

Countdown to Emergence

A companion to Ascension 2 Galaxy

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5: Mental Warfare

Being taken off medical duty, Allison Hunt reflected from the firm couch in her apartment, gave one plenty of time to think.

It wasn't that she wanted to think about her past, though she wasn't exactly against it. It was literally doctor's orders. She'd lost her memory when her scout ship broke up in the atmosphere of Rynn, and they'd been quite clear that the more she thought about it, the quicker it would come back.

A cup of now lukewarm tea in her hand, she ran through her life- what she knew of it- for what seemed like the thousandth time.

October... no, January. Fuck, she couldn't remember her own birthday! She had it yesterday, and she was sure she would be able to remember it tomorrow, but it was still frustrating. The year was 2122- she was pretty sure of that. Earth. Vancouver, actually. She remembered the skyline: the old buildings, the new buildings, the bridges that spanned the Fraser River, the narrows of Burrard Inlet and the huge viaduct that connected the mainland to the island.

Her childhood... well, she'd never been able to remember much of that. She was born on Earth, but grew up on Eridanus- she remembered moving when she was very young but had no idea precisely when. She remembered her school- bits and pieces. A mix of feelings when she walked out the door. Some kind of sport. Shooting her dad's old-fashioned rifle. And her first augs.

She'd joined the Marines twenty years ago- it felt a lot longer than that and a lot shorter than that. She had no idea if that was because her memories were all fucked up or if she'd always felt that way. More bits and pieces of Basic, joining the fleet and her first deployment among the stars. Mixed feelings about something that did and didn't live up to the hype.

But she'd been a promising young Lieutenant, and she felt like the job really mattered. She'd done well in the Marines. Six years, though. Only six years before being transferred to black ops- Naval Special Operations. Much like being a Marine, yet oh so different. It was all tightly classified to the point where she didn't talk about any of it with her therapist. Not that she particularly wanted to.

Something had happened in 2152. She didn't remember exactly what it was, probably didn't want to remember. But one year later she was out of special operations and into a command track in the Navy.

It was definitely different from being in the Marines as a ground pounder or even the Navy in special operations. Riding a ship from place to place was not the same as running it. She felt a sense of satisfaction with that posting. Making XO of the ASV Ascension hadn't been easy, but it was the best part of her career.

And then there was the Rynn Incident.

She wasn't allowed to talk about the Rynn Incident. The Incident, and indeed the planet of Rynn, were to be kept secret. It would get out eventually, of course, but until then, she was to keep quiet. Fine with her. It wasn't like she wanted to talk about Rynn, anyway.

So she waited in her apartment, thinking and trying to remember some things that she did and some things that she didn't, until enough came back for them to clear her for active duty again.

4: Lucrative Warfare

Zlix Tvervy had been called many things, in many languages. Pirate. Smuggler. Arms dealer. Warlord. Criminal. Worthless trash. Drain on society. Evil itself.

But his favorite was a human word, *businessman*. Unlike the Unified Drozh of his species, which had the ambiguity beat out of it by strict standards, the language the humans spoke was rife with double meanings and connotations. A *businessman* could be a smartly-dressed professional executive. Or it could be twisted to mean what he was.

Of course, labels mattered little in his line of work. It was what people ascribed to that label that mattered. Fear. Respect. Wealth. Power. He wasn't naive. He knew that being a successful criminal revolved around more than strength. It was the image he projected, the way he was perceived that kept him alive and in power.

He knew his profession was a dangerous one, highly competitive and highly lethal. Though it wasn't all about strength, it was a big part of it. Perhaps not being able to physically pound any challenger to the ground, but the ability to destroy any opponent by any means necessary. He would allow no room for competition, not on his territory- territory that had of course been torn from the hands of someone else. Of course, he wasn't the only one with that idea.

In response, he had evolved a certain philosophy. He was believed in climbing through the top by any means necessary, being the best where it really counted, and being as ambitious as he could. If someone could beat him at his own game, well, then, he'd cede it proudly to the one who took him down.

It was, after all, how he had gotten started in the first place.

Like many of his compatriots (but unlike a surprising number more), he was not born a criminal. Born to an orthodox family, he had grown up a proud Panalian Unionist, supporter of state and people. His cunning and ambition had led him into State Security, where he was selected to become a field agent.

Going out into the field had exposed him to the best and the worst of the galaxy, a world he had seen but never truly experienced. Nothing like the supposed utopia he had been born in, it was a cynical place where values were relative and principles yielded to the highest bidder.

Eventually, he reached a point where he no longer cared about the system he now had nothing but contempt for. It was ironic in a way. The same traits that brought him into State Security brought him out of it, working to protect the system had shattered his faith in it, and he'd been handed the tools he needed to break away once and for all.

He saw an opportunity and he took it. He knew that sooner or later someone else would, too. As every empire was doomed to fall, so was his own.

But until then, he'd enjoy the fruits of his labors.

3: Ideological Warfare

Dalna Veraii fancied himself a freedom fighter.

His cause was just. What was now New Castor had once been a fledgling Salvel colony, given away to the humans. Soon, the barely-evolved primates began taking over, building out their own colony and pushing the Salvel to the sidelines. Conflict began to grow, and some of the humans clearly were trying to end Salvel presence on the colony together. Some called him a hatemonger. It was justified resentment if even that.

