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SPQR



The Falcon of Rome

PART 1

IMPERIUM

This book is dedicated to all those whose convictions
inspired them to defend what was important to them - and
who gave their lives for that cause.

"Go tell the Spartans, passerby, that here, obedient to their
laws, we lie."

*The inscription on the commemorative plaque at
Thermopylae*

[illegible]

PROLOGUE

The first colonial ships departed Earth 372 years ago, seeking to conquer the stars. Since that event in 2094, the colonization of the galaxy has made incredible progress. An unprecedented exodus resulted in the settling of over three hundred planets and their annexation into the Terran Hegemony, which was considered home by over 75 billion people.

Thanks to the discovery of the jump points and the development of the transdimensional drive - "TD drive" for short - the distance between the stars was no longer measured in lifespans. Spaceships now required only a few weeks or months to build up enough speed to reach and cross between the jump points.

The jumps themselves took place in zero time. However, each ship had to be traveling at 0.4 c, the equivalent of 40 percent the speed of light, at the point of entry in order to be moving fast enough to fold space with the supplemental energy burst from the TD engine and to pass through a jump point. If a ship didn't meet the minimum speed, the best case scenario involved a missed jump opportunity. The alternative was a jump ending in nothingness, light-years away from any potentially responsive port, without sufficient energy, provisions, or oxygen reserves, stranded in the midst of never-ending space. This fate had befallen far too many ships.

Of course, the great interstellar exodus came with its own unique problems. With enough capital, every splinter group, sect, religious body, or ethnic / special interest group could rent or purchase space ships for emigration. The exodus presented an opportunity for these groups to turn their backs on Terra, the new name for Earth, and to begin new

lives according to their own rules. The nation states on the old Earth had hardly been abolished before new boundaries were being established beyond the atmosphere.

In the hope of preventing the rise of new power-hungry nation states and the potential conflicts that might stem from them, the former United Nations transformed itself into the Terran Hegemony in 2127. Every planetary government agreed to uphold the joint constitution, the so-called Grand Charter, and to submit themselves to the Hegemony Senate on Terra in all matters of defense and foreign policy.

Beyond these concerns, every planet and system, even entire sectors, were allowed to maintain their own governments. These ranged from the Islamic worlds around Mecca and Medina to the Ecological Federation of Paradise to the Trade Alliance to the Kingdom of Alesia. Within their separate political spheres, each government was permitted to operate autonomously, as long as their activities didn't infringe on their neighbors' rights or violate the Grand Charter.

To ensure adherence to the Grand Charter, the Senate set up the Terran Defense Force (TDF). These troops patrolled the trade routes, researched and mapped space, explored new jump points, monitored the separate nations' military and security forces, and curtailed the already violent expansion efforts of various national entities, which had increased at an alarming rate in recent years.

In short, the TDF was the Senate's strong arm, without which it would have long lost the influence it still possessed – or believed it still possessed – in many regions.

To prevent the infiltration of its troops by nationalistic agitators, demagogues, and ideologues, the Terran Great Senate – the regulatory body that supervised the actual Senate – decreed that recruitment for the TDF should primarily focus on children. This way, the TDF could exclusively control its recruits' upbringing, education, and

training, which would solidify the loyalty of future soldiers to the Hegemony.

Therefore, four times a year, around the start of each Terran season, suitable volunteers were tested and brought to Terra to continue their training to become TDF members at the TDF Academy on Luna, Terra's moon.

At the end of their training, each TDF member was assigned the position for which they were best qualified. This might be as an infantryman, an administrative officer, a drone pilot, a cook, or even a fleet or regimental officer – if he or she ranked among the best of the best and survived the hard training regimen connected with the selection process.

