ISA Fleet. I worked on her, you know.” His tone invited further questions.

Ryan nodded but remained focused on the ship. Its silhouette didn’t match any ISA vessel he recognized. It looked almost civilian, except for the squared-off stern which was reminiscent of a destroyer or cruiser.

The man opened his mouth to say more but a commotion from the other side of the shuttle drew their attention.

The slow turn revealed an equally impressive sight: the battleship *Buenos Aires*. Hanging in the distance, it filled the shuttle’s windows with its imposing bulk. Boxy and angular, the ship wasn’t built for speed or beauty,

its form was pure function, a fortress of dull steel-gray armor plates wrapped around an equally dense superstructure. At the rear, six massive fusion engines sat buried within a broad, heavily armored aft section. Bristling with weapons and sensor arrays, the vessel carried a single vivid green stripe across its bow. Ryan couldn't make out the emblem from this distance, but the stripe was a dead giveaway: this was the pride of the South American Union. A huge smile bloomed on his face before he caught himself.

Buenos Aires was the third ship of the Columbia class, its structure nearly identical to the original, a design that deliberately echoed the massive, steel-plated warships of centuries past. Huge turrets were mounted in strategic banks across its surface, their enormous barrels visible even from this distance. But those were only the secondary batteries. The real firepower lay along the ship's centerline: four 120-centimeter main guns housed deep within the armored core, capable of punching through the thickest of warship armor. These were battleships in the truest sense, slow-moving behemoths clad in thick plating, designed to absorb punishment and return it a hundredfold with a devastating mix of guided missiles and direct-fire cannons.

As the shuttle moved into the station's shadow, another sight caught their attention—the immense docking section of the Forge. Ships and shuttles of various makes, sizes, and designs criss-crossed everywhere like bees buzzing around a hive. Several larger ships hung outside, tethered to the station by long docking arms, while smaller craft like their own fifty-person shuttle entered designated bays.

The shuttle touched down in one such bay, and a large door thudded shut behind them, allowing the space to pressurize. Once sealed, the inner doors opened, and the shuttle's landing gear locked into a mechanism in the deck that smoothly guided it into the vast hangar. The passengers stood, grabbing their bags as the shuttle finally stopped, then the port-side door swung open automatically.

Once they disembarked from the shuttle, Ryan, David, and Anna stood in awe at the sheer scale of the hangar. A dozen shuttles ranging from small personnel movers like their own, to big cargo craft occupied the bay.

Several gangways on the upper levels extended toward larger vessels, allowing direct boarding for the really big passenger liners and transports.

Above them, orange-white lights cast a diffuse glow, so high that the atmosphere blurred them at the edges. The sharp scent of machine oil, lubricants, and fuel hung thick in the air, carried by unseen currents.

A buzzer sounded as the mechanism attached to their shuttle rotated it back toward the airlock. Taking that as their cue, the three hurriedly followed the large yellow arrows painted on the floor toward the passenger terminal.

“Did you see which way Elizabeth and the others went?” David asked, shifting the weight of his large duffel over one shoulder.

Ryan and Anna shook their heads.

“Gotta be this way,” Ryan said, scanning the terminal ahead. “Look for an ISA desk.”

They wove through the growing crowd, passing clusters of people who seemed to naturally sort themselves by profession. Ryan took note of the emblems stitched onto their various uniforms—many bore the symbol of a hammer striking a star, framed by an outline of the station itself. Probably the Forge’s official insignia.

Workers in blue coveralls with red stripes carried tool bags and test equipment, one even hauling a power pack and welder over his shoulder—maintenance crew, no doubt. Others, clad in soot-stained khaki jumpsuits, bore a bucket emblem, likely tied to the massive industrial forges that gave the station its name.

Mixed among them were civilians, some likely workers returning from the Moon or Earth, others looking just as lost as Ryan and his friends. But what struck Ryan most was the absence of uniformed ISA personnel.

“There.” Anna pointed ahead.

A small manned kiosk stood near a row of snack vendors, a backlit triangular ISA emblem glowing above it.

As they approached, a somewhat rumpled petty officer looked up from his tablet. “How can I help you... sirs, ma’am?”

Anna stepped forward. “Hi, we were told to check in and get our final orders.”

