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Domanova

(prologue)

Andor was the last one to enter the decommissioned airplane hangar, careful to be sure they were still unnoticed. In a short time, they would all learn if the large aluminum building was going to be their tomb or their freedom, and the air felt heavy with fear and anticipation. He was surrounded by the chosen few who would be making this journey with him. Although ninety-nine other people waited before their small spacecrafts, Andor was relieved by the uncomfortable silence in the building. He reviewed the passengers shuffling around him, holding supplies and waiting for the all clear to board. The men and woman approached for this assignment had been carefully picked from a number of scientists, doctors, engineers, and field experts. There were nearly twice as many women, and no passenger was under twenty or over thirty-five years old. Each had gone through extensive physical and psychological testing, and Fugium did their best to assemble five paralleled crews. Until now, Andor could never have imagined a mission with mostly untrained civilians and such an unclear path ahead should they succeed.

The silence broke as the minute hand was only one lap away. Andor stood stoically watching the dial clock turn. He had set the antique clock himself earlier that day just before they went dark. *Thirty seconds*. Any mistake could cost them everything. *3… 2… 1…*

The room broke into a frenzy as the entry hatches lowered on each ship and passengers scrambled to board as quickly as possible. He watched the last few board as he finished a final sweep around Genesis, the ship he would be commanding, checking for any stray cargo or passengers. The ground below him rumbled as the engines roared to life, and he knew that meant they had just nine minutes to launch.

“Commander Murray,” Andor looked up to see his Air Force commander looking at him. “It’s time. Now.” Andor watched the commander’s hatch close on Numero as he ran to the hangar door and pushed the power button. Immediately the ships propelled slowly forward to the exit as he ran back to Genesis.

Andor called for his lieutenant, Bato, to shut the hatch as he leaped up the ramp and raced to the cockpit. Genesis was now on the move, in line with the others. Dusk broke through the scene outside the hangar, illuminating the runway as their speed increased. Ahead of him, he could see that Exodia and Deuter were already soaring towards the atmosphere and Levita’s rocket boosters glowed red as they lifted off. “Bato, ignite the boosters,” instructed Andor, “and don’t get too close to Numero.” Numero should have ignited their boosters by now, but Andor saw no red glow from their engines. In order to avoid detection, there was to be no communication between ships until they were safely in the atmosphere and out of missile range.

“Commander, why aren’t they taking off?” asked Bato. “We should be in the air by now.” Andor marched back to the viewframe, not sure what he was looking for. Numero was slowing down. “Commander! They are…” Bato was interrupted by a signal call. *No.*

Andor hesitated for just a moment before he picked up the signal. “Jak, why are you stopping?” Andor bellowed.

“The throttle is choking. We can’t get enough fuel to the ignition boosters,” replied Jak. “Can we get Bato on? He helped design the damn things.”

“I’m here,” said Bato, “when did it…” The signal started to break, and Andor’s gut took a dive.

“We have to go. Now,” commanded Andor.

“What about Numero, sir?” asked Bato. “There are twenty people on that crew.”

“Now,” demanded Andor. “You know the static in the signal means we’ve been detected. We have three minutes to be outside missile range.” He felt the pressure change as they lifted off the ground, pushing against the wind.

“Andor!” yelled Jak.

*Damn it,* he thought*.* The signal was still open. He opened the viewframe to the rear just in time to see the first of the Digitale surround Numero. *We’ve been detected.*

“Open the thrusters to full dilation. We’re going to try and outfly them.”

Andor decided on the only plan he could. *Survival.* Bato, recognizing the direness of their position, released the autopilot and settled next to his commander as he had many times before. They maneuvered through the sky into the dark horizon as fast as the ship would carry them. They heard the uneasy commotion from the passenger cabin behind them as they took the first hit.

“That wasn’t a missile,” exclaimed Bato with relief.

“No kidding,” replied Andor, “we’re still alive,”

The next hit was a string of rapid fire. Andor changed the viewfind to starboard where the indicators had marked the hit. He saw the Digitale Engager and took a deep breath. They had a chance. Their ships were designed to outfly any of these menial style bug machines like Engagers. Another string of hits followed by a shriek from the back fell on them as the indicators lit up on the port side. There were two of them.

“Stay the course, Bato,” ordered Andor.

He moved to the defense board, opened the weapons sequence, and began the battle. The weapons doors opened, and within seconds he made a direct hit to the first Engager. It slowed but was not extinguished. He widened the viewfind until he had both Engagers in sight. He aimed at the second bug and missed. Genesis took another hit, knocking him into the sequence board. Bato stayed steady and Andor refocused. He fired another shot and dismantled the first Engager.

“One down,” said Andor as he watched the bug falling back toward Earth. “How much longer?” he called to the leuitenant.

Andor didn’t need a reply as he felt the air tension change, the familiarity of an atmospheric exit. Bato released the gravity stabilizer and the pressure returned to normal. *Alright you little bug, go ahead and follow us.* Andor knew the Engagers were not equipped to withstand the atmospheric line. He saw the Engager start to pull back, but he had to draw its attention back. He pulsed a string of fire towards its nose but barely made a scratch.

“What are you doing?” asked Bato, “we’re in the clear.”

“We aren’t in the clear,” replied Andor, “the bugs can relay our movements and track the pulse waves.”

Then why aren’t you hitting it head on?” Bato asked while focusing on the course ahead.

“I only have one chance at this,” explained Andor, “slow down a bit.”

“What!” exclaimed Bato.

“Trust me,” Andor replied. “Easy now.”

Bato trusted no one to command a ship more than Andor but hesitantly complied. The ship slowed a bit, allowing the Engager to get closer. Andor told him to hold steady so he did. The bug was getting closer. Bato glanced at the viewfind, regretfully, as he saw the bug’s firing port open.

“Go!” cried Andor, “full tilt!”

Bato released the thrusters completely, throwing them both back into their seats. A resounding explosion shook the craft, and the commotion from the passenger cabin morphed into fearful silence. Andor and Bato watched as the Engager exploded into bits of metal and ash. It would not be relaying any information back to Digitale. The men took a minute to recover their senses before speaking.

“What happened?” asked Bato.

“The fire launchers spit back into their fuel systems. They weren’t designed to handle the atmospheric line pressure,” explained Andor.

“Damn, Commander, you only had one shot at getting the timing on that right,” said an impressed and relieved Bato.

The signal call interrupted them, startling them both. Andor opened the signal. “Commander Andor here.”

“Andor, it’s Pressa.” The commander of the Levita announced herself. “Nice shooting.”

“Lucky shot is more like it.”

“You know Andor can’t take a compliment,” Bato interrupted as he settled back into the helm.

“Roger that, Bato,” Pressa replied with a smile in her voice. “We are on course, all passengers safe and accounted for. We are outside ground satellite reach from Earth, en route with Exodia and Deuter.”

“As are we,” answered Andor. “We had some trouble with a couple of bugs, but they won’t be telling our story today.”

“Agreed.” said Commander Pressa. “Have you heard from Numero? We have not been able to reach them.”

“Numero never made it off the ground.” the commander’s voice was heavy. “They were surrounded by Digitale before we reached the stratosphere.”

The communication line was quiet for a second. “God speed,” she replied. “We will signal meet at 0900 hours, Commander.”

“Aye, Commander,” Andor closed the signal.

Andor directed Bato to man the course while he got up to check on the passengers. He could scarcely believe it. The first part of the mission did not go as planned, but they were on course to Domanova. Digitale was no longer a threat, and human survival was once again a possibility.