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Glossary

1

Terran Hegemony, Thebes, Newport, Spaceport,
08.21.2466. 1500 Local Planetary Time (LPT)

Autumn had reached Thebes, a planet with wide expanses and practically unchanging weather conditions year round. The summer had been quite chilly, but that was just the way things were on Thebes. Rarely truly warm, though too often cold and unpleasant. This went for the summers, too, which only lasted for about two months and rarely reached the seventies. All in all, the only reason the Hegemony placed any value on this planet was due to its genetically modified wheat and vast prairies, which produced a high percentage of the foodstuffs for the colonized planets in this sector.

The GM Skyflyer MkIII family air vehicle carrying Leonidas Alexander Falkenberg and his father approached the parking area for the Newport Spaceport departure terminal. The air traffic was light, which hardly came as a surprise. What would bring an aircraft to Thebes, after all? Although Thebes sat on one of the major interstellar trade routes, 90 percent of the commercial ships bypassed the system altogether.

Freight goods composed over 95 percent of Thebes' transshipment. All foodstuffs were delivered to the spaceport by automated or robot-controlled light freighters or magnetic trains in standard Mark I - IV containers. The goods were loaded at the port onto barges that carried the cargo to the orbiting full-sized freighters, which exchanged the containers for consumer, luxury, and investment goods. Returning to the surface, the barges transferred the new goods to the waiting light freighters and magnetic trains. Not terribly exciting but fairly efficient. Even though this was

only his second time here, Leonidas was already tired of watching the process.

"Sir, when does my ship leave?" he asked his father.

His father, a 45-year-old TDF veteran, inhaled deeply. Ever since passing the TDF entrance exam two months before, Leonidas had worried nonstop that he might miss his flight. It was no surprise that for the second time in four hours, he was asking his father about the departure time. Others would have been shocked that the newly minted five-year-old had only asked twice.

"Leonidas, you already know the answer, so stop asking. Can't you just enjoy the view for a few minutes?"

Of course, this was not a satisfying answer for a five-year-old or even one you might have expected, since in about an hour Leonidas would be leaving the planet without much prospect of returning for the next fifteen years. The reply was all the more remarkable considering that, except for the twice-asked question and the short replies, not a single word had been exchanged during the three thousand-kilometer trip. However, extraneous questions were a rarity in the Falkenberg family, and when they did occur, they were seldom tolerated. For once, this was alright with Leonidas, who was still trying to process the farewells he had just taken from his mother, his sister Athena, and his older brother Caesar.

He glanced sideways at his father. For some reason, Maximilian didn't seem all that happy about the situation, although he had been incredibly proud when Leonidas had passed his entrance exam. After the results had been announced, the otherwise taciturn man had shown his son a few pictures from his military service, sharing the stories that went with them. This was another rarity in the Falkenberg home, and his mother Tessa had seemed less than delighted by it.

Maximilian Falkenberg was not a great talker, but when he did have something to say, it was always a good idea to

listen closely. Leonidas' mother claimed his reticence had been brought on by the injury his father had suffered while helping to quell the rebellion on Assur. In an ambush, he had lost both legs, half a lung and his best friend. Leonidas had never been able to find out which of these losses had been the worst for his father. This was a topic that never came up for discussion or could be broached through questions. The military past of Leonidas' father was completely taboo in their family, as was the subject of the military in general. This was mainly due to his mother, who was convinced that their family had already paid their dues to society. Nonetheless, he had not been forbidden to learn about the TDF, and after sufficient consideration, he had asked his father if he could take the entrance exam. It was at that moment that he noticed something about his father. He couldn't put it into words, but Leonidas was practically certain that his father had hoped he would do this very thing, despite the fact he had never said anything about it. His demeanor after Leonidas passed the test with distinction also indicated his approval. However, Leonidas could never figure out why his father refused to talk about this subject, a mystery that neither his father nor his mother ever offered to help solve. Leonidas sighed, his thoughts occupied by wondering why adults always had to make everything so complicated. He continued to gaze out the window as they neared their destination. They flew across the Tellert River and Newport came into view, the air traffic growing busier as they approached.