His companions were formidable. His right-hand woman, Jalah Quernalis, was the local bartender as well as an informant and skilled fighter. She excelled at her tasks, as if she had been trained for it. Her past was mysterious, but in his business, it didn't matter. His senior lieutenant, Yiiials Ilvisiai, was skilled with both weapons and rhetoric. There were rumours that he was playing both sides, but he didn't doubt the cunning man's intent for a second. The rest of his crew sometimes lacked discipline or skill, but their hearts were in the right place.

His commitment was unwavering. They all had jobs, of course, and hobbies, and in one case, a family, but they dedicated the time they could to the cause. His situation was a little different. When he wasn't building his business, he was using it as a front. So far, he didn't need it for anything critical, but he knew that would soon change.

His allies were numerous. His organization was one cell of the AVN, or Alvetria V'erya Nasi. They were like-minded Salvel, those willing to do what was necessary to take back their homes. Their rightful place, taken by selfish aliens and traitorous leaders who had sold their own people out to them. They provided little material support, unfortunately, but also interfered little, perfect for his operation.

His methods were effective. When there was time, the group gathered to plan their strategies. Right now, they were in the early stages. Listening, gathering intelligence, seeding the seeds of doubt and hatred. They would soon plan an attack, and then strike, dividing the colony and rallying their fellow Salvel to push the humans out. They were preparing under everyone's noses, yet know one knew. Perhaps they dismissed the odd group as something much more mundane.

Soon, their day would be at hand.

2: Secret Warfare

Before he'd become caught up in the business, no one would have pegged Dmitri Borosov as a spy.

He'd considered a career in engineering, or perhaps finance, but somehow ended up falling into the AEIA intelligence apparatus, first as an analyst, then as a field agent. It may not have been an expected career path, but it had turned out to be one that he succeeded at.

A more poetic man might say how a new world had been opened up to him, but to Borosov, it was simply a new set of objectives and the tools to accomplish them. It wasn't a noble quest for the betterment of humanity, but simply a job with risks and rewards.

The world of spies- if one insisted on calling it that- was one of paradoxes and contradictions.

It both was and was not as it was portrayed in fiction. There was certainly as much intrigue, if not *more*, but a lot less shooting. It was not a game- again, Borosov hated the metaphor- of suave men and attractive women but of more or less ordinary people one would never expect to be a spy.

On the other hand, it was often just as dangerous, possibly more so. Consequences depended on where and what an agent was working. A low-level source working a drug ring might end up face-down in an alley with their kneecaps blown off. A highly-placed sleeper agent with diplomatic cover could spark a galactic war.

And again, the intelligence apparatus was both as important as fiction would lead and far less, at least in the way one would expect. Ultimately, the AEIA answered to the government and did not control it. On the other hand, the agency's information shaped the thinking of top officials. If they wanted to, perhaps they could usurp the galaxy, but the desire was not there. The ones making the decisions wanted to keep their jobs, after all.

Trust was a complicated affair. It was said that one could only be betrayed by those they trusted. It was also said that trust was necessary in a world where mistrust was simply a way of life. Because of this, everything was tightly controlled and heavily compartmentalized. It wasn't without disadvantages, but it was necessary.

Even when the information was gathered, it could not always be acted upon. Often it would show one's hand, revealing the source. Sometimes it would actually make a situation worse. This had always been a problem, and there was no end in sight.

Borosov didn't like to admit it, but he often got nervous before a mission, and this one especially, for good reason. Going rogue and working with the Tvervy cartel was essential to the plan. It was also as insane as it sounded.

1: Future Warfare

Its pale grey hull illuminated by massive floodlights, the AXV Emergence waited silently in its drydock for its first deployment.

The missile system was the heart of the new warship. Guided missiles had been tried and had some uses, but mass accelerators remained the dominant weapon in naval warfare. The new ones on the Emergence were unlike any ever seen before. The missiles were huge, FTL-capable, and were fired from a short mass accelerator. In theory at least, they would be able to destroy even the largest dreadnoughts before any response could be made.

Apart from the missile system, the Emergence was equipped with the latest technology. Matter-antimatter reactors, first deployed on the Ascension subclass of the Hampton Roads class, powered the new ship. They were much more powerful and efficient than their fusion predecessors, though expensive and somewhat more dangerous. A huge subspace array graced the bow of the Emergence, providing unparalleled detection capabilities. State of the art ECM and directed energy point defense was fitted. Absent were the usual secondary turrets- the Emergence wasn't supposed to need them.

The new starship was designed to be stealthy as well as fast. It featured subspace signature reduction in its FTL drive, the details of which remained classified. The sublight engines were baffled and could be chilled to cut down on the massive plasma exhaust plumes, and were supplemented by much less powerful but far less observable "reactionless" drives. The hull was coated with radar absorbent material and could be refrigerated to reduce the infrared signature. Heat was dumped with next-generation subspace sinks which were purported to disperse heat in subspace and reduce its signature in the alternate dimension.

The ship broke conventions for layout, too. The standard Alliance cruiser had a long mass driver above two or three reactors, with the FTL drive behind and the sublight drives to the side. It was a design that worked fairly well and hadn't changed significantly in decades. The Emergence put its missile system forward, much like the mass driver of its predecessors, but had a much different engineering layout. Three drive pods, each including a reactor and sublight engine, were arranged radially around the aft end of the ship, with the FTL drive in the middle.

To some, the Emergence was a technological boondoggle and a waste of taxpayer money. But to many, it was the future of naval warfare. Only time would tell who would be proven right.