

# HELIOSPHERE

## 2265



DECISION AT NOVA

ANDREAS SUCHANEK

**Heliosphere 2265**

Volume 9

“Decision at Nova”

by Andreas Suchanek

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*NOVA Station, Tess Kensington's quarters, Alzir System, 04 August 2266, 08:30 hours*

The moment of decision was upon them. And it had arrived far too soon. Lieutenant Commander Tess Kensington slowly shook her head as she stared intently at the approaching military shuttle. The vessel was shaped like an over-sized torpedo and could transport up to four passengers. Usually the shuttles were used to transport just a single officer – the courier – but not this time.

Tess leaned back in her contour chair and switched to the camera monitoring the landing pod toward which the shuttle was making its final approach. As she had expected, Commodore Ashton and EC Lipsted were standing by to greet the new arrivals. Ashton, the station's Commandant, waited at the pod, his chest swollen with pride. The EC represented the Inner Security Police and was a man with far too much power for Tess's liking. There was an oily sheen to his bald head in the cold light of the hangar.

Alongside them stood Captain Ivo Coen, who had been appointed Commodore Ashton's deputy only days ago. It was he who had informed her that the shuttle was coming to collect Commander Zev Buckshaw on the orders of President Skolberg. Buckshaw was to be transferred to the station from the prison world of Pearl within the next few hours. There was no way he would ever arrive on Earth – of that much she was certain.

The courier shuttle landed and a man aged in his late forties exited the vessel. The insignia on his crisply starched uniform identified him as a commodore. He scowled as he stalked across the hangar floor to the assembled officers, followed at a distance by his aide, who stumbled from the ship's interior in his wake. The young man was little more than a puppy in her eyes. A puppy that had been tossed into piranha-infested waters before it had even learned to swim. His cheeks were flushed with fear and he clutched a pad to his chest like a life-buoy.

The officers struck up a conversation, but its subject was of little consequence to Tess. She turned her attention to a second display, where a real-time network intrusion map identified the nodes within the station's data network that had been successfully infiltrated by the Trojan virus. The code had infected most of the network by now, but a few modules still remained unaffected. And this fact presented her with a dilemma.

Admiral Pendergast's plan hinged on the success of the cyber-attack, which would cause the station's defenses to target the home fleet rather than the invading rebel force. The mere threat posed by the station's missile installations would bring the battle to a swift and relatively bloodless conclusion... provided the virus successfully infiltrated the entire network. But if she waited for the virus to achieve this goal before activating the signal that would launch the attack, the rebel fleet could not possibly arrive in time to rescue Zev Buckshaw and Lukas Akoskin. Instead, the two officers would either be on their way to Earth or dead.

Tess cursed aloud. Luck had been on her side so far, but now it had deserted her when she needed it most. She had little doubt that Skolberg had learned of Buckshaw's true identity following his interrogation on Pearl, and she couldn't bear the thought of Zev falling into his hands.

*Is this genuinely about the greater good, or am I just looking after my own feelings?*

Once the thought had entered her mind it took on a life of its own and began to eat away at her confidence. She loved Zev. Of course she did. And she wanted desperately to rescue him. But she knew that calling in the rebel

fleet to save his life was not an option. Her personal feelings didn't factor into this. She had to focus on the big picture. But where did that leave the rebels? They might not know it, but they needed Zev.

And then there was Akoskin – a man who had saved her life more than once. It was true that he had once belonged to very organization that had carried out the killing of her parents, but she could no longer hold that against him. Not after everything that he had revealed to her about his past.

He too was a victim. Captured by an Eriin Alliance raiding party, he had been sold to the assassins as a child. They in turn had used brute force to break his resistance to the brainwashing techniques that they used to turn innocent children into highly trained and merciless killing machines. But somehow Akoskin had found a way to preserve his humanity.

In time he could provide a wealth of information about the Ketaria League that might one day lead to their destruction. The rebels needed Akoskin as much as they needed Zev.

*What's wrong with me? I never used to question my motives...*

She glanced to the left and studied her reflection in the deactivated display. It was the face of a stranger. Scarred and disfigured by burn scars. The battle in the Algethi System had cost the HYPERION and its crew dearly. As macabre as it sounded, Tess knew that she could count herself among the fortunate. Many of her comrades had been killed. Others had suffered far crueler injuries. But *something* had changed inside her since she awoke from her coma in the medical bay.

She had lost her sense of certainty and found herself questioning her decisions more than ever before. Only after completing her mission to NOVA Station could she afford to have the scarring on her face removed. Until then, there wasn't a biometric system that could recognize her. Or so she hoped.

*Pendergast should have sent Doctor Tauser with us, she thought bitterly.*

With a shake of head she put her doubts behind her. She had to act fast. The success of this mission depended on her making the right decision and making it now. She took another look at the network intrusion map then activated the phase-comms squirt. The rebel fleet would be standing by, the assault could begin. And as the ships made their final preparations, Tess began with hers. She began to pray, hoping against hope that the virus would spread throughout the network before Pendergast's arrival.

