

Chapter 2: Top of Her Class

"Captain Sorensen is honored in history by his ultimate sacrifice: Fighting to the death, with five to one odds, his battle remembered by his ingenuity, tactics and perseverance. A sacrifice that only put fear into the enemy of what was to come."

- **Fleet Admiral Ellison**, on remembering *Ansell's Sacrifice* at his inauguration speech in SY 2168.

Sol Year 2193

"... and so all of you, the next generation of Captains and Commanders hold the responsibility of keeping our civilians safe, our borders secure." Chief instructor Maxwell continued, "I hope to see all one hundred twenty-eight of you succeed in sustaining your warships and crew with smart and informed decisions beyond what your superiors may have indicated in a crisis situation."

The great auditorium of the Command Academy was nearly full, with twelve rows facing the podium against a grand view of Olympus Mons, the tallest mountain on Mars. Over a dozen instructors and Academy representatives, along with the guest speaker, were seated facing the twelve rows where the graduates sat.

Soraya Madani was seated in the second row, with eight others who were considered the top of their graduating class. On the first row, there were another six graduates, considered to be the elite of the group. Soraya should have been on that first row. But she did not have the naval pedigree as those in front of her -- her family came from a line of business people with no connection history with the navy. She was just as good or better than any of these 'elites', some of whom were Admiral's sons or daughters.

The Commodore's long winded speech was coming to an end. "And for our keynote speaker, welcome Vice Admiral Kurosawa to the podium." The graduates applauded as the Vice Admiral stood up and walked to speak.

"Thank you Commodore, it is an honor to come here and see the new faces that will become the future heart and soul of the Sol Imperial Navy. I am sure training has been hard, and you have become the best of what the academy has to offer. However, I'm not here to give you another farewell speech, but to break the hard reality to you. Look to the graduate sitting next to you on your left." The students awkwardly turned to their classmates, those sitting on the left side of the rows looking confounded. "Now look to the graduate sitting on your right." The students followed his commands. Soraya nodded to her classmate Antonio sitting on her right. "Odds are one out of three of you will likely perish in an engagement with the Genari within the year."

There was rustling and whispering in the audience, some visibly shaken by his statement. The Vice Admiral took his time to let what he said sink in, surveying the graduates in front of him.

Soraya didn't flinch. Her classmates may be officer material, but many would undoubtedly break under pressure. She also knew how the graduates would get assigned; it was a common understanding on how things worked in the Navy.

Most of the rows above her would be commanding Corvette class warships and smaller Escorts – considered to be experience-builders for new Captains. Her row would be most likely assigned to a Frigate-class, which was definitely sturdier and the most common ship of the fleet. And at least in a Frigate she had a fighting chance. The 'elites' would probably end up becoming first officers under flag captains or command Destroyers on

their own. What a waste of her command ability that she wouldn't have access to a much stronger fighting vessel that played a more significant role in this war.

Continuing off his somber note, Kurosawa said, "Despite our advances into Genari territory, casualties have been rising. We have the technological advantage, but the Genari are bred for war. They are a fearless fighting force, and their suicide Marine assaults balance out their dated technology. Our incursion into several Genari-held regions has only increased their determination to take these regions back. Their commanders cannot be underestimated, and have learned new ways to counter our fighting forces. Those of you who may end up on the Genari front must adapt to their constantly changing tactics, or find yourself outwitted and outmatched."

One thing was true: Genari fleets tended to have better unit cohesion, usually working together in groups of three warships, with tactical command given to a single Captain, usually called a Force Commander. Sol Navy doctrine was somewhat different; each Captain did what they felt best for their ship, and only worked loosely with their comrades.

Kurosawa continued, "Our scientists are constantly improving our force field and plasma weaponry, while we have seen no signs of breakthroughs by the Genari in that field, or on ion drive technology. If they do eventually implement this technology to their warships, the Sol Imperium could find itself on the losing end of this war."