Even at a distance, Leonidas could see a ship sitting on the open airfield, contrasting sharply with the barges that dominated the field. It was narrower than a freighter and was only about one hundred meters long. It bore the emblem of the TDF, a stylized white galaxy within a white laurel wreath against a light blue background, but what distinguished the ship even more were the double gun

turrets on the top of it, as well as the fact it was sitting in the designated military part of the spaceport.

"Look, father, there's my ship. It's huge!"

"My boy, that's not a ship. It's a launch, kind of like a dinghy. The real ship is orbiting somewhere above Thebes, and is several times bigger than that little thing there."

"Will you be taking me up into orbit?"

Leonidas watched his father expectantly. "No, Leo, I can't. Parents can only go as far as the gate. The TDF is responsible for you past that point. For a long time, it's going to be your family."

Leonidas considered this. "You were also in the TDF, father. So, you can come along and take me up to the ship."

Maximilian studied his son again before shaking his head slightly. He relinquished control of his vehicle to the almost fully automated spaceport traffic control center. Now he had one less problem on his hands.

The vehicle was drawn along the guide beam to the spaceport's entrance, coming to a stop in front of the passenger departure area. A yellow transport droid immediately approached them and asked: "May I help you with your baggage, gentlemen?"

Leonidas and his father were just climbing out of their vehicle, but they didn't respond to the droid. Via his individual comp – his personal DNA-coded arm comp, IC for short – which he still had from his military days, Maximilian instructed his vehicle's autopilot to park in an adjacent lot and to wait until he notified it to return to the terminal's pickup area.

There was no luggage for the multi-armed service droid to carry anyway. All of Leonidas' future needs would be supplied by the TDF.

"And whatever they don't give you, my boy, you don't really need," his father had added to the orders from the TDF, by way of explanation.

All that was allowed was three kilograms of carry-ons. Mementoes. Leonidas had spent a long time considering what to bring. He had finally made a list, gathered everything together, and weighed it. He was only off by thirteen kilograms. His favorite books would have to stay behind, along with his ball and the green block of granite he had found last year on their mountain trip to the Emerald Waterfalls. Once he had set aside everything that seemed too heavy, he was down to seven kilograms. Still four too many!

After a sleepless night, his father had given him a HoloCube the following morning. It came with a 200 TB hard drive and voice control. Leonidas was stunned. His very own HoloCube. The latest model, at that! Never in his wildest dreams had Leonidas imagined that his father would spend so much money on something like this. His mother had merely watched her husband with a smile. Now Leonidas had something that would enable him to take along all his favorite toys, books, photos, and videos – at least in a scanned, saved sense. For the next two weeks, he ran around with the HoloCam from his father, taking photos and videos of everything that was important to him. Surprisingly enough, his father had permitted this without a single comment. Leonidas captured his mother cooking, the sunrise and sunset over the hill behind their house, his siblings, the skittish cat from next door, his room, his mother out shopping, his father at the memorial in the TDF cemetery near the city – he had recently started visiting it more often –, his mother baking in the kitchen...

When he had everything pulled together, he still had an extra 200 grams for the various sweets his mother had stuffed into his bag, despite his father's disapproving gaze.

His father grasped his hand and led him to the TDF check-in point. Leonidas had to present his ID card, while his father handed over the documents that the uniformed man behind the desk called *marching orders*, although everyone had to

know that he was going to be flying on a ship to Terra and not marching anywhere. Leonidas was asked to peer into a retinal scanner and to sit quietly for a DNA scan.

When this was over, the desk attendant said: "That's it, Cadet Falkenberg. Here's your boarding pass. Don't lose it! You have thirty minutes until boarding. Feel free to spend this time with your father. Be back here at 1600 on the dot, with all your gear."

Thanks to his father's years of insistent formalities, Leonidas responded instinctively: "Aye aye, sir!"

"Well, look at that. There's still hope for my beloved TDF," the man remarked with a smile. Leonidas had no idea why the soldier suddenly looked so much friendlier.