“Huh, you’re the fifth group today.” The petty officer tapped at his tablet and began rattling off instructions with the weariness of someone who had repeated them a dozen times. “Report to the quartermaster on Deck 17 first. Once you get your PDDs, your orders and room assignments will be uploaded automatically. You can—”

“What’s a PDD?” Ryan cut in.

The petty officer exhaled sharply, clearly annoyed at the interruption. “Your Personal Data Device.” He held up his wrist, showing a wide black band. “Everyone gets one when they join their first command. Makes communication and getting around a snap.”

“Oh, of course.” David nodded, looking a little less green. “I’ve read all about those.”

Ryan smirked, briefly wondering where David had stashed his sick bag.

The petty officer had already returned to his tablet, barely acknowledging them.

“Uhh... that’s it?” Ryan prompted.

The man perked up slightly as if remembering something. “Oh, right. If you three need food or entertainment, the Level One promenade has just about anything—shopping, too.” Lowering his voice, he added, “If you need anything else... go to the Nebula and tell ’em Charlie sent you.” He winked at Anna.

“Thanks Charlie.” Ryan said, steering the others away.

Once out of earshot, David frowned. “What do you think he meant? Like drugs?”

“Drugs, sex, whatever.” Ryan shrugged. “You hang around enough seedy spots, you get to know how these things work. Our guy Charlie’s probably

got a deal with the Nebula—sends people their way, gets a little commission in return. Believe it or not, it's probably a decent place."

"Ewwwww." Anna wrinkled her nose.

"No, not like that. Maybe overpriced drinks for the tourists, but get in good with the owner, and it's the kind of place where you can get decent food, cheap drinks, and information. I'm telling you, bartenders can be your best friends if you ever need to know what's really going on."

The others looked skeptical, but Ryan made a mental note to check the place out when he had the chance.

After a bit of searching, they arrived at a massive elevator bank. Several other new ISA recruits were already waiting.

"He said Deck 17, right?" Anna pressed the already-lit call button.

Chapter 3

After hours of administrative runaround, and even more hours of checking into the ISA housing division, the exhausted trio met back on the main deck, having changed into more comfortable civilian clothing. After a short walk, they found a pod of chairs off to one side that had been placed there by one of the many corporate partners of the Forge. Above, a video screen played an endless loop of advertisements and snippets of news.

“How was your room?” Anna said, slumping down into the comfy chair.

The other two followed suit. “Actually decent, I can’t believe they assigned us singles,” Ryan said.

“You got a single room?” Anna pouted. “I’m stuck with two other ensigns... of course *you* get a single.”

“You’re lucky,” David said. “I’ve got three roommates.”

Ryan shrugged, leaning back in the chair, head rolling until he was staring straight up at the ceiling high above. For a few seconds he let himself just sit there, taking it in. Then he flicked his wrist and tapped his PDD. The screen popped awake with its usual flood of menus and links. He started scrolling, eyes skimming across page after page.

The Forge was set up like a small city. The main deck they were on now was like the main street of a small town. The cavernous space was at least four stories high and was a place where people gathered around commercial shops and services. Lining either side were stores, restaurants, bars, and all manner of entertainment.

When they first entered this space on their way to the housing division, none of them could believe the sheer scope of it, especially given that it was located on a space station so far from Earth. Anna was the first to notice that it actually had living plants and trees growing here and there. The ceiling was even made from high-definition panels that mimicked the day-night cycle of the station with various clouds flying high above.

At this time of day, the virtual sun had set with orangey red hues, giving the whole thing the feel of a small planetside town if you didn't look too closely.

"So, where did they say to report again?" Ryan said, struggling to navigate other menus on his PDD.

Anna tapped hers clumsily before finally answering. "It just says report to the Temporary Training Division on Deck 6 at 0700 tomorrow."

"Yes," David agreed. He swiped his PDD a couple more times before an icon lit on Ryan's PDD.

"You got the hang of that pretty quick," he said, opening the message.

"Looks like all us newbies are in the same division."

"When do you think we'll get our orders?" Anna said, still struggling.

"We find out tomorrow."

"I didn't see that anywhere," she said, giving up and letting her arm fall back to her side.

"Ryan?" a hesitant voice called out nearby.