The Vice Admiral was a diminutive man, but a tactical genius: Soraya had a lot of respect for his position. It was well known that he was the real brain behind some of the larger victories in pushing back the Genari. He had masterminded several successful campaigns in taking strategic Genari sectors, creating a buffer zone to Sol Imperial Worlds' home regions, especially Vega. The Fleet Admiral took the overall credit, of course, but he was more a spiritual leader to the military population than the decision maker.

"We've had a few incidents where some of our smaller warships were commandeered by their marines. They were probably taken back to their scientists for reverse-engineering." The Vice Admiral said, "Fortunately, none of these ships carried ion-based dark matter drives, or plasma based weaponry. That is just one reason why young inexperienced captains like you do not start command with the newer, larger warships. You will earn them with experience in the field."

Soraya considered his words. If there was anyone who could show the Vice Admiral exemplary abilities in the field, it would be her. She was a quick learner, and shown time and again in war simulations against her classmates that she was a better captain, whether in single one and one ship combat, or in fleet actions. Though she had never met Kurosawa in person, she vowed to herself that she would end up on his radar.

Kurosawa began ending his speech. "I apologize for this rude awakening, but it will be a matter of weeks before you settle into your new command and get acquainted with your crew. Your decisions can make the difference between life and death of hundreds under your command. It will no longer be a virtual experience, or a simulation, or a cruise between Sol and Alpha Centauri."

"In conclusion, remember that every one of you *will* have an important role in the Sol Imperial Navy. Ysuperior's roles in deciding your missions are not chosen by happenstance. Be a strong leader amongst your crew, make them look up to you, make them respect you. And never forget *Ansell's Sacrifice*."

The Vice Admiral left the podium, with the students clapping and repeating '*never forget*'. Soraya whispered the words, but her mind was more on when and where she would have her first tour of duty. The Commodore came back to the podium to announce the end of the graduation ceremony, and that their datapads would be relaying information about their assignments in the next few minutes. Students began to stand up and murmur amongst each other, but she stayed seated with her eyes glued to the screen. A message popped up, titled 'New Assignment', from Commodore Maxwell. Impatiently, she opened the message and read the contents.

"Captain Madani, congratulations on your successful completion of the Command Academy with high honors. It is my pleasure to announce that you have been assigned command of the Frigate *S.I.N. Schofield*. You will be transferring to the Proxima Cygni shipyard where your ship will be waiting for you. You will then receive your first assignment to region HN23 where Commodore DeWert will go over your mission parameters. You are likely to be involved in combat situations rather quickly, but as one of our top graduates, I am assured you will handle it well. Best of luck to you, and may you have a long and successful career in the Sol Imperial Navy."

Soraya was not disappointed -- but not entirely satisfied either. Though Proxima Cygni was a major strategic point for the war against the Genari, Vega was where most of the action was. And region HN23 was several light years from the Genari front, and saw little Genari activity from what she knew about the area. Instead, she would be very close to the Helix Nebula, where very likely she would be on border patrol for contraband going in and out of the Helix. Whether it was in her best interests or not, she would have been happier with an assignment on the war front. Listening to some graduates near her, at least she didn't get the command of a Corvette in a completely uneventful area like Sirius, where it was more about 'security theater' for civilians where she'd never have a chance of a forward-moving career. She laughed to herself when some of her classmates were actually *relieved* that they were assigned to some safe zone away from having any chance of engaging Genari.

She then went to the ship details -- scrolling to the *Schofield's* classification page. An *Oslo*-Class Frigate -- one of the oldest frigates in service. Not what she hoped for. Powered by four McKellan Engineering SIWFHD-4A heavy fusion drives, the ship was relatively slow and lacked maneuverability. At least it was heavily armored. Its armament was tolerable; four Nakabyashi SIWLB-8 laser beam weapons. She would have preferred more accurate, plasma based weaponry. At least on the defensive side, it had a Musashi Technologies SIWFF2-2 second level force field system. The force field would be able to absorb one or two heavy hits with half the cost in power. She was not delusional though; her ship would not be able to stand toe to toe against a Genari Destroyer, let alone their Capital Ships.