"Father, could we go have a cup of hot chocolate?" Leonidas asked.

"Yes, Leo! Good idea. There's something I'd still like to tell you."

Leonidas and his father walked over to the cafeteria across from the check-in desk, where they claimed an unoccupied table. Parents and their children were scattered all over the place, the general mood being relatively gloomy. This part of the terminal seemed to be engulfed in a fog of melancholy, sadness, and gradual goodbyes, which effectively repelled all the other passengers and visitors.

Leonidas watched his father submit their order through the table terminal, before shifting his attention to him: "Leo, we won't see each other for a very long time – at least not face to face. You're now as old as I was when my father brought me to the check-in desk. I'm very proud of you, and I'm sure you're going to do great things."

A red-and-gold painted droid delivered their order, interrupting his father for just a moment.

"As of today, you are a soldier in the TDF. Never forget that, my son. For the past twelve hundred years, there has been a Falkenberg in every generation who, just like you, has done their duty. You will receive the finest education

possible. What you eventually become depends only on your own abilities, your dedication, and your ambition. And on something that isn't talked about nearly enough – luck. Never press your luck too far. Always take precautions when making plans. Don't ever rely on chance, and always be careful. I would like to give you something I hope you will never receive personally."

He reached into his bag and pulled out one of his medals, which Leonidas had secretly looked at more than once. His father didn't keep these under lock and key, but he didn't display them, either, and typically refused to answer any questions about them.

"This, Leo, is the Blood Cross. I received it because I failed to duck down quickly enough. This piece of lead is what I got in exchange for my legs and lung. I might have excellent prosthetics, but I have never stopped missing my legs. Make sure, my boy, that you never receive a medal like this. It would kill your mother. So here, take this one and keep it as a warning of what can happen if you are reckless and trust in your luck instead of being careful.

"And ignore anything you hear about honor, bravery, and heroism. Listen to nothing except your own common sense and do what you think is the right thing, my boy. Always!"

His father had never said anything like this before. Quite the opposite. At home, he had encouraged his son to look up to his grandfather Marcus, who in 2432, during the capture of the space station on Ceres, had single-handedly stormed the main security center. For this heroic act, he had been awarded the Terran Cross on the battlefield by the fleet admiral himself. There was also Uncle Hadrian, who had received the Defense Cross for neutralizing an enemy gun emplacement in hand-to-hand combat despite having been injured. The events that had led up to these heroic acts were another taboo topic at home, and Leonidas had worked hard to find out even these bits of information. And now this!

"Father, may I ask you something?"

"My boy, you may ask me anything. What would you like to know?"

"Why didn't you go back to the TDF after you got better?"

Leonidas studied his father closely. This was actually a thorny question his mother had strictly forbidden him from asking. She claimed his father would tell him eventually – when the time was right. For a second, it looked like his father was struggling against tears. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to ask him this at this particular moment.

"My boy, assuming you complete your training without deciding to quit, you will eventually reach a certain age and have been around enough that you will be forced to choose between two possible paths: You will either change that which is slowly killing off both you and your comrades, or you will walk away altogether. Back then, I decided to walk away."

Leonidas still had a lot of questions, but their time was up. The great departure was taking shape around him. Parents hugged their children while friends shook hands, and the young cadets began gathering around the check-in point. It was two minutes till four. Leonidas looked at his father and hugged him one more time. "Please tell Mother I love her, sir."

"Take good care of yourself, Leo!"

"Aye aye, sir!" Leonidas replied, turning quickly away so his father wouldn't see his tears.

Like the other cadets, he reported to the soldier at the check-in desk and presented his marching orders. At the next table, he was handed gray overalls with his name on them and a pair of zero-g boots. After getting dressed in the changing area, he emptied his pockets and deposited his civilian clothes in a trash disposal. With his three kilograms of gear, he boarded the TDSF shuttle *Prometheus*, which transported him up to the orbiting TDSF troop transport cruiser 73 *Gladius*. This was the moment that everything

changed for Leonidas. He would think back on this day, though he had no way of knowing that yet.