The three friends looked over as one, spotting the young man in civilian clothing. Ryan, never good with names, took a second before pushing himself out of his chair and holding out his hand. "Marcus? Hey, man, good to see you."

To say that Ryan didn't know many people would be an understatement. His time at the Academy taught him to stay far away from anyone not named David or Anna. The one exception was Marcus Batista. He was a bottom tier polly from the class before theirs and had graduated weeks before. Even amongst the elites, he was sort of an outcast. From a middling family with no real political power, and he was a strange duck to boot.

They first crossed paths during a joint SERE training exercise. The upper-year cadets played the opposing force, tasked with tracking and capturing Ryan's class in the wilderness near the Academy. Not long into the exercise, most of Ryan's classmates were quietly granted the option to call a timeout, a privilege reserved for those with the right names and

connections. Only Ryan, Anna, and David were left in the game. That made them the foxes... and the hounds were all too eager to chase them down.

It was Marcus who found them and let them go for reasons Ryan still didn't understand.

"Hey, Marcus!" Anna said, holding out her hand as David did the same.

"Your class already graduated?" Marcus asked pointedly, as he shook their hands. He was about as tall as David, with about the same build. Ryan assumed he was in his early twenties like the rest of them, but he had a bearing that made him seem older.

Ryan was the only one who didn't seem to mind talking to Marcus. Both David and Anna had heard strange stories about him, rumors whispered by other cadets and even echoed by a few instructors. They said he was unlucky, often close by when something went wrong. A few even claimed he caused the accidents somehow. But Marcus had done Ryan a solid, and that counted for something.

"Nah, man, we graduated early. You're looking at Lieutenant Junior Grade Ryan Anders." Ryan smiled broadly, eliciting an eye roll from Anna. "We got bumped up with some others. No idea why, we haven't received our orders yet. Where did you get assigned?"

Marcus didn't seem fazed by the news of Ryan's promotion. "Oh, that's good. I'm a... I requested assignment to the *Rio de Janeiro*. I'm on third watch coms."

"Requested?" Ryan asked. "You can request a ship? I thought that was assigned by fleet."

Marcus shook his head. "No, anyone can request. Let me send you the link." He quickly swiped his PDD a few times and a chime sounded in Ryan's embedded earpiece, signifying the message.

The screen behind them flicked back to a news broadcast that Ryan did his best to ignore, but Marcus seemed immediately enthralled. Ryan turned, seeing the same report he had heard in passing. Two very attractive anchors were talking about a cargo craft that had been found after

disappearing a week before. The authorities were pinning it on a reactor accident.

“Ryan, I... well, I need to tell you something,” Marcus said, his voice a little shaky. He glanced around as if looking for an escape route. “I don’t know why, exactly, but when I saw you, I just had this feeling. Just... be careful, okay?”

Ryan tilted his head, watching Marcus flounder. His reputation for being strange certainly wasn’t misplaced, but he didn’t care. Still, something in his voice felt different, earnest, even anxious.

“Hey, I never got to say thanks for what you did in SERE,” Ryan offered, trying to lighten the mood. “You really saved our asses out there. We probably would’ve failed if not for you, right guys?”

Marcus gave a tight, uncertain smile. “Yeah. No problem.” He hesitated, then added, “Sorry to bother you,” before turning and disappearing into the crowd without another word.

“That guy is... weird,” Anna said, plopping back down into her chair. David nodded vigorously beside her.

“We all are.” Ryan shrugged. “Hey, look at this thing, he wasn’t kidding.”

Swiping his PDD, he sent the link Marcus had given him to the others.

“ISAPERF 203.5 Request for Posting or Reassignment.” He read the title before scrolling down to several pages of instructions.

“I don’t get it.” Anna looked dubiously at the form, which to her surprise looked legitimate and had very few caveats. “I thought all assignments were handed out by fleet... and if it was this easy, why isn’t everyone doing it?”

“Says here that you can request postings on heritage, family legacy, corporate citizenship, religious grounds, just about anything.”

“Ryan, we don’t have any of those things,” David said.

“Ah, but we don’t have to,” he said triumphantly. “There is no requirement that we submit supporting documentation. We can just request it. It’s all

automated by the system.”

