



"Thank you all for coming here on such short notice. I hope you all had a pleasant flight," said Ousha La Guilla, representative of Terra Force.

After the raid on the space station *Yakoura II*, a rescue team from the frigate *TF Antarctica* found La Guilla. She had suffered from internal hemorrhaging, broken ribs and her left leg was shattered. The doctors, onboard the frigate, were able to save her upper leg, but the rest had to be replaced with bio-droid components.

Once back on Earth, La Guilla immediately called for an emergency meeting with the Terra Force United Council, the advisory council to the Terra Force United Supreme Senate, to discuss the viscous attack. She had learned from witnesses how Mikiyaka Oshiro, ambassador of the Far Station Cluster, had blasted his way out of the station a few minutes before the attack. Her suspicions were confirmed when the remains of a launch site were found on the asteroid Deimos that clearly belonged to the Far Station Cluster.

"I have requested this Council to join today to hear my plead. 'They' have really gone too far this time," La Guilla said angrily. "Tomorrow, I will also address the United Supreme Senate and to insist on declaring war on the Far Station Cluster! We have lost many valuable lives to these raids and I draw the line here, today." She took a moment to let her words echo. She looked in the eyes of the Council members sitting in front of her. "General Stone was a very good friend of mine and therefore I take this personal. I will dedicate my efforts to end this situation.

La Guilla's emotional speech had its effect on the crowd. She had never let her emotions take over at any official gathering. Everybody started talking loudly to each other and yelled at her.

"This is unacceptable, Madam La Guilla," said Bruce Hunt, head of Commerce & Industry. "They have not claimed the raid, yet. Until they do, if they do, we have to maintain the trade agreements with them, for we depend on their produce. We..."

"Do we really?" La Guilla interrupted. "I suggest we give the independent miners the status they want and we will trade with them instead."

"With all do respect, Madam La Guilla," responded Hunt, "but our own miners will not accept any bargaining with the independent miners. There have been many incidents in the past between them. I strongly recommend we send a delegation to the Far Station Cluster to negotiate a truce between us. Whether we like it or not, the trade route is one of our most important resources. I think you should set your emotions aside and accept the situation."

Hunt sat back down in his seat and became aware of the silence in the room. The other members held their breath, as they were surprised, yet intrigued by his straightforwardness.

Zachary Dunn tried to open his eyes slowly, blinking his burning eyelids. He struggled to separate his consciousness from the echoes of his sleep. He propped himself on his elbows, to have a better look at his surroundings. The stinging in his side reminded him of the attack on the *Yakoura II* and the shootout in the corridor. This was the second time he had lost his consciousness, but this time he was completely lost. He was lying in a small bed in the corner of a scarcely lit room. Apart from a chair and a small table it was empty. On the table stood a glass and a pitcher with water. The low pulsating hum told him he was onboard a space vessel. He slowly sat upright and placed his feet on the cold floor. The pain in his side wasn't as bad as he remembered and he lifted his shirt to look at his wound. A long scar ran from his hip up to his chest. The skin was healing, showing the apparent work of a skin tissue regenerator. He tried to stand up, but halfway in the process his legs folded under the weight of his body. The tingling in the unwilling weak muscles of his body meant only one thing: the soldiers on the *Yakoura II* had used a stungun.

Terra Force had abandoned stunguns years ago. They were modified and a weaker version became available on the open market. Many shipments were sold to the merchants and cattle traders. These troopers must have reversed the modifications, because it clearly had stunned him good.

He crawled back on his knees and headed for the table. His throat felt sore and he could use a drink of water. When he had finally seated himself in the chair, the door slid open and a tall slender man in a black uniform entered the room.

"Good afternoon," the man said.

"Where am I?" Dunn asked after taking a drink of water.

"That is of no concern to you at this moment. We are going to..."

"Where am I," Dunn asked again gritting his teeth and stared at him.

"Now, now, Mister Dunn. No need to get hostile. There is plenty of time to tell you all about where you are, whom we are and what's going to happen to you. First, we must get you dressed and ready for interrogation. If you..."