\*

*Dreadnought TORCH, Distance to Alzir System: 15 light years, 4 August 2266, 08:50 hours*

Jayden awoke with a jolt. His first instinct was to leap to his feet. Then, remembering where he was, he sank back into the sheets. The ambient AI, noting that he had awakened, bathed the cabin in warm light. Beside him his companion's steady breathing paused momentarily, then she sighed and rolled over to continue her slumbers. Jayden turned to study her. Lieutenant Commander Kristen 'Kirby' Belfair. He smiled at the thought of the events of the past evening – and indeed of every evening since his return from CASSIOPEIA. There really is a silver lining to every cloud, he mused. In this case, the cloud was his damaged ship and the lengthy repairs which had prevented its deployment on their mission. Pendergast wanted to have him around and he had been transferred to the TORCH as an observer. Since then, the fleet – comprised of the few vessels still armed and fit for battle – had loitered on Alzir System's outermost periphery. A little downtime, he had discovered, had its own rewards.

"Your smile is brighter than the lighting", grumbled Kirby. "How is a woman supposed to get any sleep around here?"

It was only then that Jayden realized that the steady rhythm of her breathing had changed seconds before. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake you." He kissed her lightly on the lips, lay back on the futon and clasped his hands behind his head.

"I was only joking", Kirby grinned. "Nobody wakes me that easily. Not even Jayden Cross, star-fighter and all round hero." She rolled over onto her side, resting her head in the crook of her elbow.

"Don't you start!"

"And why not? Bugging you is a lot of fun. You should try it."

His smile vanished. "I guess I'm just tired of people calling me a hero."

Kirby snorted derisively. "You've got no one else to blame. People were just beginning to forget about your little stunt on Tikara II and what did you go and do? You rush off to Cas III, steal Skolberg's kill chip extraction technology, thumb your nose at him and his ISP goons *AND* return with the serum to heal Noriko Ishida."

"You were there. You know as well as I do that we got lucky "

"The ILLUMINA wasn't directly involved in the operation. And you really need to get over this 'we got lucky' number. Sure – a bit of luck never hurts. But you risked your life to help us. And if your FO is alive today then it's thanks to you. Those are the facts. It was *you* that gave us the means to deal with those chips and every officer in this fleet is grateful for it. You shouldn't begrudge them that, Jayden."

"Then how about you show me some gratitude just one more time?" He grinned cheekily.

"Why, Captain Cross! I'm shocked!" She punched him lightly then sat up and declared: "Let's remember that it was I who warned you of the incoming kinetic strike. And that makes me something of a hero too." She motioned to him with her hand. "You may massage my feet."

They giggled.

"But seriously", said Kirby with a straight face. "How is Ishida? I've heard all kinds of rumors."

"Surprisingly well. Even Isaac is impressed. According to the doctors, her brain shows no signs of organic shock or trauma."

"It's amazing. That stuff could save thousands of lives."

Jayden's eyes clouded over. "Isaac and Collins were able to retrieve microscopic traces of the serum from the cylinder after Ishida's treatment."

"And?"

"The nano-matter decayed within minutes even though it was extracted in a clean room."

Kirby groaned in disappointment. "Walker's orbital strike made a gigantic crater out of the military research station on Cas III so I don't expect there'll be more of that serum arriving any time soon. It's a wonder he didn't completely obliterate Central City while he was at it. But I guess we can be grateful that Skolberg will be hurting too."

"And I'm sure he'll make us pay for it. I can't believe I once looked up to that man. He protected me and my crew from Michalev."

"Sure. But only so that he could use you." Kirby nodded. "I'm familiar with the report you submitted to Santana about McCall's revelations. She uploaded the documents relating to the ShadowNetwork discovered by Commander Gold's wife to the fleet network."

"I know. Everyone is talking about it. Pendergast moved him to the HYPERION before the TORCH departed. It's possible that his wife is being held on Pearl – I mean, who isn't? Pendergast wanted to get him out of the firing line. Desperate men do desperate things."

"Precisely. I'm sure your Alpha 365 will keep an eye on him." Jayden cleared his throat. "If he doesn't have another one of his manic-depressive episodes. How did the Admiral react when you told her about his little problem?"

"How about that foot massage?"

"You're kidding me?! You were going to tell her! Dammit, Jay!"

It was strange hearing her address him by his nickname. His childhood friend Jonas Tauser was the only other person to use it and only when they were off duty. Jayden had a sneaking suspicion that Kirby might make more liberal use of it.

The fury in her eyes snapped him back to reality. "I just couldn't find the right moment. And as long as the HYPERION is away from the front lines, the risks are minimal."

"I hope you know what you're doing. Do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure. What?"

She smiled cheekily. "Just make sure that I'm around when you tell her."

Before he could respond, their comms implants began to blink simultaneously. A moment later their priority alarms sounded. They both sat up and studied their implants.