He could see both of their expressions soften a bit. Ryan didn’t tell them Marcus was actually a legitimate heritage, as his family was from Brazil, but the way he figured, there was no way he was going to get an assignment on the *Columbia* going the standard route.

“Hey, it says here that we can submit them as a group. What do you guys say? Keep the band together?”

“Sure...” David said, waffling.

“You two would be lost without me.” Anna shook her head while starting to tap out her application.

“OK, send them to me when you get finished.”

Several minutes later, a couple notifications popped up and Ryan tapped the two applications, adding them to his submission. When he had the three bundled, he tapped “send” and got confirmation that they had been received. “OK, it’s asking which ship or ships we would like to be considered for.”

Neither of his friends had given much thought to ship assignments, assuming they would be put wherever the ISA needed them. Anna slumped back in her chair and blew a lock of hair from her face, tapping her fingers together.

“Umm,” she said.

“How about... the *Columbia*?” Ryan said, pretending to just throw it out there.

David’s head tilted to the side as if he were weighing the pros and cons of being on the fleet flagship. He also knew it was Ryan’s favorite even if he wouldn’t admit it openly. Anna gave a little nod before agreeing. Ryan took David’s noncommittal response as a yes.

“OK, *Columbia*,” he said, tapping the screen. “Maybe we should pick some backups?” After nobody raised objections, he scrolled and chose the *Seoul* and the *Buenos Aires*. He was gambling that submitting three applications

amongst the thousands of crew on each of the battleships wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

"Done!" Ryan said, tapping the send button, then closing the tab.

Ryan let out a long breath, the knot in his stomach loosening. A posting on the *Columbia*—his mom would've... He stopped himself, jaw tightening. No use going there. Shoving the thought aside, he pulled up the mapping feature on his PDD and searched for "Nebula," the bar the petty officer had told them about when they'd first arrived. It wasn't far, just a few minutes from where they sat. "Now, it's time to celebrate."

David yawned, stretching his arms above his head. "I don't know, we have an early morning. We should probably get some rest."

"What? Come on, we're on the Forge! The biggest space station in existence. Let's at least get something to eat. The guy said that our PDDs have full access to our accounts. I'm itching to spend some of that sweet ISA cash, so... first rounds on me?" He smiled, waiting.

"OK, how about first round AND dinner," Ryan proposed a few seconds later.

Both of his friends perked up.

He hadn't even checked his account for almost a year. When he had seen his first paycheck, he was floored by how much a cadet made. Growing up in the refugee camps skewed his concept of money, so he wasn't quite sure how to react to the windfall other than to ignore it. Both of his friends, however, sent almost the entire balance of their checks home as soon as they received them. He bet that they were supporting a dozen people between them—parents, siblings, extended family, maybe more.

Not long after arriving at the Academy, Ryan had tried sending money to his father, but the messages went unanswered. He told himself he'd look again on leave, but the camps weren't really home, and people there drifted constantly, chasing scraps of work. The closest he came was a week in a Seattle airport hotel, drinking and ordering room service, hoping his father might surface. He never did. Truth was, Ryan doubted he'd ever see the old man again, and wasn't sure he wanted to. His father had never

shown him much affection, even before his mother died. Afterward, he just... unraveled, vanishing for longer stretches until one day he didn't come back at all.

After hearing no other talk of calling it a night, Ryan popped to his feet and held out his hands. As both of his friends grabbed them grudgingly, he pulled them up out of their chairs. "I know the perfect place to start," he said with a big smile on his face.

The three walked like a group of tourists, doing everything but snapping pictures while making their way down the wide faux street of the Forge's main promenade. It was fairly crowded and only seemed to increase as the neon lights and shopping storefronts gave way to the "outdoor" dining areas of restaurant row. Owners of the various businesses had added small touches like lampposts, painted signs, benches, and even some fake animatronic birds. Ryan imagined that this was what one of those fancy theme parks must be like with a thin veneer of pretty eye candy slapped over the machinery that made the place run.

As they continued their journey, the restaurants gave way to nightclubs and bars. There were even some darkened side "alleyways" complete with shifty-looking characters and bouncers. Neither of his friends could figure out if it was more decoration or if these places really were as seedy as they looked.