2

In orbit above Thebes, TDSF Launch 73-2 TDSFS
Prometheus, 08.21.2466, 2120 LPT, 1545 Galactic
Standard Time (GST)

His father had been right. The *Gladius* was bigger than the shuttle. Significantly bigger. The blue-uniformed petty officer, who was accompanying the thirty-two cadets, explained what type of ship they would have the honor of traveling on to Terra via Sparta, Megara, and Olont. As the cadets stared at the view screens – either to catch one last glimpse of their home planet or to check out the *Gladius* as they approached – the officer pointed out that this venerable ship had participated in practically every fleet operation over the past seventy years.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our *Gladius* is a Weapon-Class troop transport cruiser. It measures twelve hundred meters long and four hundred fifty meters at its widest point. With a crew of one thousand six hundred, it can transport an entire ground-forces division and its equipment. The landing craft *Prometheus*, on which you are currently traveling, is only one of *Gladius'* six launches, each of which can transport an entire company. This is why you have so much space in here.

"Since this is a battleship, you shouldn't expect much luxury on board. In other words, if any of you have enjoyed living the good life before now, it's time to kiss those days goodbye! You won't find any room service, extra desserts, or nagging around here. Starting now, you are all members of the TDF. And members don't mess around with each other.

Got it? Anyway, go ahead and look around at the view screens or out of the portholes, and relax a little."

With those words, he turned around and disappeared through a door, which was called a hatch up here. Leonidas watched the main screen, shifting his gaze back and forth from the quickly approaching, cigar-shaped *Gladius* to Thebes. Without any scale comparison, it would have been difficult to guess the ship's dimensions if a barge hadn't flown past the ship at that moment. Leonidas knew that these barges were four to six times as large as the launch he was on. Nonetheless, the barge looked relatively small compared to the giant *Gladius*.

"Look at that old piece of junk," commented a boy two rows behind him. His remark coincided, unfortunately, with the officer's return.

"Which of you landlubbers said that? Who's dumb enough to call our old lady *junk*? Which of you is arrogant enough to risk opening your trap about something you know next to nothing about, hm? In short, which of you ignoramuses wants trouble with me for the rest of our trip?"

Frightened faces all around. Leonidas hardly dared to breathe, keeping his lips firmly closed. The petty officer turned on his heel and retreated through the door to who knows where. Leonidas made the snap decision to no longer think of doors as doors, but as hatches. From behind him, somebody let out a long breath and gasped for more air. Someone in front of him sniffled quietly. Leonidas made another decision to keep all his comments to himself. Like he had heard once in an old holofilm: "Shut up, do your duty, and never speak up!" In the context of keeping your mouth shut, that old soldier saying was not too far off the mark, as far as Leonidas could see.

"Jenkins, I hope you haven't been putting on your show again for the cadets back there!"

"No, sir. I just took the opportunity to draw the young ladies' and gentlemen's attention to a few important points, so the captain won't have to waste valuable time on correcting the cadets' word choices in the future."

Petty Officer First Class Jenkins and Captain Samuel A. Davidson had known each other for decades. They had been part of the same cadet class, spending four years in the same lecture hall at the Academy. Although Jenkins fell victim to the pitfalls of advanced mathematics, despite the assistance of his classmates in general and of Davidson in particular, Davidson finished his fleet officer training. Thus, Jenkins began his TDF career as a soldier in the Terran Defense Space Force (TDSF), while Davidson got started as a TDSF officer a few years later. When Davidson assumed command of the *Gladius* three years ago, he crossed paths once more with Jenkins, who was one of the petty officers on the *Gladius'* barges.

