

# Victory: Book 3 of the Legacy Fleet Series

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VICTORY

Book 3

Of

# The Legacy Fleet Trilogy

For J., L., and C.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Reading Order**

### **of the Legacy Fleet Series:**

[Constitution](#)

[Warrior](#)

[Victory](#)

[Independence](#)

[Defiance](#) (coming early 2017)

[Liberty](#) (coming early 2017)

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Nick has been working with a group of talented authors to expand the Legacy Fleet universe, and we are pleased to present the "Extended Universe" of Legacy Fleet, which, as of this writing, includes 9 novels and a short story anthology:

### [Legacy Fleet Extended Universe](#)

\*Please note, these Extended Universe novels are only available for purchase in the US. International readers, please email [authornickwebb@gmail.com](mailto:authornickwebb@gmail.com) and Nick or his assistant can help you with a solution.

### **Other books by Nick Webb**

The Pax Humana Saga:

1: [The Terran Gambit](#)

2: [Chains of Destiny](#)

3: [Into the Void](#)

4: The Sons of Oberon (coming 2017)

Chapter One

*Cadiz Refugee Camp #127*

Lieutenant Rodriguez stepped into a murky puddle in the middle of the street, wrinkled his nose, and swore. *Oh, for hell's sake.* It was the 27th century, technology had launched humanity to the stars, dozens of planets had been colonized, and galactic civilization had, up until four months ago, flourished on a scale few had ever dreamed of.

And now there was raw sewage flowing freely through the streets.

The refugee camp was bursting at the seams, having accepted over double the half million refugees from the Cadiz sector it had been designed to hold. As Lieutenant Rodriguez made his way down the muddy, sewage-infused street, the wails of sick babies rang in his ears. Small, dirty children huddled forlornly under their equally-harrowed mothers' arms, peering out the doors of their temporary shelters, looking for the next shipment of food and water from the city.

It wasn't coming, Rodriguez knew. The shipments had slowed to once every several days, then to once a week. The next one would not come.

Something else was coming instead.

*They were coming.*

Dusk began to color the sky. The sun had set several minutes ago—possibly for the last time, Rodriguez thought. Time was short. In spite of the crying children in the background the refugee camp was eerily quiet as he crossed the final hundred meters of mud, refuse, and sewage to reach his family's shelter. His own children would be waiting for him—hopefully with their bags packed, like he'd instructed.

As he opened the door to his family's shelter, the refugee camp's sirens began to sound, adding their urgent wail to the children's cries. That could only mean one thing.

*They were here.*

"Papa!"

His daughter Elsa ran up to him and hugged his lower torso. Tomas sat in the corner, hovering over his grandmother who was supposed to be taking care of them but instead had fallen sick with an illness that had left her feeble and coughing, lying weakly on the shelter's only bed.

Lieutenant Rodriguez peeled Elsa's arms off and approached his mother. Her face was ashen, but she managed a weak smile.

"Are they ready?" he asked, leaning down close to her.

She gave a small nod.

“Are you?” he added.

Her shaking hand reached out to his. “Go,” she said, with some effort, and descended into a fit of coughing. Her hand came away from her mouth, spattered red.

“I’m not leaving you, mom.” He stooped over to pick her up, but the woman, with surprising strength, pushed him away.

“I said, go. They’re ready. You’re out of time. Get them to safety. I’ll be—” she glanced at Tomas and Elsa, forcing out a grimaced smile for their sake. She always was a wonderful actress. “I’ll be fine.”

The sirens wailed outside. Crowds shouted in the dusky air.

Rodriguez breathed a silent curse, but sprang into action, grabbing the two bags sitting by the door. His own belongings were in his hangar at the fighter base on the other side of Gunaratana City. As a fighter pilot he, as a general rule, packed light. But there was no time to retrieve his own things. There was no time for anything. Except to run.

They were coming. In force. He’d seen the scans play out on the monitors of the hangar bay just over half an hour ago. Twenty Swarm carriers, plus something new: the unthinkable-massive super dreadnought that had made its first appearance the week before in the Swarm’s invasion of the Mao Cluster.

Mao Prime no longer existed.

Eight billion people no longer existed.

Scouts reported that the surface, once the glittering cosmopolitan jewel of the Chinese Intersolar Democratic Republic, was now a sterile, fiery wasteland.

He pushed his children through the door and cast one last glance back at his mother, still on the bed, wan and pale. She mouthed, *I love you*. He blinked back tears and could only nod a curt reply before turning back out into the rank, muddy street.

The transport would be leaving soon; they had only minutes to spare. As they navigated the busy streets—which had erupted into a frenzied mob of panicked refugees now that the emergency sirens were wailing in force—he wondered if he’d be court-martialed for abandoning his post. *But really*, he thought, *what good would one more lone fighter craft be against the unstoppable force that was coming?* How could they court-martial a man just trying to get his kids to safety? Could one man really make a difference against such incontestable power? Such reckless hate?

Granger had. The Hero of Earth—he supposedly died, and returned, beating back the Swarm in the process. So the rumors said, though Rodriguez didn’t quite believe them, video proof be damned.

It didn’t matter. He looked up at the darkening sky, and his stomach clenched as he focused on a small cluster of bright lights above the eastern horizon that steadily grew clearer—twenty small dots surrounding the larger one.

They were coming.

So was the Hero of Earth. He’d heard chatter that Granger’s fleet was on its way, coming to the

rescue. But he'd seen the tactical scans. There was no way he'd arrive in time. The man may have been a miracle worker, but it looked like his lucky streak was over. By the time The Bricklayer showed up, the entire world of Indira would be a wasteland, just like Mao Prime. Just like the Cadiz Sector. And the Veracruz Sector. Merida, New Oregon, and Calibri—all gone.