Leaving the auditorium, distracted with thought, she vaguely responded to queries and conversations other graduates were directing to her about her assignment and headed directly to the Vice Admiral. He was swarmed with graduates, and was busy talking to two Elites. Even the Commodore and the other instructors attending were in conversation with some of her classmates. It seemed that while she was preoccupied with her mission information, everyone else had moved to talk to the Academy staff. She noticed one of the Elites, Sharif Soulav, standing alone, reading info on his datapad. She approached him to pass the time. "Hey Sharif, congrats. What does your assignment look like?"

"It's pretty interesting, I'm supposed to shadow Captain Faulkner of the Cruiser *Yosemite* as his First Officer. I'll be heading out to Vega tomorrow morning and getting another briefing there." Sharif replied. "How about you?"

"Not as exciting as yours, Sharif. I'll be stationed near the Helix, commanding my own ship." Then she added, with a hint of pride. "It's a Frigate, the *Oslo* Class." Even though Sharif didn't have a command of his own, working as an exec on a flagship cruiser with an experienced Captain led to a lot more opportunity down the line.

After some small talk with Sharif, her chance came to talk to Kurosawa. "Admiral, it is an honor to meet you." She shook his hand.

"Thank you Captain Madani, and congratulations on your new command. Where have you been stationed?"

"Region HN23." Soraya was surprised he knew her name, and pronounced it properly. The Vice Admiral thought for a second. "That is under DeWert's jurisdiction, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. My concern was that I would not be on any of the active Genari fronts. I would have preferred a position there." Soraya understood that it was unlikely that she'd get a change made in her assignment, but she had to try.

"Ah, you're the sort of graduate who wants to jump in the fray. What makes you think you'll see no action around region HN23?"

"Well sir, I expect nothing more than illegal trade runners and a few lost freighters in that region."

"Remember what I told your class. You've all been stationed with all your attributes and potential command abilities in mind. I assure you that your tour of duty there will be more active and dynamic than you think." He then turned to the next graduate waiting to speak to him.

Soraya was uncertain what to think. She had finally talked to Kurosawa, someone who she admired and respected, but the conversation had ended too quickly. But what did she expect? He would cater to her requests? She could hear others come to the Admiral or the Commodore with requests to change their assignments. Did she end up sounding like just another complainer or insubordinate to Kurosawa? With those thoughts, she left the academy hall, and went to her quarters. The next morning, she would be taking a shuttle out to Proxima Cygni, which she later found out, with eighteen other classmates taking assignments around the region.

Later that evening, in her private quarters, there wasn't much else for her to do but pack; in the anticipation of her departure out of the Sol system she wasn't ready to sleep. She thought about her family, and how they were unsupportive of her desire to join the Navy. She would be even further away from them now. The Madanis were very wealthy, with businesses and real estate handed down for generations on Earth. She was supposed to continue the tradition with her sister, growing the business, or start a new one, then marry someone who also had a wealthy family. But that was not what she wanted. Her father would say, "*It's still a man's world up there*" and there was some truth to that; most of the Commodores, Admirals, and even Captains were still men.

She would change that.

Soraya looked at herself in the mirror. *I'll be 28 years old soon*, she thought. She had cut her hair short, shoulder length, Military-standard -- she used to have silky, long flowing dark brown hair. There were times that she would doubt her career move to the Navy, looking back at the luxuries and lifestyle she had before the Academy. Her mother

would always tell her how attractive of a woman she was, and how it would be wasted in the Navy.

Her Captain's uniform, neatly folded and ready, sat on her desk. It had arrived in the morning -- she had not tried it on yet. Undressing from her academy clothes, she put on the uniform. The pants fit snugly, if not a little too tight, and the shirt and jacket seemed cut properly to her frame.

She turned to the mirror, and looked at herself side to side. She liked what she saw. The blue azure & butternut Navy colors and the Captain's bars on her left chest, as well as on the sleeves gave her a look of authority. She still felt attractive, perhaps more, in uniform. She would have to send holos to her parents and sister in her uniform when she got to her ship.