"Drop dead. I'm not answering any questions until you tell me where I am."

The man turned to the bed and placed a stack of clothes on it.

He faced Dunn and said, "Put these on and follow me."

Dunn remained on his chair and grabbed the glass to drink some more water.

"As you wish," the man said.

He stepped towards the door and signaled two armed men waiting outside the room. They came in and grabbed Dunn by the arms. He tried to resist, but his weakened body was no match for them. He cursed and shouted in objection while they dragged him out of the room into the hallway. He bit one of the arms that held him and he received an unexpected hard kick in his face in return. Warm blood oozed out of his nose and dripped from his lips.

"Gentlemen, please be careful with our guest. We don't want anything to happen to him, yet. Mister Oshiro will not be pleased if we screw up."

Many hours after returning to her house in Tampa, Florida, Joanna Brooks lay in her bed with her fiancé, unsuccessfully trying to get some sleep. Thousands of things ran through her mind. Nikki, her cat, was sleeping on her usual spot at her feet.

Outside, she heard a Fast Hover Shuttle roar by the building. Over Tampa Bay large amounts of atmospheric energy were released. Streaks of lightning ripped through the clouds, followed by loud thunder. The storm headed towards the city and she hoped it wouldn't keep her awake until morning. It had started to drizzle and Nikki woke up when it thundered nearby. She yawned intensely and stretched her paws, opening her little eyes and looking at Joanna. She perked her ears, when she saw Joanna was still awake.

Joanna's body jerked when a bright lightning flash, directly followed by thunder, illuminated her bedroom. The flashing and rumbling made her relive the attack on the *Yakoura II*.

She remembered hearing the impact of the torpedoes and the collapsing of the bulkheads in the corridor. Dunn had screamed at her to head for the center of the station to provide medical aid to the station's guests.

Running through a wide corridor, she heard the action outside through her intercom. When she turned a corner a small group of people ran towards her, clearly in panic. The hallway reeked of burned circuitry from the ion torpedoes and the paneling behind the fleeing crowd was in flames. They yelled at her that the passage was blocked and they were going around the next elevator shaft to get to the shuttlebay. She followed them through several dark corridors when a nearby explosion shook the station. Everybody dropped to their knees and protected their heads from debris flying around. The first blast was quickly followed by another explosion just behind them. The bulkheads collapsed, creating a large hole in the outer hull. The corridor began depressurizing. Paneling and debris was sucked out into space. Before she could respond Joanna found herself being pulled towards the hole. While holding on to the wall, she managed to pressurize her jumpsuit and place the oxygen mask on her face. She turned her head and saw two people desperately trying to grasp for something to hold on to. As all oxygen escaped from the corridor, they could not stay conscious and Joanna watched them being sucked into space. She had seen these horrifying events before during previous space battles. But this was different. Here civilians died helplessly, completely at the mercy of outer space. Joanna heard more explosions, but didn't feel them. Realizing the sounds of these bombardments came over her intercom, she hoped it was retaliation from Dunn and the rest of Team Red and Gold. She screamed their names to contact them, but nobody replied. Suddenly a vessel roared by the hole outside and another in pursuit firing at the first. Flashes from its disruptor cannons illuminated the corridor and Joanna held her breath when she was briefly able to see more around her. Nobody in this corridor had survived. Lifeless bodies soaring and drifting, crystallized blood escaping from collapsed lungs. The next thing she remembered was waking up in thermogel onboard the *Antarctica* forty hours after the attack.

"Yes?" said Mikiyaka Oshiro, turning his head towards the holoscreen.

"Your guest will arrive at bay fifteen in subsection three. ETA ten minutes," replied the operator.

Oshiro leaned back in his chair and looked up to see the stars through the transparent dome of his compartment. He could see the surface-side stations on Callisto through the window in front of him. Oshiro smiled, because he felt confident. Confident about his plans and the relations between him and the people he surrounded himself with. People like the arriving guest.

Oshiro stood up from his chair, grabbed his black robe, and walked to the door after he had locked his computer console. He didn't want anybody to get access to any sensitive information present in his system.