Five minutes later, they arrived at the local spaceport. After a few panicked moments of desperate searching for the transport he started to wonder if it had left without him.

"Are we too late, Papa?" asked Tomas.

Rodriguez swore under his breath, but breathed a sigh of relief as they rounded a corner and saw it: a small freighter, its captain waiting impatiently on the still-open ramp.

"Come along, Elsa," he coaxed his daughter forward. Tomas followed close behind.

He climbed the ramp, but not before glancing back up at the sky, looking for the cluster of bright lights that signaled their world's certain doom. They were bigger, closer, and more spread out. Several were still near the horizon while others had risen high into the sky overhead.

The ground shook, starting as a low tremor, and escalating into a moderate shaking that rattled panels inside the freighter. Rodriguez watched the horizon with a sickening feeling, and felt his face go white as he saw a mushroom cloud rise in the distance, hundreds of kilometers away.

"Stop gawking and shut the damn hatch!" yelled the freighter captain from the cockpit. Lieutenant Rodriguez hit the ramp retractor and ushered his kids to the rows of seats. All were full, except for three. They settled into them after fiddling with the restraints.

"Hey," said a teenage girl sitting across from him, "is that a pilot's uniform? An IDF pilot?"

He looked away, ignoring the girl, and busied himself with Elsa's seat restraint.

"Why aren't you out there? Why aren't you fighting for us?" The girl was visibly distraught—she shook, her eyes were wild, darting back and forth from the closed hatch back to Rodriguez and over to the cockpit. "They're coming! They're coming! Why aren't you out there? They're coming! They're—"

The woman next to her grabbed the girl's arm—her mother, or grandmother. "Quiet. He's getting his kids out. He's just the same as us."

"But he's a fighter pilot! He could stop them! He could—"

The woman shook the girl until she fell silent. "Nothing can stop them! One more won't make a difference. You just mind your own business."

*Nothing can stop them.*

Rodriguez pulled a necklace out from beneath his uniform and began thumbing the beads, whispering silent rosary prayers. He knew they were rising through the atmosphere now, well clear of any of the dreaded singularity weapons that were now ravaging the surface.

But making it through the perimeter of the Swarm fleet would be another feat entirely.

*One more won't make a difference,* the woman had said. But, besides the rosary, there was only one

thought in Rodriguez's mind:

*Granger, where the hell are you?*

## Chapter Two

*Bridge, ISS Warrior*

*0.3 lightyears from Indira, Britannia Sector*

Captain Timothy Granger paced the *Warrior's* bridge. He was late, and it was killing him inside. Each second that ticked by was like a dagger twisting in his gut.

Because he knew that with each tick, another ten thousand people were likely dying.

"Initiating q-jump twenty-seven," said Ensign Prince.

The scene on the viewscreen shifted, and the central bright star grew slightly larger. And around that star, a planet. And on that planet, people. Millions of people. And drawing nearer to that planet, with a disconcerting head start...

"Any more word from CENTCOM about the Swarm fleet approaching Indira?"

Ensign Prucha slowly shook his head. "Sorry, sir. All outer system bases went quiet fifteen minutes ago. Last word was over twenty incoming vessels."

Damn. The Swarm had abruptly changed tactics the past two weeks, with deadly effect. Rather than slowly waltzing their way into a system, giving the population time to panic and scatter, they'd taken to striking as quickly as possible, with overwhelming force. Instead of three Swarm carriers here, four there, their enemy had entered a new phase of the war. A phase of extermination.

*You ain't seen nothing yet*, she'd said. That young pilot, Fishtail, had spoken those words after her life was saved by injecting her with Swarm matter. She wasn't lying. The scale of the new Swarm offensive was breathtaking. Three entire worlds destroyed in the past two weeks. Hundreds of ships lost. Billions of lives.

And the next target, Indira. Right in the heart of United Earth territory. Less than five lightyears from Britannia itself. Fifteen lightyears from Earth.

And Granger was caught with his pants down, stationed at Britannia, ready to defend against an attack that never came. The hammer was striking Indira instead.

"Ready for q-jump twenty-eight," he said.

"Sir, the *ISS Colorado* is reporting trouble with their cap bank. They need five minutes to lock down the problem and recharge."

He shook his head. "No. Leave them. Ready for q-jump."

Not having the *Colorado* there would hurt, but getting there five minutes later would hurt more. Plus, fighting with thirty-seven ships instead of thirty-eight ships wouldn't make much difference, especially if the Swarm had brought their newly unveiled super dreadnought.

While not quite as large as the massive Swarm orbital space stations they'd destroyed over Volari Three—the planet that had turned out to be the homeworld of the Dolmasi—the super dreadnoughts were formidable. Easily ten times the size of the run-of-the-mill Swarm carriers, packed with antimatter beam turrets and loaded with the singularity weapons the Russians had provided them with.

There were only three or four of them—the intelligence community hadn't come to agreement on that point—but whether there were three or three thousand, the result was the same.

Utter destruction.

"Ready, sir," said Ensign Prince.

"Initiate."

The viewscreen shifted again, and the central star, Indira Prime, grew even larger. Just two more jumps, nearly half a lightyear, and they'd be there, late, for the battle of their lives.

Or, they'd find a broken, empty, devastated world, depending on how late they were.

"What do you think?" Commander Proctor had been working doggedly at the science station, conferring with her new science team, immersed in a project that had consumed nearly all her time the past few weeks, but now she sidled up next to his chair and bent low to his ear.

"We're too late."

She nodded, apparently in somber agreement. "And if we really are too late? What then? Stay and fight? Wait until we've got backup? Wait for the Dolmasi?"

He grunted. "If we don't fight them here, then we fight them over some other world. Here is as good a place as any, and if the planet is already ravaged, best to limit the destruction."

She lowered her voice. "But if it's the case that the planet is lost, wouldn't it be more prudent to at least wait until Zingano shows up?"