#

Nearby, a small gathering of people chatted in lowered voices just to the side of a gaudy corporate nightclub; the low, muffled thud of the music they were blasting within could be heard half a block away. One figure took notice of the three walking by, his eyes locked on Ryan, following him and his friends till they moved out of view. Teeth clenched, Slaunder pivoted on his heel and walked away toward the main promenade, several of the others in the group calling after him.

#

“Down here,” Ryan said, studying the map on his PDD as he led them into one of the narrow, dimly lit alleyways. They passed what was unmistakably a brothel—holograms of men and women in barely-there outfits flickered in the air, beckoning passersby inside for a “drink.”

David drifted toward it like a moth to flame, but Anna caught his arm before he could veer off course and steered him firmly down the alley.

They passed several other establishments of unknown type before coming to the end of the alley where they saw a small wood paneled facade with a purple and pink glowing sign: Nebula.

“This place?” Anna said, crossing her arms, slowing slightly before picking up the pace to catch up to Ryan and David.

Ryan could feel his excitement growing like it did every time he went into a dive like this. He swung the door open, expecting to be greeted by a dozen hard-nosed characters who would all stop speaking and give him dirty looks. Instead, besides the bartender, the place was empty. David and Anna were hot on his heels and nearly collided with him as he stopped inside.

Ryan took a quick scan of the bar and wasn’t disappointed. The place was dimly lit, forcing his eyes to adjust for a second. The air smelled of stale beer, sweat, and what he guessed was machine oil. Like every dive bar from here to Washington state, the layout was familiar: well-worn booths lined two walls, their padded burgundy coverings scarred with gray-white slashes from years of abuse. Heavy tables clustered in small islands, leaving just enough room for foot traffic to reach the bar that dominated one side of the room. Near the back, a row of unmarked doors suggested bathrooms or maybe storage.

Behind the bar stood an older man with graying hair and a beard to match. His thick arms and barrel chest were inked with faded tattoos that blurred in the low lighting. A questionably clean, threadbare towel hung over his left shoulder. He hadn’t moved since they walked in, eyes fixed lazily on a newscast reporting a missing ship.

After a few moments, he spoke. “What can I get you three?” The low, gravelly voice startled Anna, who’d been moving in slowly, half convinced he was asleep on his feet.

Ryan made his way over, noticing a vague yet familiar stickiness to the floor.

“I’ll take a beer—whatever you got.”

“What about them?” the bartender said, still not turning from his news program.

“Make it three.” Ryan sat on one of the stools bolted to the floor and put his feet up on the railing near the base of the bar. Anna and David joined him on either side while the bartender finally moved from his spot, turning in their direction.

Ryan scanned the room, noting that if the place had ever been popular, that day was long past. Like the bar, some of the furniture was painted, textured metal made to look like wood, but other pieces were just bare metal. Some pieces were haphazardly painted, and everything was scratched or dented.

“Credits or chits?” the bartender grunted.

“Uh, credits?” Ryan held out his arm as the bartender waved a dirty white puck over his PDD, then turned to fill three questionably clean mugs and thumped them onto the bar.

“Oh, uh... Charlie sent us,” Ryan said as he grabbed his drink.

The bartender crossed his arms. “You don’t say. Well, if you see him again, tell him I still have that...” He stopped, lips tightening, then waved it off.

“Never mind. That doesn’t concern you.”

He studied Ryan for a moment, his expression shifting. “Academy,” he said flatly. “Guess you three are here for the simulator.”

Ryan had no idea what the man meant, but the mention of a simulator caught his interest.

“Don’t know why I let him talk me into buying that shit.” The gruff man paused for a moment, considering something. “Maybe I let you use it and you bring your Academy buddies here.” He pointed toward a nondescript door in the back wall of the room. “No freebies for them, but you can use it as long as you’re drinkin’.” He turned and went back to wiping glasses and watching his news program.

Intrigued, Ryan stood. “Sounds like a deal. What was your name again?”

“Robert,” the bartender said, not turning.

“Nice to meet you, Robert. I’m Ryan, this is Anna and David.”

He let out a grumble, picking up another glass.

Ryan shrugged, then gestured towards the mystery door. They grabbed their beers and all walked back, not quite sure what to expect. The door opened surprisingly smoothly on well-oiled hinges. Inside, a small hallway led to another door. As they opened it, lights started to snap on, revealing a clean, well-appointed simulator room. About fifteen feet wide and ten feet deep, there were four mechanized chairs built into the floor at the rear. Hanging on each chair were a set of clear wraparound AR glasses that looked like they’d never been used.