Sitting back down on the bed, she undressed once again. She thought of the crew she would command, each of them with their own families, goals and pursuits; in the end, their lives would be in her hands. She suddenly felt the weight of responsibility overwhelm her. *After seven years in the Academy, I am finally going to have my own ship.* When the time came, she would make the right decisions and prove herself in command situations.

Taking a sleeping agent, she put her hair up, took care of hygiene, and settled into her bed. A clear mind would be what she needed for her first day as Captain.

... arrival to Orbital Defense Station PC2-4, docking in 10 minutes... "THAT'S AMAZING!"

Soraya stirred up to some Ensign's shoulder pressing against her head. He was leaning over to talk to her seatmate who was seated closer to the viewport window. "Ensign... *Talbert*, do you mind?" She gently pushed his shoulder out of her face.

"Sorry," He said half-heartedly, and went back to his conversation with her neighbor. "That makes six ships, if you include the repair tender..."

Soraya rubbed her eyes. She wasn't able to get much sleep the night before; her mind kept running all night and she couldn't seem to enter REM sleep. She must have dozed off while the transport shuttle was in its quiet transit through darkspace. She looked around her. Practically everyone on the shuttle had migrated to the port side, faces pressed against the windows. She peered over to have her own look.

Five warships were in the process of engaging their dark matter drives; two frigates, two destroyers, and one larger ship... A *Mercury* Light Cruiser. They seemed to be traveling together. She listened in. "Yeah, that is Captain Salimes' ship alright. It's his Wolf Pack, the *Low Riders*." Someone said, a few rows down. *Low Riders*... Soraya looked back outside, saw the emblems on the side of some of the ships, a thing that looked like a land vehicle with two wheels. With the distortions coming from the dark matter bubble forming around them, it was hard to tell what it was supposed to be.

Unless you were living on the dark side of the Moon, you knew about Salimes and his veteran squadron of ships. His long hair tied in a ponytail was considered off-regulation, but his performance on the battlefield made that issue trivial. He had made a name for himself in the past few years. Together as a team, this Wolf Pack had succeeded in taking out several Genari installations, as well as countless numbers of ship kills. He became rather famous in the War when he was somehow able to outsmart and destroy a border battlestation and its surrounding defenses, all with a *Leningrad*-class Destroyer.

She studied the Mercury-class Light Cruiser. It was had one of the most graceful designs that had ever come out of the Sol shipyards. She had never seen one up close; and now its powerful ion engines radiated blue: The dark matter drives were in full charge. *That must be Salimes' new ship.* Soraya thought. *What would it be like to command a fleet of your own, with one of Sol's most advanced ships?* She shook her head, then peeked back to the portal. The bubbles had now completely encompassed the ships, and just like that, they all disappeared in unison.

"... Yeah, his navigators are pretty good at coordinating their movements. They all end up at their destination within 1000km of each other." Someone else said.

Soraya thought about that for a moment. The officers and crew were the other half of what made a Captain successful. There is a big difference between a sharp weapons officer, versus a helmsman who needed medication to keep her focus. What would she end up with as her crew? The best officers were assigned to the larger ships on the front...

As the shuttle entered the massive station, she filed out with all the other Navy enlisted officers. She had about 2 hours of downtime on the station until she met the Commodore briefing her and formally assigning her the *Schofield* and key officers.

She entered one of the grand walkways that led to various parts of the station. PC2-4 orbited around an unremarkable, ice encapsulated planetoid. You couldn't see it from the big tinted windows that surrounded this part of the station; but you could see the pair of white dwarf stars that made up Cygni A/B. They acted as a natural light source, illuminating the station on this side, casting large shadows on the opposite wall.

Since this was a military base, there were hordes of uniformed officers, cadets and portside employees passing through. The walls and ceilings were decked with physical and digital emblems representing the Sol Imperial Worlds, as well as individual advertisements selling some product or another. Staggered throughout the place, there were also displays for some of the military contractors, such as McKellan Engineering, Volkov Star Drives, Benson Dynamics, each boasting some new and improved system on individually-named Navy warships coming off the line.