Granger shook his head. "Weren't you listening earlier? He's dealing with a sudden incursion into the Maori System. Small raid of only four Swarm ships, but his fleet won't be here for hours, at least."

*Only* four ships. He inwardly chuckled that he now considered four swarm carriers to be a *small* raid. Four months ago, four ships had nearly destroyed Earth. While their defenses had improved since then, Zingano would lose at least a dozen capital ships and tens of thousands of men and women in that engagement with *only* four ships.

Proctor scowled. "I didn't hear. When was that?"

"Just ten minutes ago." He eyed her warily. "You ok, Shelby?"

She glanced around the bridge before dropping her voice to a whisper. "I think I'm on to something. The team and I."

"What?" He scanned the bridge as she spoke, watching the officers and crew. Proctor had subjected every crew member of the *Warrior* to the blood test that revealed Swarm infiltration, and though no one else had tested positive after Doc Wyatt and Colonel Hanrahan, Granger was still wary of speaking openly of either IDF's strategic plans or Proctor's Swarm research. For all he knew, the blood test was incomplete and there could still be Swarm agents among them. Best to practice good OPSEC hygiene in the meantime.

"Just something about the fundamental mechanism behind Swarm communication. With the meta-space signals. It's quantum based. Using gravitons. Quantum particles."

"Right..." He wasn't sure where she was leading.

"But the singularities, they're not. All equations governing gravitational waves, gravitational singularities, gravitational *anything*, at least on a macro scale, is general relativity-based. Quantum mechanics, and general relativity—those two branches of physics just don't mix very well. We haven't reconciled them in the seven hundred years we've known about them, and here the Swarm is using both of them to devastating effect."

The viewscreen shifted as they made another q-jump. Only one more before show time.

"And?" he murmured.

"And ... that's it, mostly. Just a hunch. I've performed a few experiments I want you to look at later. Some of the results are ... interesting. To say the least."

Ensign Prince glanced back. "Ready for final q-jump, sir."

Granger nodded. Proctor retreated back to the XO's station where her deputy, Lieutenant Diaz, had been making preparations for the battle. Now that it was upon them, she took up her post, glancing at the tactical crew, who nodded back, indicating they were ready.

As ready as they'd ever be. Granger knew he was never ready for any battle. How do you prepare to lose tens of thousands of people under your command? It was something he hadn't grown used to, and hoped he never would, his nickname be damned. *Bricklayer? Bullshit.*

“Initiate,” he said, sitting down just as the contents of the viewscreen shifted.

In place of the starfield centered on the distant sun of Indira Prime came the image of a planet.

A devastated, broken planet.

“Ensign...?” he whispered.

Ensign Prucha shook his head. “All planetary defenses are silent. Every other comm band is just frenzied chatter, both civilian and military bands.”

Ensign Diamond at sensors worked his controls. “Most major cities destroyed. The Swarm fleet is spread out across an equatorial orbit, targeting the smaller population centers. Thousands of colonial transports and freighters are trying to break free of orbit but they’re being intercepted by Swarm fighter craft.”

Once again, he was left with the choice of who to save. Who to fight for. Who to die for. The hundreds of thousands of people in orbit who would form the next wave of refugee camps in the adjacent star system? Or the millions of people left on the ground, about to be either burned alive or vaporized in a singularity explosion under their feet?

He gripped his armrests, knuckles white. He’d had enough. A yell erupted from his throat, culminating in a balled up fist hitting the console swiveled in front of him, which snapped off onto the floor with a clatter that startled all the crew members around him.

All eyes were on him.

“Where the hell is that super dreadnought?”

Diamond scanned his console. “At longitude fifty-nine point two four, latitude—”

Granger cut him off, still staring at the wrecked planet below. “Send coordinates to the fleet. Prepare for maneuver Granger Omega Three.”

Commander Proctor looked up suddenly, her face bunched up with concern. “Tim, we’ve only tossed that idea around. Never practiced it. Haven’t even run simulations. Are you—”

“Now’s as good a time to practice as any,” he replied, maintaining his fiery stare at the screen.

To her credit, Proctor sprang into action, erupting into a flurry of orders. “Alert all crew on decks one through five to move to higher decks. Ensign Prince, full acceleration along heading fifteen mark eight. Prucha, coordinate fleet positioning behind us....”

Within a minute, preparations were complete. He could just barely feel the pull of the thrusters straining away at maximum, the inertial compensators struggling to keep up, pushed past their limit. The extra thrust, adding to the inexorable pull of the planet’s gravity, was building their velocity up to a range that would take them far out onto a wide elliptical orbit after they swung around the planet.

But not before they blazed past the super dreadnought at a dizzying speed. With *Warrior* in the lead, shielding the rest of the fleet.

There was a good reason they called the maneuver Granger Omega Three. It could very well be the

last thing Granger ever did.

"Time," he said. The bridge had fallen to a deadly quiet.

"Sixty seconds."

Granger nodded. "Cut thrusters. Rotate us with aft lateral thrust. Show them our belly."

"Done, sir," Ensign Prince said after a moment.

"All ships," Granger lifted his head to the inter-fleet comm, "prepare to fire on my mark. Keep your heads, and remember the pattern." He glanced up at Proctor, who nodded once, confirming all was ready. "And if we don't make it out of this one ... it's been an honor serving with you. However—" he nodded toward the tactical station, where ten officers were staring at him, grim-faced, "—I do not give you permission to die until that piece of cumrat shit is destroyed. On my mark ... fire!"

## Chapter Three

### *Star Freighter Lucky Bandit*

#### *Low orbit, Indira, Britannia Sector*

Elsa and Tomas both jumped nervously against the restraints as the freighter lurched again. It was clear to Lieutenant Rodriguez that the captain was repeatedly changing their heading, to avoid either Swarm fighters or debris pluming up from the dozens of singularity impact sites on the battered continent below.