Information that could get him banned from this civilization. And banned meant imprisonment on a moon on the other side of Jupiter, execution or worse: sent back to Earth. He walked through one of the long and narrow support beams that held the command station together. He had been looking forward to this moment for many years, a moment of answers, and a moment of truth. He would sacrifice anything to get what he wanted from his guest.

Five minutes later he walked up to the airlock of shuttlebay fifteen. In the distance he saw a shuttlecraft approaching the station. Only its blinkers were visible, but he knew it was them.

"Come to me, my old friend," Oshiro whispered to himself, "I've been waiting for you too many years. You owe me this after what you've done..."

The shuttlebay trembled briefly as the shuttle attached itself to the outer airlock coupling. Oshiro stepped back as the airlock cycled, hissing loudly when it opened the safety doors. Excitedly he balled his fists and gritted his teeth. A tall slender man in a black uniform stepped out of the airlock and turned towards Oshiro. "Welcome, Mister Tagoya. Have you brought my guest?" Oshiro asked eagerly.

"Of course, Oshiro San," the man replied, gesturing to the shuttle.

Two armed men stepped into the shuttle bay holding a wounded man between them.

"Welcome my old friend," Oshiro said almost joyfully.

"Fuck you, you bastard. You're going to pay for this," said the wounded man.

"How can I simply accept the situation if people are killed around me. Innocent people, mind you, " said Ousha La Guilla in response to Mister Hunt's bold statement.

Hunt stood up, pointing his finger at La Guilla, clearly losing his temper. "Going to war with another civilization based on emotional grounds and personal beliefs are in direct violation of law and order of the Terra Force society. You will never get this passed the Senate if you can't present facts or evidence beyond reasonable doubt."

Dregga Ponti Magenti, head of the Security Agency spoke directly into his microphone, connected to his collar. With a calm and low voice he said, "Madam La Guilla, I totally agree with Mister Hunt. Drastic measures, such as vengeance and war, are not presently at hand. I will see to it personally that in two hours a delegation will depart to meet with the ambassadors of the Far Station Cluster. I will send our people to Jupiter if necessary."

La Guilla turned to the rest of the United Council and said, "Does everybody feel the same way as Mister Hunt and Mister Ponti Magenti?"

The crowd kept silent and people moved nervously in their chairs.

"Fine. I thank you all for coming," La Guilla looked around and saw people evading her eyes, "I have no further business to discuss with you here. I wish you all pleasant evening."

La Guilla grabbed her cape and walked out of the room, leaving the rest baffled at her sudden retreat.

La Guilla took the elevator to the upper levels of the building and headed to her personal shuttle. Five minutes later she headed to the downtown area of New Chicago. She was hailed by Terra Force Space Control Center and entered her authentication codes to get access into the restricted fly zone. After a short pause a soft beep told her she was authorized to proceed. She entered her destination and the shuttle directed itself to her apartment on the east side of the city. The lights of the city reflected on the base of the clouds and turned them into a warm blur of gray, orange and yellow. Hundreds of little shuttles crowded the skies like bumblebees flying around their hive. It was a busy evening. She slowed the shuttle down to eighty miles an hour and she shortly arrived at the shuttlebay.

When she entered her apartment she asked her home-unit to contact Jack Raman, secret agent for the SA. Meanwhile she took off her cape, dress and boots and slipped into a comfortable robe. The screen of the communication console activated when Ousha sat down on her large couch. A man came into view.

"Hello Jack," La Guilla said.

"Good evening, Ousha. What can I do for you?" he replied.

"I have just met with the United Council to discuss the attack on the *Yakoura II*. I hold the Far Station Cluster responsible. This has got to stop, Jack."

"What did the Council say?" Jack asked, lighting a cigarette.

"They disagree and want to send a delegation to meet with the Cluster's ambassadors. They said I couldn't provide evidence that show it was the Cluster who attacked the station.

"Well, I can't quite disagree with the Council there, Ousha."

