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Of Fire and Night

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Chapter One

KING PETER

A heavy transport bearing the Earth Defense Forces logo settled onto the Whisper Palace plaza to the sound of cheering almost loud enough to drown out the landing jets. An honor guard carved a safe corridor through enthused spectators toward the shuttle and laid down a purple carpet for King Peter and Queen Estarra.

Taking steps in perfect synchronization with hers, the young King spoke from the corner of his mouth so none of the professional eavesdroppers could hear. "I so rarely get to announce good news that isn't an outright lie."

Well aware that Chairman Basil Wenceslas was watching and ready to respond if they made the slightest wrong move, Estarra answered with equal caution. "We've had to report the deaths of soldiers far too often. Greeting genuine returning heroes is a vast improvement."

No one had expected to find EDF soldiers alive this long after the battle of Osquivel; the missing men and women had been presumed killed by the alien hydrogues. Now, blinking in the Palace District's sunshine, thirty survivors hurried down the debarkation ramp, jostling each other as if they couldn't wait to drink in the air of Earth. All of the smiling refugees wore new uniforms provided by the rescue crew. According to reports, they had immediately ejected the clothing given to them by their Roamer captors (or was it "hosts"? Peter wondered) out the disposal chutes.

Barely able to contain the ecstatic mob, the guards let the corralled VIP relatives and selected loved ones forward. During the return voyage, former Chairman Maureen Fitzpatrick had transmitted the names of the POWs. Excited families bounced from one rescued survivor to another until, like puzzle pieces, the right ones interlocked with hugs, joyous shouts, and mutual weeping.

Despite this glowing reception, Peter knew the Hansa government was thoroughly embarrassed to find anyone there. The EDF's clash with the hydrogues at Osquivel had been an utter disaster and a frenzied retreat. Many wounded soldiers were left

to die aboard disabled vessels and unclaimed lifepods. But a band of Roamers had rescued some of them. Maureen Fitzpatrick and families of the fallen had gone to the ringed gas giant with the intent of establishing a memorial, and by sheer coincidence had encountered the Roamer shipyard and secured the hostages' return.

Without question, many more soldiers could have been rescued if the panicked EDF hadn't abandoned them. Once the heady celebration was over, people would begin asking questions. Basil, you certainly have egg on your face, Peter thought and realized that that was when the Chairman proved most dangerous.

Behind his eyes he saw a memory-flash of bloodied water, butchered dolphins, lifeless glassy eyes of the once-playful sea mammals: Basil had not reacted well to the leaked news of the Queen's unsanctioned pregnancy. Peter could not get the smell of blood and saltwater out of his nostrils.

"Keep to the schedule," Basil's voice scolded from his tiny ear microphone. "This is taking too long."

He squeezed Estarra's hand and faced the transport, waiting for the main event. Sensing an even greater spectacle, the crowd grew quiet. The cargo doors cracked open with a thud and a groan, metal sliding against metal. Interior floodlights shone with a glow like banked fires. Soldiers and cargo handlers used lifting apparatus and gravity-reducers like wranglers transporting a chained prehistoric monster. A small hydrogue derelict.

Roamers had found the dead ship drifting in the rings of Osquivel after the great battle. Though this scout vessel was less than ten meters in diameter, the crowd drew in a near-simultaneous gasp of amazement and fear.

As lifters lowered the derelict to the ground, Maureen Fitzpatrick approached Peter and Estarra with her grandson, one of the thirty refugees, and shook the King's hand as if he were a business partner. As a former Chairman, Maureen understood both how little power Peter truly wielded and the necessity of playing the game. "Sire, we had to let the Roamers escape in exchange for this derelict. I hope you agree it was an acceptable bargain."

"I'm sure the Roamers won't cause us any particular harm." He considered the recent aggression against them to be a deadly distraction that wasted vital military resources. Another one of Basil's boondoggles. "You made the right decision. Now we have an intact enemy ship to study. I will see to it that both of you receive recognition for your service."

Pleased to be in the limelight again, Maureen looked like a plump cat that had just swallowed a whole mouthful of canaries.

Estarra looked at the quiet young grandson of the old Chairman. "You seem distracted, Mr. Fitzpatrick. Are you well?"

"Sorry-I was ... thinking about someone."

"All this talk about Roamers must be distressing to him." Maureen touched the young man's arm. "He and the rest of the EDF survivors deserve a long furlough, King Peter-if I can convince General Lanyan of that."

Hansa scientists hurried into the security zone, eager to get their hands on the alien ship. Engineering Specialist Lars Rurik Swendsen was like a child unwrapping the largest present at a birthday party. "Just look at it! It's perfect. And if its systems work, we should be able to build counterparts using similar technology. This could be the biggest advance since producing Soldier compies from Klikiss robot designs, or ... or the Klikiss transportals themselves. Just think of it!" The tall Swede looked as if he might start dancing.

Maureen interjected, "We've also secured detailed notes and logbooks from tests performed by a Roamer engineer. Some of the data may be useful."

Dignitaries came forward to have their images taken beside the hydrogue ship. With so much disheartening news lately, media reporters would seize upon this happy story, just as they had repeated the unofficial announcement of the Queen's pregnancy.

Even so, this small derelict was a grim reminder that the hydrogues could strike Earth at any time. However, Peter thought of Basil lurking behind shadows in the Palace, it would be refreshing to confront an enemy who isn't afraid to face you.