After calming the children down, he glanced toward the passenger compartment's lone viewport, a round thing less than half a meter across. Indira's atmosphere looked like a thin shell wrapping around the fragile, besieged planet—a shell that was rapidly turning from a vibrant, living blue to a sickly brownish gray over the dozens of spots where the ground had erupted outward. Too numerous to count, the mushroom clouds seemed to extend up past the edge of the atmosphere and into space itself.

The planet was bleeding.

How many people had just died? The last sounds from his hurried walk through the camp still rang in his ears—the sick, crying babies. Were they silent now? Probably not—the Swarm would target the major cities first, and only make it to the smaller refugee camps once the larger population centers were smoking craters. But other babies were silent in their place.

Rodriguez wished he could cry, but the magnitude of the loss was too great to comprehend. Besides, he'd already mourned his own planet, Merida. He'd already mourned his extended family, his hometown, and everyone he ever knew.

He'd already mourned his wife. How could he have anything left to mourn?

The freighter lurched again. And again. A third time.

He knew what that meant—they were under attack. The captain was flying a merchant freighter. He'd have little experience evading Swarm fighters. Hell, *no one* had experience evading Swarm fighters.

But he wasn't going to trust his kids' fate to some merchant freighter pilot. He ripped the seat restraint away and maneuvered around the rows of seats, tripping over passengers' legs as he ran to the cockpit.

When he got the door open he found the pilot and his copilot arguing heatedly. Just a glance through the viewports told him what he needed to know—the Swarm was all around them. Looking down at the sensors he grimaced as three contacts approached from three different directions.

They were being hemmed in.

"I'm telling you, Avi, we're no match in speed for those things, we can't just blaze past one and think they'll ignore—"

The copilot shook his head and swore. "Raf, all I'm saying is doing *something* is better than doing *nothing*. We can't just go back and land for god's sake—"

"And what, are you just going to pick a random direction and hope it doesn't take us past a fighter? For hell's sake, there's three of the bastards zeroing in on us right now!"

Rodriguez squeezed the shoulder of the co-pilot. "Gentlemen, if you'll allow me?"

The co-pilot, a short, stubby man with a close-cropped black mustache, shot him a dangerous look. "Get back in your seat, sir. I'll get around to the cabin beverage service after we figure out how to not die."

Rodriguez scowled. "Look, I—"

The co-pilot twisted around suddenly in his seat, and pat a bulge under his vest. "I'm not going to ask you again. Sit."

Lieutenant Rodriguez glanced at the bulge—could be a firearm, but probably just a canister of chew—and swore as the freighter bucked again as the pilot chose another direction.

"Look, see these?" He pointed to a pair of small medals pinned near his flight suit's shoulder, just under the epaulette. "This one here. Wings on fire. Any idea what that means?" Before the copilot

could answer, Rodriguez did it for him. "Fighter combat. And the one next to it, the one with the number fifteen on it? Any guesses?"

A proximity alarm went off as the nearest Swarm fighter closed in. Raf, the pilot, swore and punched it off. "Are you going to go sit down, fly-boy, or do I need to—"

"It means I've been in orbital fighter combat bloody fifteen times against the cumrat bastards out there." He jabbed a finger toward the viewport. The distant Swarm fighter was quickly becoming visible to the naked eye. "So if you want to live, give me the controls. *Now.*"

Avi looked like he was about to jump up and try ripping Rodriguez's arms off. "Why you little ignorant piece of AWOL shit." He reached into his vest and pulled out the firearm. Rodriguez grit his teeth—he had been sure the man was bluffing. "I'm giving you to the count of *one* to get the hell—"

"Avi," began the pilot, "stand up. Give him your seat." He jabbed his thumb toward the cockpit door. "No, don't give me that look. You're half drunk anyway. Go. Get up." When Avi hesitated, looking from his gun to Rodriguez to the co-pilot controls, Raf repeated himself. "Go. Before you put a hole through the hull. *Now.*"

Avi grumbled as he thrust himself from the seat and stalked out of the cockpit. The pilot glowered at him as he left. "Don't worry," he said, watching Rodriguez take Avi's place, "the gun was empty. He just carries it around for show. Micro-dick compensation, most likely. Now are you going to show me your fancy flying, or what?"

"That's the idea...." Rodriguez studied the controls. It was similar to his fighter cockpit, but just different enough to give him a moment's pause. "Time to intercept?"

The pilot glanced at the sensor readout. "That bogey'll be here in twenty seconds."

"What's the maximum acceleration on this thing?"

"Staying within inertia-canceling limits, about two point five—"

"I didn't ask about inertia-canceling limits. Tell me. Maximum acceleration?"

The pilot considered a moment. "Five g's. But that'll give our passengers quite the scare, I don't know if—"

"They'll live." Rodriguez pushed the control stick to maximum and flipped off the acceleration governor. "Maybe."

The thrust nearly took his breath away. He heard his kids scream behind him as everyone was thrown violently against their restraints and he could swear he heard Avi fly through the air and crash into the bulkhead, but all that mattered now was getting them all to safety. Wherever *that* was.

"They're still gaining on us, and our trajectory is straight at the planet—" the pilot's face turned white, "—straight at that plume coming from what used to be New Bangalore...."

"We'll just skirt through the top. Hold on...."

The billowing debris cloud loomed in the viewport ahead of them. From far away it had looked

static, but now that they approached, Rodriguez realized the cloud was expanding at what was probably a supersonic rate. He wondered how good the freighter's shielding was.

The pilot apparently read his mind. "If there is any debris in there bigger than a grain of sand, we're goners."

"We're goners anyway. Here we go...."