"I know Jack. But it pissed me off to see them handling this so calmly and passively. I want to take action. And that's why I'm talking to you know," she said moving herself to the edge of the couch, "A few..."

"Uh-oh. I don't know if I can help you, my dear," Jack interrupted.

"Listen to me. A few operatives from Team Gold and Red are missing. I believe that they were taken onboard one of the shuttles that attacked us. I have looked at the classified logs of the astro-sensor scopes, which I received from a person inside Space Control. Two shuttles headed towards Waypoint Eight where they connected with a larger space vessel, which then headed to Jupiter two hours later..."

Well, you know that Terra Force can't monitor vessel movement past Waypoint Eight. So, there is no telling where the shuttle was heading or what its destination was. Look, I will contact my people on the GMTC

and see if I can find you some clues, okay? If I find something I will let you know immediately. If the Cluster really took some of our people, they better prepare for war. The Senate won't go to war with them based on the current information, but if we can locate the operatives or find people who know where they are, the Senate will respond accordingly. I'm sure of that. Until that moment I suggest you rest and let me handle this for you, okay?

La Guilla looked at her hands, sighed and said, "Okay Jack, you win. You always win."

"Look, I have to go. I will talk to you later, bye!" said Jack and the screen turned to idle-mode.

When Joanna woke up the following morning she realized that nobody from Security had contacted her in the past three days; not even a word from her team members.

She turned around to find her fiancé, but had already left for work. She closed her eyes to consult her datacrystal and accessed the personnel files at the Security Agency. All files of Team Red and Gold were locked under status 'missing in action', except her file and that of Sergeant Iaku. She decided to go to SA's head office in Geneva, Switzerland and find out what had happened to her team and what SA plans to do with her.

Twenty minutes later Joanna left her apartment and walked over to the nearest taxi shuttle platform. Ten minutes later she arrived at the commuter ferriesport where she booked a flight to Switzerland and left a message to her fiancé that she had gone to SA's head office and that she would return the next day.

During the flight she accessed every file and log she could find concerning the attack on the *Yakoura II*. It worried her that all the logs of the team members stopped adding entries seventeen minutes after the attack started. Usually datascrystals don't stop of fail logging events unless some special device disables them. Soldiers from the Cluster don't have access to this kind of equipment.

At the ferriesport in Geneva she is welcomed by SA staff and taken to the head office where she is asked to wait in the lounge. There she prepares her meeting with team's ops chief instructor. Half an hour later the instructor approaches her.

"Welcome, Miss Brooks," he said, extending his hand.

"Thank you, Sir."

"How can we help you? It is quite unusual for an team op to visit our office here voluntarily," he said as he gestured her to an elevator.

"I have come to find out what happened to the team members present at the *Yakoura II*. It concerns me that..."

The instructor interrupted her, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Miss Brooks, but these files remain classified until the investigation is complete. This matter has severe interplanetary consequences. We do not wish to rush anything and bring more complexity and tension to this situation. I hope..."

"I respect the delicacy of the situation, Sir, but what are my orders?" Joanna asked, clearly irritated about the instructor's diplomatic response.

"I'm afraid that you are to remain standby at your residence until you are reactivated for duty," he replied.

"What?!" Joanna said, raising her voice, "What do you mean *standby*? I want to contribute to resolving this matter and search for the ops!"

"We appreciate your effort, but we can't have you or any other ops officials involved if..."

"I'm already involved!" she roared.

"Please, Miss Brooks, try to remain calm. I'm sorry that you had to come here, but all you can do for us is go home and await our orders." he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. When Joanna motioned it off her shoulder, the instructor to a small step back and said, "Thank you for coming here, Miss Brooks. Now, please go home. That's an order."

Joanna snapped at his words and raised her hand to salute the instructor, "Yessir!"

"Well, well, Mister Dunn, we finally meet eye to eye," said Oshiro.

Zachary looked around him, still puzzled about where he was, "Where am I and what the hell am I doing here, you piece of..."

"Now, now, Zach. May I call you Zach?"