She was hungry, but she wanted to find a restaurant that had a good view of space, namely a view where she could see her ship. She had the time. "Location, Frigate *Schofield*." She said to her datapad.

"Docking port 4, level 6." The computer replied back.

"Nearest restaurant on level 6?"

"None."

She sighed. "Nearest restaurant with proximal view of docking port 4?"

"Interstellar House of Pancakes, Level 5."

Level 5 was particularly empty at the time, and the restaurant had only a few patrons; so she picked the best seat she could to view her ship one level below. It seemed that this level was more commonly frequented by civilian crews, usually from freighters and station maintenance crews. The only other uniformed person in the restaurant was a grizzled old captain, who looked to be retired Navy, now working as a civilian contractor. He was studying his datapad, never looking up.

She was not a breakfast person, but ordered pancakes and several breakfast meats anyway. Two minutes later, the food arrived hot. She added some jellied fruit on top and started eating.

Soraya stared down at the *Schofield*. From above, it looked like several slabs rectangular metal that had been put together, with little portals punched throughout the sides. She wondered who the ships' previous captain was, and where they were now. She could see some light scarring on some of the plates; classic laser scars, no doubt in skirmishes with Genari; but most of it had been repainted over in Sol Navy Grey, so you could only see the scar lines because of the way the twin stars' light reflected over the hull.

"Mind if I join you... Sir?" A voice distracted from her thoughts.

She looked up, still chewing. It was an Ensign, with markings on his uniform identifying him as a Helmsman. *She swallowed, then thought, well I do have some time to kill, why not.* "Please, sit down."

"Thanks, I'm Dominik." He reached out his hand across the table to shake hers. "And you are Captain...?"

"Captain Madani..." She paused. "Soraya."

"Your name sounds Persian, but you have a French accent."

"Yes, I spent most of my time in Paris, as well as Marseilles."

He smiled. She had to admit he did have a nice smile. His blonde hair and blue eyes had never been her type, but he *was* handsome. "I've lived most of my life on deep space stations, with a brief two-year stint on Alpha Centauri when my father got stationed there. It must be nice to have a place on Earth."

Soraya smiled back. "Yeah, it is nice, but even a few weeks living there will make you go nuts. Everybody is into themselves, without a care of what is happening out here. So you're a Navy brat?"

"Yup, my father, brother, and sister are all still in the Navy. They're all doing well, stationed on the four corners of the known universe." He laughed. "And your family?"

"I'm the only one who has joined the Imperium. My family doesn't agree with my decision to enlist."

"Well that's a shame." He then commanded an order on the console without looking at the menu lists. "Crepe style pancakes, Swedish style, two eggs, over medium. Extra side of sausage."

"You really know your breakfast food." She said, tapping a finger on the menu.

"Most of my life I've been in transit, on various stations like this. This restaurant has always been my favorite, since I was a kid. There's always one of these places in every space station, large, small, or civilian." He leaned back. "Freighter crews eat this stuff up like there's no tomorrow."

"Well that's exciting..." She replied, not knowing what to say about that.

"It is actually; you get to overhear all sorts of stories. In crazy times like these, they give me a civilian's view of the war, and how they feel things are going. We are here to protect civilians after all..." He stopped, when his crepes were served. "I love lingonberries, even though I'm pretty sure these aren't the real kind. I hear that they do still grow the real stuff on New Terra --"

"So, what ship are you going to be reporting to?" She was curious.

"The *Bainsbridge*." He replied. When he saw no recognition in her features, he added, "It's a *Swordfish* Class Destroyer."

"Old-school."

"Yes, but so is yours I think." He pointed to the ship below them. "From the same era." He flashed that smile again.

"I guess it was obvious." She laughed. So who was commanding the *Bainsbridge*? She would have to look it up. If he had been her helmsman, this would have been a nice way to get introduced to him. No such luck.

He seemed to be trained on the same thought. "I don't know who my Captain is yet, but I'm to report to the *Bainsbridge*. I would have been happy to serve your *old-school* ship as well."