They plunged into the cloud, and the freighter began to lurch violently as the turbulence from the debris plume buffeted the ship. After a few seconds Rodriguez shifted the controls, veering the craft hard to the left, still at maximum acceleration, staying in the turn until he'd nearly completed a full-about.

The pilot nodded his understanding. "Hoping they keep a straight course, and meanwhile we pop out of the cloud right where we entered it?"

"That's the idea...."

A moment later they cleared the plume and the violent shaking ceased, but Rodriguez maintained the gut-churning acceleration. A quick glance at the sensors told him the gambit had partially worked—the Swarm fighters trailing them were nowhere to be seen. Probably on the other side of the massive debris plume by now.

But ahead of them loomed a new nightmare.

The Swarm super dreadnought, flanked by two regular-sized carriers. Green antimatter beams lanced down toward the planet, raking across towns and smaller cities, even as a half dozen bright points shimmered around the giant ships—growing singularities readying for their imminent launch.

"We're screwed," breathed the pilot.

An odd reading on the sensors. Rodriguez studied the anomaly. A large mass approaching at a dizzying speed. No, not one large mass. It was broken up into several discreet pieces, approaching as one large clump. Had one of the Swarm carriers broken apart?

Raf's eyes widened as he studied the readout. "Is that what I think it is?"

Rodriguez scanned the transponder frequencies. They were IDF ships. Packed together into as tight a formation as he'd ever seen, moving faster than any fleet had a right to.

He grinned. "Yep."

The Hero of Earth had arrived.

## Chapter Four

Lieutenant Tyler “Ballsy” Volz gripped his controls. If he wasn’t wearing flight gloves, he imagined his knuckles would be white with tension. With good reason—they’d never practiced the Granger Omega Three maneuver before. Lately, he hadn’t practiced much of anything.

All he could think about was Fishtail. He visited her every day. Or rather, visited what had taken her place. A smug, over-confident Swarm agent—at least, when she wasn’t under full sedation. Gone were Fishtail’s mild-mannered wit and sarcasm. Her easy-going charm. In its place was ... something alien. Utterly foreign.

“All craft, prepare for launch. Watch yourselves, people. None of you have ever launched at this speed before, and you most certainly have not launched all at once like we’re trying today.” The CAG, Commander Pierce, listed off the instructions one final time. Each fighter, in its turn, would launch exactly one third of a second after the one before it. All one hundred and fifty of them. The accelerations would be gut-churning. The distances between fighters uncomfortably small.

There was no room for error on this one.

And the giant osmium brick tied to the undercarriage of each fighter more than doubled each craft’s mass. Maneuvering would be difficult.

The Granger Omega Three maneuver. Omega: an appropriate term. It would most likely be the last thing they ever did.

He glanced to his left, down the line of fighters with their engines idling. Spacechamp. Pew Pew and his brother, Fodder. He’d sure miss them. Commander Pierce’s voice cut through his headset. “Standby ... five seconds ... three, two, one, NOW!”

To his right, the line of fighters started shooting out the giant bay door, one at a time, every point three three seconds. Much of it was computer-controlled, but not the actual maneuvering. When his time came, the engines roared to life automatically, and he barely had time to steer the nose of his fighter out toward the exit and space beyond.

Fifty seconds later, they were all in position, forming a vast halo around the *ISS Warrior*. Thirty-some-odd heavy cruisers bunched up tightly behind the giant tungsten-armored carrier. All of them blazing toward the planet ahead of them. In orbit above that ravaged world stood the largest Swarm ship any of them had ever seen. It was still a tiny dot, but it grew larger.

“All craft,” came Pierce’s voice, “brick launch on my mark.”

Volz checked the computer calculations one more time, ensuring his thrusters were linked appropriately to the targeting computer. All clear.

“Launch.”

He flew back against his seat as the fighter leapt forward and to starboard, and moments later he felt the tell-tale clank as the osmium brick detached. A moment later he reversed thrust, aligning his nose with the edge of the *Warrior's* bulk and maneuvered his fighter around the ship. There was no time for all of them to land in the fighter bay, and staying out to fight during the flyby was pointless. All they could do was hide in the shadow of the *Warrior* like the rest of the cruisers.

Hide, and pray.

## Chapter Five

### *Star Freighter Lucky Bandit*

#### *Low orbit, Indira, Britannia Sector*

Something seemed dreadfully wrong. "They're coming in way too fast. This doesn't make any sense..." Rodriguez studied the sensor readout even as he pointed the nose of the freighter on a trajectory that would eventually let them break orbit and make their first q-jump.

"Whatever," said the pilot. "As long as they keep the bastards distracted while we make our getaway. And it's not just us—there's thousands of other freighters and colonial transports trying to make a break for—"

Thousands of tiny explosions leapt out from the super dreadnought.

"Hot damn!" Rodriguez watched the scene unfold in amazement. Granger, with his fleet coming in close behind, had oriented the *Warrior* so the bottom face of its hull was fully exposed to the super dreadnought and its two smaller companions. But peeking out from the shadow of the *Warrior* were hundreds of mag-rail turrets from the tightly-packed fleet of cruisers, each ship positioned such that its hull was protected by the *Warrior*, but with a clear enough view of the super dreadnought that it could fire several steady streams of ultra-high-velocity mag-rail slugs.

Which they did. Thousands of impacts erupted all over the massive super dreadnought. It, along with the two escort carriers, opened up a devastating volley on the rapidly approaching *Warrior*, raking the underside of its hull with dozens of antimatter beams. Rodriguez could only imagine the destruction on the lower decks.

"Pretty gutsy, but they're flying past in less than ten seconds. I still don't see how much good it'll do," said Raf, shaking his head.

"Watch. I see it now," interrupted Rodriguez, pointing at the sensors. They just barely detected

over one hundred small projectiles which rocketed away from the *Warrior*. Small, but thousands of times larger than the standard mag-rail slug.