"Damn you, Oshiro. If I get my hands on you I'll seriously hurt you," Dunn said, gritting his teeth. His eyes burned with anger. He had been held captive for weeks in a dark room onboard a ship. The wounds on his face had started to heal, but were still quite visible.

"Welcome to my humble quarters onboard command station Q-11a. Welcome to the Far Station Cluster.

"Why am I here?"

"Well, Zach, to be very straightforward, you know something. You have strategic information that I need," said Oshiro while he looked at Dunn.

Oshiro leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees. His long black hair fell down from his shoulders like a curtain. He folded his hands and let his chin rest on them; his broad cheekbones, chin and nose protruded from between his hair.

"You know I don't have a clue what you are talking about," said Dunn, shifting in chair. His hands were restrained with cuffs that contained small thermal detonators, triggers by breaching the seal.

"Remember the Saturn Operation?" asked Oshiro, raising his eyebrow.

"Yes, I do. What about it?"

"During this operation your recon team made some very astonishing discoveries. I have been digging into data files when I had finally succeeded in hacking into the Data-Construct. But I never actually found the details of that discovery. I knew it was very important, or else Terra Force would never have put so much energy into hiding the facts." Oshiro eagerly waited to see Dunn's response.

"I still don't know what..." started Dunn.

"Oh, come on! You know, you idiot!" roared Oshiro. He had a very short temper and was about to loose it, being so close to getting the last pieces of the puzzle. "You know. I see it in your eyes. You can't lie to me. I will sit here and wait till you tell me what I want to know. I have all the time I need, but my patience will run out. And then..."

"Then what? You're going to kill me?" said Dunn. He rose to his feet and looked down at Oshiro.

"Ooh no, Zach, not really. I'll enjoy hearing you scream and beg until your volunteer to give me everything that I want," Oshiro grinned.

Dunn glanced down at his cuffs and looked at the structure around him. Oshiro quickly understood Dunn's reasoning.

"Oh no you don't," he said and disabled the detonators on the cuffs with a remote control.

Oshiro was prepared for Dunn's response. Dunn jumped to his feet with catlike reflexes and attacked Oshiro, reaching for his throat.

The following morning La Guilla expected a message from Jack Raman. She only found some messages from several United Council members, pleading La Guilla not to address the Senate. After La Guilla had taken a warm steambath, she sat down on her large sofa. She always sat there when she was interacting with the Data-Construct. She was determined on finding the clues to the current crisis situation. She found that 3 SA Officials from Team Red and one from Team Gold had survived the attack on the *Yakoura II*. Her plan was to contact them first and move on from there. She contacted Captain Fisher from Team Red and invited him to her house. His wife rejected her offer. Fisher was still recovering from his severe injuries. She promised to contact her when Fisher was conscious and able to speak again. She left a message for the two other Team Red members, but no response. Finally she contacted Joanna Brooks from Team Gold. When Joanna responded, La Guilla turned on her conference screen and closed her connection with the Data-Construct.

"Hello Miss Brooks, " said La Guilla, facing the screen.

"Good Morning, Madam La Guilla," Joanna greeted onboard the ferryshuttle that took her back to Florida.

"This is a secured line. Am I calling you at a convenient moment?"

"Well, I am returning from the SA's head office. I am very glad to see that you have survived," Brooks said, speaking into her holopad on her wrist.

"So am I, my dear," La Guilla said, allowing herself to smile, "Do you have any contact with the other ops?"

Brooks shook her head, showing disappointment and frustration, "No, I don't. I was trying to find out what has happened to them, but SA wouldn't tell me anything."

"That is outrageous!" hollered La Guilla, "I can understand diplomacy or censorship to the media, but holding back information from an Official like you. Absolutely ridiculous!"

"I agree, Miss La Guilla," Brooks said, "I have a right to know where they are. I want to take action, but I don't know where to start."

"I do, Joanna," said La Guilla. Her voice had changed. She sounded a mischievous and cunning. "I've had contact with someone inside SA. We are working on a covert plan to get the facts, but most important: get our people back home!"

---- *End of episode 2* ----

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