Their eyes met for a moment, her big brown eyes with his crystal blue ones. She broke the silence, and turned to look at the *Schofield*. "Same here, I haven't met my officers and crew yet."

"Probably new graduates, especially if you're not going to the front." He started dissecting his eggs, eating the yolk first.

Her datapad chimed. 30 minutes. *How did time go by so fast?* "I have to get going, Commodore Stovall will be briefing me and introducing me to my Senior Officers." She started getting up.

"Duty to the rescue!" Dominik said, standing up with her, with another big smile. "Will we ever run into each other again?"

She returned the smile with a grin. "Maybe... then again you know where to find me." With that, she left the Interstellar House of Pancakes, feeling his eyes behind her back.

"I appreciate the escort out of the region, Captain Madani." The courier captain said. "Ships like ours are easy targets for pirates."

"You're welcome Captain. Have a safe trip to Arcturus." Soraya said with an air of navy professionalism.

The small unarmed courier, with a crew of three, sped off past the jump point.

Two weeks had gone by. It was common to escort freighters, couriers, even the odd military personnel transport or personal shuttle. The region of HN23 supported a deep space monitoring station at its center, which also acted as a R&R area for all kinds of civilian and military vessels. Though not anywhere as massive as the orbital defense stations found around key Sol star systems, it boasted several recreation areas, restaurants, and an active mix of civilian and military crew and support staff totaling 370. It was unarmed, however, so there was her ship, the Frigate *Schofield*, along with a *Puritan* class Sublight Monitor, and an *Erebus* class Heavy Gunboat that kept watch over the region. Since her ship was the only one with a dark matter drive, she ended up escorting most of the ships leaving the region at the jump points. It was dreary work: More of a Navy-civilian public relations role that made very little use of a warship like hers.

Oh, there was a kerfuffle once on one medium sized freighter. It was carrying 100,000 tons of foodstuffs from New Terra. The inspection team spotted couple of hundred kilos of *green spice* hidden deep inside some of the food crates, some even mixed in with leafy green vegetables in cryostasis. The *spice* was a nasty hallucinogen, considered illegal in Sol, and commonly abused by Navy crew. The Captain of the freighter was arrested, but he denied that he knew about the contraband on his ship (even though he was tested high with the *spice*). He said his crew set him up. Then, the strangest thing happened, he ran

out of the hands of the local Sol Police that arrested him, sped into an airlock on his freighter, and shot himself out into space. Dead in an instant. Soraya guessed crazier things could happen.

Now, sitting in her command chair, she looked around at the bridge of her ship. Relatively small, it held displays and equipment for the crew: The Helmsman Ensign Torres, Weapons Officer Ensign Dimitrov, and Science Officer Ensign Harrison. All of them were Green; relatively new graduates from the academy, with their respective skills. The only member of her crew with a higher ranking was the Engineer, who was a junior grade Lieutenant. They all performed well on these escort routines, though it may be different under pressure in a live battle situation. She would routinely run battle drills and simulations, but she didn't know how they would fare in a real battle.

"Another freighter entering the region Captain," Ensign Harrison said. "Its origin is from the Helix Nebula. Class II light freighter, 25k tons of cargo."

"Mr. Torres, intercept the freighter. Mr. Harrison, scan ship and cargo." Captain Madani said. She's been through this routine more times than she could count in the past two weeks.

The captain of the freighter opened up communication. His eyes lit up after seeing Soraya. "This is Captain Witte of the Freighter *Rosaria*. I would be glad if you could escort us to the station. We will be staying 24 hours for some R&R."

"Absolutely Captain." She turned to the Science Officer. "What are they carrying?"

"Looks like basic salvage, recycled parts, and a lot of electronic equipment. Crew of sixteen." Harrison said.

Wonder where this lot got all that salvage from. Well that was none of her business. "Alright, lets escort them in."

"Captain, another ship is entering from the opposite side of the region. Looks larger, possibly a Class IV freighter also originating from the Helix Nebula." Harrison announced.