And traveling at fifty kilometers a second.

The incoming IDF fleet, still sheltered by the *Warrior*, continued pummeling the super dreadnought, some ships even turning their attention to the two Swarm carriers, but Rodriguez understood it now—the conventional fire was a ruse. Moments later, his suspicion was confirmed with a violent, eye-piercing explosion.

One hundred and fifty eye-piercing explosions.

“I don’t believe it.” Raf couldn’t take his eyes off the disintegrating super dreadnought. From the hundred and fifty massive, gaping holes erupted a hundred and fifty streams of debris, smoke, and fire, all up and down the hundred kilometers-long spine of the ship. “I don’t believe it,” he repeated breathlessly.

“That’s Granger for you.” Rodriguez pushed hard on the accelerator. Now that the Swarm ships in the immediate vicinity were focused like a laser on the IDF fleet, it was the perfect chance to high-tail it out of there.

“They still can’t win. Even without that super dreadnought there are over twenty Swarm carriers in orbit, and Granger only has thirty-six ships. Plus, he came in so fast that he’ll be flung out toward the outer solar system unless he can miraculously arrest his velocity in the next two minutes.”

Rodriguez shook his head. “He’ll figure something out. He always does.”

The pilot regarded him for a moment in disbelief, like an atheist skeptically eyeing the firm faith of a sincere believer, but he shrugged and began plotting their course toward a point where it would be safe to make the q-jump. Or at least, that was his intention. Instead, he gawked at the sensor readout again. “Yes, but what is he going to do about *that?*”

Rodriguez’s eye followed the pilot’s outstretched finger.

The sensor readout had more bad news.

## Chapter Six

*Bridge, ISS Warrior*

*Indira, Britannia Sector*

Granger was beginning to regret his order—the Granger Omega Three maneuver was wreaking havoc down on the lower decks. The ship trembled and shook violently. The super dreadnought and its two accompanying carriers were unloading everything they had straight into the *Warrior's* gut, tearing their lower hull to shreds.

But the results spoke for themselves—after twenty seconds of fleet bombardment, the super dreadnought was beginning to show signs of extreme duress, to put it lightly.

“Massive power fluctuations coming from the dreadnought!” Ensign Diamond yelled over his console.

Granger nodded, and inclined his head toward Commander Proctor. “Brick status?”

“Launch in ten.”

He studied the sensor readouts coming from the super dreadnought, then waved over to the comm station. “Send to fleet: retarget accompanying vessels.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Ensign Prucha. Moments later, the IDF fleet protected under the shadow of the *Warrior* redirected fire toward the other two Swarm ships hovering near the super dreadnought, which also began to erupt with thousands of small explosions where the mag-rail slugs ripped into their hulls. *These three buggers are toast*, Granger thought.

But he was paying for it. Dearly. The bridge jolted to starboard violently as several of the incoming antimatter beams connected with one of the main inertial cancelers. Those things were embedded at least five decks within the lower hull. Damn—they were cutting deep. The bridge jerked again, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the marines stationed near the bridge entrance sway and struggle to remain on their feet.

Granger counted silently in his head the remaining seconds, and moments later Proctor announced, “Brick launch. Impact in five. Prepare for attitude realignment.”

“Put it onscreen,” said Granger, gripping his armrests ferociously to steady himself against the violent buffeting of the incoming storm of antimatter beams. “At least we’ll get to enjoy the show.”

Just moments after the viewscreen focused on the Swarm super dreadnought, which had redirected its fire to the incoming osmium projectiles in a vain attempt to destroy them, the gaping holes appeared in blinding explosions as large chunks of the hull were blasted away. Each osmium brick, though only a few tons, was moving so fast that it slammed into the massive vessel with the energy of over a hundred megaton-class nuclear warheads.

And even though the ship was dozens of kilometers long, it was no match for explosive energy on that scale. As *Warrior* and the rest of the fleet flew by at nearly fifty kilometers per second, reorienting itself so the smaller cruisers would remain in the shadow of Granger’s ship, the super dreadnought shuddered as it disintegrated into hundreds of smaller smoking pieces.

Excited whoops and cheers erupted on the bridge, and Granger, for the first time that day, allowed himself a small smile. “Full reverse. Two times safety limits. Settle us into an orbit that will take us to the next cluster of Swarm carriers.”

Commander Proctor looked up from her status board. “Heavy damage on the lower decks, sir. Main inertial cancelers are out. Numerous casualties on decks six and seven.” Her face tightened into a pained expression. “They nearly cut all the way up to main engineering, Captain. Just a few more seconds and we would have been goners.”

“How much thrust can we sustain?” They *had* to arrest some of their speed, otherwise they’d fling out from the planet, hundreds of thousands of kilometers away from the battle, leaving the ravaged planet to its doom. From the looks of his planetary sensor readout, the Swarm had already devastated dozens of cities with singularity blasts, likely killing millions. Tens of millions. But there were still a handful of major cities left, and hundreds of smaller towns that had to be defended.

“Auxiliaries are only rated at half the safety limits of the primaries.”

“Then full reverse—double the safety standards of the auxiliaries.” He punched the internal comm. “Hold on, folks, we’re about to have a rough ride.” He noticed Proctor shoot him a raised eyebrow. “Again,” he added.

As the reverse thrusters engaged, they were thrown back against their seat restraints, then forward, then backward again as the inertial cancelers struggled to keep up, swinging like a pendulum between the extreme acceleration vectors they were trying to balance. The deckplate seemed to groan, and Granger could hear the screeching of twisting metal deep within the walls. How much more could the Old Bird take?