Davidson, a fifty-year-old man of taller than average height, had used their time in orbit to "stretch his legs" a little on solid ground and to visit an old acquaintance who now managed the Newport Spaceport's signal department. Unfortunately, as was typical on trips like this, he had been required to exchange the most recent confidential dispatches with the port's captain.

Despite instantaneous hypercommunication and diverse encryption techniques, there were still certain kinds of dispatches that could only be delivered in person, to minimize the odds of unauthorized individuals having access to them. This was why Captain (TDSF) Davidson was armed and in the company of a heavily armed, four-man corporal's command of marines when he handed the newest confidential dispatches to the port's captain.

Usually, these errands were taken care of by TDSF corvettes and much lower officers, but High Command had wanted this particular special dispatch to be handled at the highest level. In the Navy, officers with the rank of captain

served exclusively on cruisers and performed their duties in space. Since these cruisers typically operated in fixed theaters of operation and in units, the *Gladius* was selected for this task because it and two other troop transport cruisers would be flying past all of the systems in which the dispatch recipients were located. This would enable all the individuals on the distribution list to receive the dispatches personally from a captain (TDSF).

What nonsense, Davidson thought. And to make the matter all the worse, the escort was sufficiently large and more-than-sufficiently armed to conquer an entire planet. Good luck with that confidentiality thing! At least, the residents of Thebes got to see that the Navy was using their tax money not only for salaries and smart uniforms, but also for high-caliber blasters, perfect for intimidating unarmed and innocent civilians. Unfortunately, the relevant orders were "clear and unambiguous."

One positive result of all this was the fact that, over the past four weeks, Davidson had personally visited more planets than he had in the entire previous decade. It was a privilege to be able to hand all the administrative stuff over to his IO, due to the "elevated status of the orders," and to take in a little of whatever the surface landscape might have to offer, without a guilty conscience. It was almost like being on leave, especially if he wasn't handed any return dispatches. If not, he was able to send his escort back and use the remaining time until the launch's departure with the cadets to walk around and just enjoy the feeling of the wind.

It might be true that the engineers could build ships with every conceivable bell and whistle, but after a certain amount of time on these "creations of modern technology," you started to miss the most basic things, such as the wind in your face.

Now they were on their way back to "Old Gladdy," as his crew called the *Gladius* - of course, out of ear's reach of the officers and especially the commander. Davidson smiled at

the thought of how relieved his IO would look when he took over the majority of the paperwork again. Reports, various forms, requests, preferments, transfers, revisions, disciplinary measures, incoming messages, ...

One glance through the porthole confirmed that he still had about two minutes to enjoy without all of that. On the rapidly approaching *Gladius*, Davidson could make out the clear marks of minor hull damage on the starboard side close to gun turret 3. It looked like it had been caused by a meteorite that had slipped through the meteorite shield. The commander made a mental note of this and scrutinized the rest of his ship.

The *Prometheus* launch approached docking bay 4, the uppermost of three bays on the starboard side, and docked without any discernible sound or vibration. The pilot, Lt (TDSF) Andrea P. Wilson, had no desire to draw criticism from her commander, which was why she tried her utmost to execute an exemplary docking maneuver under his watchful eye. After all, he was sitting in the cockpit!

Once the control lamps had flashed green, the bay officer had confirmed their landing, and the systems had been switched over to external auto-control, she turned to her right and said: "Sir, *Prometheus* launch is docked and secured. The locks have been pressurized, Captain."

"Thank you, Wilson. Your handling was impressive. If I hadn't been looking out the porthole, I wouldn't have even noticed that we'd docked."

"Thank you, sir. The *Gladius* deck officer reports that everything is ready, sir."

Captain Davidson stood up and walked over to the forward entry hatch, returned Petty Officer First Class Jenkins' greeting in passing, and marched down the *Prometheus'* connector. As soon as he set foot on the deck of the *Gladius*, the edge of which was demarcated by a red line, one of the petty officers standing near the *Gladius'* lock blew a note on

his whistle and a voice announced via the loudspeaker:
"Commander on board!"