Then why the separate jump point? Soraya opened up communication with the *Puritan* Monitor. "Captain Lombardi, there's another freighter coming in. Please intercept and scan, and escort if necessary."

"Acknowledged, Captain." The captain of the monitor replied.

Freighters and transports from the Free Peoples of Sol, originating from New Terra had no schedules, and never gave advance notice of arrival. They did what they liked, and the Sol Imperial Worlds tolerated it, to a point. There was an uneasy truce, and the local Sol Imperial regions around the Helix benefited from the trade. They were also an incidental buffer between Sol and Genari space in this side of the galaxy.

The *Schofield* moved to the port side of the *Rosaria*, and followed its slow pace to the station. Captain Witte, still keeping his communication line open with Soraya, started talking, boasting about his adventures through the Helix, and his once narrow escape from a pirate attack. He also kept sending praises, and how attractive of a captain she was. *Was he flirting with her?* He offered to buy her a drink at the base, if she has free time. He wouldn't stop talking -- but she had to remain cordial with this civilian.

Harrison suddenly interrupted his chatter. "Captain, the Monitor just got hit by weapons fire!"

"I thought you said it was a freighter, how can they have weapons?"

"Sorry Sir, it looked like a freighter from the registry data. They must have hacked it. The Monitor is under attack."

It has to be pirates... they're getting greedy if they think they can come here. "Full power to the engines Ensign Torres, intercept the hostile at 9,000 kilometers." She opened up communication with Captain Lombardi, but she got no response. The heavy gunboat was already heading in the same direction to intercept the hostile as well. She opened up communication with the captain of the gunboat. "Captain Vizcaya, stay behind me, this hostile may very well be a commandeered Frigate, let me assess the situation first." She also contacted the base. "Reporting to Commodore DeWert, we've had a hostile encounter with a possible Class III or IV pirate ship with active armaments. Communication lost with the Monitor."

At 9000 kilometers, she ordered a stop, arming the *Schofield's* two primary laser beams and forward force fields maxed at 400 terajoules. Her laser beams' max range was 12,000 kilometers, though not very accurate at this range, she felt safer assessing the situation from a distance. The gunboat kept another 2000km behind her. "Ensign Harrison, scan the area, and try to get a lock on the enemy ship and our Monitor."

Sure enough, both ships were there, about 9000km away. The Monitor seemed stationary or disabled, with damage to its fusion drive. Adjacent to it, an old *Kashin* class Frigate sat with its weapons armed, and force field up. The markings were unmistakable -- a *Raider*. They must have stolen this Sol Naval Frigate at some point, it wouldn't have been easy either. Now it looks like they were trying to do the same with the Monitor.

She opened up communications with the Raider. "Commander of the raiding ship. You have just committed an illegal act on the Sol Imperial Navy. Stand down and surrender, or be disabled and have your crew arrested."

The response she got was two shots from the Raider's forward laser beams. Both missed at this range. *Unacceptable response.* "Torres, move to 4000 kilometers. Dimitrov fire both lasers once we are at range. Don't miss." She then contacted the gunboat. "Captain Vizcaya, flank the hostile on its port side. Fire your primary weapon then leave the area before it can return fire."

The next 30 seconds were very tense. As the *Schofield* moved in closer, the Raider fired another volley of two lasers. One missed, the other hit. "Forward force field down to 50%." The Science Officer said. The Captain of the Raider was being brash, firing earlier than they should have. Maybe their Captain thought it would scare her away? At 4000km, the *Schofield* fired its two laser beams. They both hit. The Raider's force field went down with the first shot, and the remaining shot got through, cutting through the hull. At the same time, the gunboat fired a laser at the Raider's port/aft side, where there was no force field making a hard line through the hull. Explosions rocked through the ship. "Raider hull integrity down by 30%." Science officer Harrison said, excitedly.

"Why isn't the Raider moving away?" Soraya asked, to nobody in particular. Then she realized -- they had boarded the Monitor, and were transporting hostages back to the Raider. It also looked like they were using haulers to move large ship systems into the retrofitted cargo hold.

To be continued....