He shook his head. *Dammit*. The Old Bird was dead. Still sitting on the main boulevard in South Salt Lake City, where it had crash-landed and skidded to a halt, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. IDF engineers had decided to leave it there, building up a giant scaffold around the broken hulk as they performed a refit—the goal was to restore her, though she wouldn’t be ready for months yet. But he still hadn’t shaken the habit of calling the *Warrior* his *Old Bird*.

He heard a groan from the sensor station, and almost simultaneously he heard Proctor mutter a curse. He glanced over at her. “I’m almost afraid to ask....”

She looked up, her face taking on an almost resigned expression, as if she knew this battle would be their last. “Two more super dreadnoughts just q-jumped in. They’ll intercept our course in five minutes.”

The math was starting to weigh on Granger’s mind. Twenty Swarm carriers still orbited the planet, pummeling its already-ravaged surface. Less than a third of the planet’s population likely was still alive. Two new dreaded super dreadnoughts to deal with. The *Warrior* was a wreck. Admiral Zingano, with his fleet, was occupied with its own invasion, lightyears away.

“Sir?” Proctor said, eyeing him.

He sighed. “Prepare for q-jump.”

Chapter Seven

*Bridge, ISS Warrior*

*Indira, Britannia Sector*

The bridge fell quiet in the aftermath of his order to q-jump. From the way they eyed him it was clear that they were expecting to make a strategic withdrawal. To stand and fight another day. Somewhere else. He saw in their eyes that it pained them, but that they were prepared to do it. To run.

But Granger had never retreated. Ever.

And he wasn't about to start. "Prepare for q-jump to these coordinates," he said, punching in a set of numbers and sending them to the helm. Ensign Prince looked at them, finally understanding Granger's meaning.

"We're making another pass?"

"You got it, Ensign." He looked around the bridge. "Any objections?"

No one spoke. Before he could continue, Commander Proctor cleared her throat. "We're all behind you, Captain—" she began, but he could see in her eyes what she was going to say—that strategic withdrawal was smarter. But he wasn't going to have any of it. He'd lectured her, and Zingano, and all the other captains more times than he could count. Stand your ground and fight, make the Swarm pay for every single system they took. Never retreat. Show no weakness of will. It was either that or fight them—and retreat from them—at the *next* world. And the next. And the next.

No. The Swarm needed to be taught that humanity would never, ever, ever back down. Eventually, they would learn, calculate their own losses and realize that they would never truly win until every last human outpost was utterly obliterated.

"Good," he said, leaving Proctor with her mouth left half-open.

"Sir, if I may, our lower hull is breached in three dozen locations. Engineering is a mess. Our fighters are all back in the bay and none has been reloaded with a brick yet, and you're sending us into another Granger Omega Three against *two* of those super dreadnoughts? Surely there's something else that can be done at this point."

He sighed. She was right, of course, but there simply was no alternative. He held up his hands. "If you have a better idea, Commander, I'm all ears."

With any other officer, he'd have them removed from the bridge. But Proctor had saved his ass more times than he could count. Still, their relationship had been strained over the past two

months. Ever since that fighter pilot, Volz, had returned with Fishtail, claiming that he'd just escaped from a Swarm-controlled Captain Granger on the other side of the singularity. She'd defended him—hell, Zingano had defended him—against General Norton, the chairman of the joint chiefs, and though he'd kept his command, suspicions around him were high ever since.

"Split the fleet. Send everyone in threes and fours and engage the carriers—they're all spread out singly in various orbits. We'd last longer that way, and take out more of their fleet. And if we're lucky, Zingano will show up before we're all dead."

Admiral Zingano to the rescue. Dammit, that was *Granger's* job.

But she was right, of course. And he wasn't going to let his pride get in the way of the best outcome. That was something a politician would do, and, dammit, he was *not* a politician. He was not an Avery. Or worse, an Isaacson.

"Do it." He pointed to the tactical station. "Assign targets. Focus on those heading toward the remaining large population centers. Commander," he said, turning back to her, "make the fleet assignments."

She nodded, focusing her attention to splitting up the fleet and informing the other captains. She looked back up. "And where will we be going, sir?"

"My previous order stands. When our fleet has dispersed on their assignments, we make the q-jump." He watched the viewscreen as the planet began to pull away—they were still on their highly elliptical course. "Straight down the throats of the two super dreadnoughts."

Proctor hesitated. "Alone?"

"Alone."

## Chapter Eight

*Star Freighter Lucky Bandit*

*High orbit, Indira, Britannia Sector*

Lieutenant Rodriguez could hardly believe his eyes. Just minutes ago he was watching the largest warship he'd ever seen begin launching its horrifying rain of fire down onto his homeworld, razing vast swaths of a continent, and the next moment that same ship was in pieces.

It was impossible. He'd always suspected that the stories surrounding the Hero of Earth were embellished and shaded with hyperbole, that the crew around Granger and the people he'd saved tended to be over-the-top in their praise of him.

If anything, those stories were cheap, fanciful lies compared to what he'd just witnessed.

"You know, I think that maybe, just maybe, we might make it out of this," he said.

Raf, the pilot, nodded slowly, his eye still wide at watching the ongoing destruction of the super dreadnought. "Yeah. I think you might be right." A moment later, he came out of it and cranked on the controls. "Watch out for those fighters."

Rodriguez nodded. "Look." He pointed toward the pieces of the dreadnought, which were starting to break up into smaller red-hot chunks. "The fighters are high-tailing it out of there. Let's thread the needle."

"You mean fly into that storm of wreckage coming off that thing?"

"No, no. Not through it, just close enough and around it so we can avoid these fighters."

Raf shook his head, but then seeing the cloud of Swarm fighters approach, he relented. Rodriguez steered the freighter toward the fragmenting dreadnought. Soon, the hundreds of bogeys faded into the background behind them as they approached one of the large pieces of wreckage—a section of hull nearly a kilometer long.

"We're too close," said Raf, nervously.