A chime in Ryan’s ear indicated “Nebula Simulator” attempting to pair with his PDD. He accepted and saw a menu pop up on his display.

“Ryan, look at the second page. Bridge simulator!” David said, having paired his own PDD.

Ryan grabbed the nearest set of glasses and put them on. The clear lens immediately showed the same menu as well as outlines around his hands. He took a long draw of surprisingly good, cool beer, then tapped the bridge simulator option.

“I guess we’re supposed to sit?” Anna said, taking a sip and sitting in one of the seats, which had a built-in cupholder. Her glasses were a bit oversized for her small face but adjusted easily. As she sat, the chair immediately started to shift position to Ryan’s left, eliciting a small squeak from the petite woman.

“I selected ‘tactical,’” she said, now scanning the room with a look of wonder on her face.

David jumped into the next chair, putting on the glasses, and started furiously swiping the air as his chair moved forward.

Ryan sat, selecting “captain” from the menu. As his chair slid smoothly forward, the world around him changed. Now instead of a nondescript beige and grey room, there was a high-resolution rendering of the bridge of a destroyer. To his left and a little forward of his position, Anna sat, looking slightly out of place in her civilian clothing. To Ryan’s right, David’s chair moved into the Navigator’s position. They all looked at each other, then back to their stations.

“Oh look!” she said, tapping the console in front of her. “I can feel the glass on this screen. The buttons feel real,” she said with awe.

They had used simulators at the Academy, but they must have been several generations behind the one at the Nebula. Ryan shook his head as he tapped his controls randomly. “This is going to be fun, but I think we’re going to need more beer... a lot more beer,” he said, draining the rest of his frosty mug in one long gulp.

#

At a small two-seat table in the heart of Restaurant Row, Elizabeth Miller absently swirled her drink, scrolling idly through the news on a sleek new tablet. Her fleet-issued PDD was adequate for navigation and messaging, but its design was awful, its holographic display too small for comfort—and worse, it was ugly.

Her classmate Maxime ran into some sort of housing issue, leaving Elizabeth with a few hours to spare. This place, she supposed, was the best she could do under the circumstances. Personally, she had eschewed the standard-issue accommodations for new arrivals and checked into a so-called well-appointed hotel that barely met her minimum standards.

A soft chime cut through the ambient hum of the faux street. Elizabeth glanced at her tablet, took a sip of her drink, and tapped the notification.

The message was from Lieutenant Jameson, a minor contact in Forge personnel, the sort of overeager social climber Elizabeth would never befriend under normal circumstances. Still, she'd proven useful.

Setting her drink down she scanned the message. There it was: the preliminary crew roster for the *Cosmic Explorer*.

She had hoped for a position on First Watch, but her mother's chief of staff had already warned her that the maiden voyage's principal bridge crew had been handpicked by the ISA's inner circle. Second Watch, however, was well within reach. A posting at the weapons control station for the shakedown would be more than respectable. With the right maneuvering, it could lead to a secondary command role within the year. Two, perhaps three tours, and she could be running the ship herself.

She filtered the list for bridge assignments and began scrolling. Her finger traced down the column, past one name after another until she reached the end.

Frowning, she scrolled back up, slower this time. Still no entry with her name.

She scrolled again. And this time, her breath caught.

Miller, Elizabeth, Bridge, Communications Specialist, Third Watch

She sat bolt upright, her drink forgotten.

"What on Earth..."

It had to be a mistake. She scrolled back to Second Watch, hunting for some sign of a clerical error. But what she saw next stopped her cold.

Anders, Ryan, Bridge, Weapons Specialist, Second Watch

Her pulse spiked. That post was hers. The notion that anyone else could take it was absurd, but a lottery pick? Impossible. The insult stung like a slap. No one rose that far without someone powerful dragging them upward.

For a moment, she simply stared at the screen, her expression unreadable. Then she reached for her drink with deliberate calm, the kind of stillness

that settles in just before a storm breaks.

"If it isn't our illustrious class leader," a familiar voice called from nearby. "I'm glad I ran into you."