"We're fine." He pulled up on the controls and whipped them around the side hull section.

Which, to Rodriguez's surprise, disappeared in a flash. Not an explosive flash, but a bright, white flash.

He'd seen that light before.

"Be on the lookout for—"

He was about to warn Raf about the singularities—they could be so small that you'd never see one until right on top of it, but he didn't have time.

It was right in their path. Shimmering. Deadly.

The cockpit turned brilliantly white for a split second, and Rodriguez felt as if his head had just taken a direct hit. He fought against the rising sleep with its promise of peaceful oblivion. He knew he was close to passing out, but he needed to stay awake to steer the freighter to safety. His life depended on it. His kids depended on it.

The view through the windows had changed. Instead of giant pieces of the shattered super dreadnought, set against the backdrop of Indira, he only saw one piece, falling.

Falling toward a swirling maelstrom of material. Rocks, ice, debris, dust—all falling into and colliding with a central mass.

They were falling too. Their engines were out. He felt his consciousness slipping away. The last

thing he saw was the surface of the giant ball of material looming up, filling the entire window. Hundreds of rocks struck the outside hull like a million hailstones in a hailstorm. Even their relentless cacophony could not keep Rodriguez awake.

## Chapter Nine

*Bridge, ISS Warrior*

*Indira, Britannia Sector*

"Time?" Granger asked.

"Still two minutes until we've matched the velocity of the incoming dreadnoughts, Captain," said Ensign Diamond.

He nodded. "Q-jump in one. We'll decelerate the rest of the way once we've made the jump. That'll give us some time to assess the tactical situation."

Proctor eyed him warily. *What is there to assess?* her eyes wondered. Even though she said nothing, he answered her unasked question.

"We still have no idea what tactical advantages these things have—"

"You mean, other than the fact that they're a hundred times our size, sir?"

The remark was accompanied by a wink, indicating humor, but he continued as if he didn't hear. There was no time for humor, even gallows humor. "And for all we know they have a weakness that can be exploited if we just took the time to scan them properly and study their ship layout."

"You think we'll be able to study their ship schematic enough in one minute and figure out a way to destroy them? What, like fly into their exhaust port and blow up their main power reactor?"

"Something like that."

"Seems a little cliché." She studied his face. "Do you remember anything like these things? The super dreadnoughts? No fleeting memories?"

Lately, Proctor had been questioning him more about his Vacation—his missing three days aboard the *Constitution*. The memories were still foggy, especially after Vishgane Kharsa, the Dolmasi admiral, had tampered with Granger's mind, making him think he'd been peering down at the Swarm homeworld. Afterwards, he'd thought he was remembering the Swarm's point of origin, but the memory was false. And by thinking, wrongly, that he'd seen Volari Three, the Dolmasi's homeworld, he had inadvertently liberated them thinking he was striking down the Swarm.

For all the good it had done them—ever since then, the Dolmasi had rarely shown up to any battles when called upon. Some allies they were.

He shook his head. “Nothing. I remember nothing of them.”

Ensign Prince caught his attention. “Sir?”

Granger noticed the time had elapsed. “Initiate q-jump.”

Prince engaged the drive, and Granger felt the tell-tale momentary sway as the change in the starfield on the viewscreen indicated the jump was successful. Quantum effects such as the q-jump were always a little more unpredictable close to large gravity wells like planets.

“Continue deceleration,” he said. “Full scan of the ships as we approach. All bands. All fields. Neutrons, gamma, RF, meta-space, quantum signatures—everything.”

“And tactical?” Proctor stood near her post in the rear of the bridge, the eyes of the tactical crew were on her and Granger.

“Show them our belly again. That section of the ship is already dark. The crew is evacuated from decks one through five, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

“Extend the evacuation to deck eight.”

Proctor looked flustered. She never looked flustered. The battle was getting to her, or, more likely, *he* was getting to her. “Sir, Engineering starts on deck seven. Are you going to evacuate Engineering?”

“No, Engineering crew stays.”

“Tim, this is highly irregular—”

“There’s *nothing* regular about this, Shelby, why would you expect it to start getting regular now?” Why was she calling him out in front of the crew? If she pushed any harder he’d have to relieve her—he couldn’t have this kind of public questioning of his orders, especially not in the middle of a battle.

But deep inside, he knew why. Ever since Lieutenant Volz had come back through that singularity. Ever since a Swarm-controlled Fishtail had woken up, and started fingering Granger as a former Swarm agent, confirming what Volz was saying—that the pilot had talked to Granger on the other side, acting for the Swarm.

It was getting to her, that much was obvious. It was making her doubt his orders, wondering if every action he took was *still* controlled by the Swarm. He needed to figure out a way to regain her complete trust. She was too valuable an asset to lose, and if she didn’t shape the hell up, he *would* lose her.

That word lingered in his mind. *Asset*. Was she only an asset to him? Another human brick to hurl at the enemy? Another tool in his mission for complete and total victory?

But it was true, wasn’t it? He himself was a tool. They were all tools. When it came to the survival of

the species, none of them mattered, individually. Each of them, as a member of the pack, as a carrier of the precious genetic instructions that made the human race viciously fight for survival, was expendable. Including Proctor. Including Granger. She had to understand that.

"We're all bricks, Commander."

He looked her in the eye. The pain behind her gaze told him she understood.

"Very well, sir," she said with a curt nod.

"And send word to the CAG. I need some more human bricks." \*

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United Earth burns.

The Swarm runs rampant across our space. We mourn the loss of thousands of ships and millions of fallen comrades. Billions of fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers--all gone, all dead. It is time we end this, for our moment has come.

But victory never comes without sacrifice. Heroes are not taught nor trained, but forged in blood and ashes. Our grandchildren's history books will tell our story, and glorify the heroes and legends.

The Swarm will be conquered; we will prevail.

At any price.

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