Elizabeth blinked once, slowly, her gaze fixed on the tablet. "Ensign Slaunder."

Corporate candidates like him were mannerless to the point of offense, and she had no patience left. Her mother had exposed her to their type early, through fundraisers, galas, and diplomatic functions. She had watched them closely: always circling, eyes sharp behind counterfeit smiles, treating every introduction like a transaction. Unlike the political class, who cloaked ambition in subtlety and restraint, these boardroom brats were obvious, transactional to the bone.

Slaunder, as if on cue, took Elizabeth's greeting as an invitation and slid into the empty seat across from her.

"I'm surprised to see you here." He looked around, picking at the rolled napkin in front of him. A practiced smile played on his lips. "My father says the best place to eat on this dump is Stellaré. I can get you a private table there if you want."

"No thanks," Elizabeth said coldly. "What do you want, Slaunder." She put her tablet down on the table, careful to close the message, and picked up her drink.

He blinked, thrown off for just a second, then recovered with a tight smile. One hand casually swept back his carefully styled hair, the gesture more habit than necessity. "Right to business. I like that." He motioned to the server, who brought Elizabeth a drink earlier. "I'm working on a little project, and I need some... assistance from someone with ISA connections."

Elizabeth took a sip. "Why on Earth would I help someone like you?"

"Staying at the Spire?" He switched quickly; his predatory grin was back. "I know that place is nice enough."

The young server appeared at the table. "What can I get you, sir?"

Slauder looked at her like a piece of meat, his smile and wandering eyes made Elizabeth want to retch. "I'll take a glass of *Rubio7* on the rocks, darling," he said, adding a wink that earned a giggle and hair toss from the girl as she turned away.

Without missing a beat he turned back to Elizabeth, all smooth entitlement.

"I can get you a private apartment. Fully furnished with its own concierge." He tapped at his PDD. A glossy sales brochure blinked to life on her tablet without her asking.

Elizabeth didn't even glance at it. "Not interested."

"The job's simple," he said, pressing on as if she hadn't spoken. "You get the apartment for as long as you need. And I want Anders. Gone, out of the ISA for good. Arrested, if you can swing it. But gone."

There was a new sharpness to his voice, tight and focused. When he said the name, his expression twisted into something darker, almost feral.

Elizabeth's eyes flicked to his for the first time since he sat down.

Now he had her attention, and he knew it. His smile changed—not wider, but sharper, hungrier.

She paused as the waitress returned with Slauder's drink, her thoughts spinning. She didn't trust him, not even slightly, but she didn't have to. What mattered was that Ryan Anders had somehow bullied his way into her spot and was now standing firmly in her way.

"What's your name, cutie," Slauder said, interrupting her train of thought, grabbing the waitress by the wrist.

"I can make that happen," Elizabeth said, her voice sharp and deliberate.

Slauder's hand dropped away as the waitress retreated. His gaze snapping back to Elizabeth, still hungry, still watching.

"I'll message you when it's done..." she picked up her tablet and began scrolling.

“No,” he said quickly. “I want to be the one who does it.” He licked his lips. “I want to send the dumb idiot back to his nothing life.”

Elizabeth looked up, her eyes icy over the top of the screen. He flinched, just slightly.

“This isn’t how it works,” she said coolly. “I’ll set things in motion. When the time comes, he’s out. You can tell him whatever story makes you feel powerful.”

She returned to her tablet as if the conversation bored her, then added, almost as an afterthought, “Oh, and the rest of my things are with a porter at the dock,”

With a flick of her finger, she sent a message to his PDD. “See to it they’re delivered to my new apartment.”

She met his eyes one last time. “Goodbye.”

Slauder stood, his mouth opening and closing as if still assembling a reply. Then, without a word, he threw back his drink, slammed the glass onto a nearby table, and stalked off.

“Pathetic,” she muttered.

Elizabeth lifted a hand to signal the waitress. With Anders finally out of her path, her appetite had returned.

Thank you for reading this sample of Fleet of the Forgotten.

Ryan Anders has spent his entire life fighting for the chance to reach the stars. Now, just as that dream is finally within his grasp, someone is already plotting to take it away.

And far beyond the safety of Earth, something else is waiting.

Ryan’s journey is only beginning.

Keep reading to discover what happens next.