A detachment of seven marines - an entire corporal's command in the combat armor of the Deck Guard - presented their weapons at orders from their commanding sergeant, and his IO, Commander Felix Hausser, presented his report. And he did indeed look relieved.

3

In orbit above Thebes, TDSF troop transport cruiser 73
TDSFS *Gladius*, 08.21.2466, 2310 LPT, 1530 GST

On board the *Gladius*, nothing was as expected. Instead of spacious corridors and rooms, everything was narrow and small. A single wide corridor ran down the middle of the ship along its horizontal axis, and it was commonly called the "main road." All of the important intersections branched off of this artery, which provided relatively direct access to all of the ship's stations - if you knew where to go. With its diameter of 450 meters, the cigar-shaped *Gladius* possessed only twenty troop decks on which ground troops could be transported. These twenty decks each measured 400 meters in length and were arranged down the middle of the *Gladius*, ten above and ten below the main road. These were located in close proximity to the launch docking rings and between the hangars for the thirty assault craft. This positioning was meant to simplify the deployment process. At a moment's notice, the ground troops could reach the launches and assault craft as quickly as possible to without getting under the crew's feet.

The rear third of the ship was reserved for the TD drive, the life support drive, the three antimatter (AM) reactors, the food storage, the main shield generator, and the ship's technical safeguards. The front third of the ship housed the *Gladius'* Operations Center (OpC) and its adjacent Joint Information Center (JIC), the crew quarters, the leisure facilities, the kitchens and dining areas, the Ground Operations Control and Command Room (GOCCR) for the commander of the ground troops along with headquarter

offices, and the control rooms for navigation, telecommunications, electronic warfare (EW), weaponry, and the captain. All of these critical control rooms were situated around the OpC and surrounded by an additional armored defensive layer to ensure the operational readiness of these essential ship's systems at all times. A platoon-sized marine contingent was part of the crew and was responsible for protecting the *Gladius*. It reported solely to the security officer.

The ship's hull was armored and surrounded by a defensive shield to provide protection against enemy fire. However, the shield required so much energy that the *Gladius* – and every other ship, for that matter – could never cross a jump point with full shield strength. On the limited amount of available energy, no ship could simultaneously run its life support drive, TD drive, and shield generator. As a result, the jump points were generally crossed with only minimal shield protection.

Instead of being solely equipped with non-munition energy weapons, the *Gladius* was outfitted with a mixed armament of rocket launchers, turbolasers, torpedo tubes, various kinds of artillery pieces, and Gatling guns. These were mounted on the side turrets, so that every centimeter of space around the *Gladius* could be targeted. Double-hinged hatches made sure that the majority of the weapons could fire in a single direction and that a minimum of three different weapons systems could cover the field of fire. Thus, no defensive vector would find itself undefended as a result of insufficient energy or munitions supplies.

The three sectors of the ship were marked in distinct colors to aid in orientation: green for the mid-section with the troop decks, blue for the front of the ship with the captain's spaces, and yellow for the stern with the engine rooms. Red was used for all of the regions that were of vital significance for the warship – the reactors, the weapons stations, the magazine, and the OpC. The decks were

numbered from the keel up, and the individual frames were numbered from bow to stern. This made orientation much easier.

This orientation system was explained to the cadets before they even exited the launch. "You are only allowed to enter the parts of the ships marked in green. No one should even joke about leaving the authorized areas on their own. You will limit yourself to the shortest direct path from point A to point B, and don't even think about making a detour to point C. This ship wasn't designed for chauffeuring civilians – much less children – through space. It was built for military use. In short: Any wrong move at the wrong time could be deadly up here. I don't want to scare you, but you've been recruited to serve the Terran Hegemony someday, doing God knows what, and not to go belly up on the trip to Terra. Just make sure you do everything your supervisors tell you to."

With this, the young ensign who had met them at the bulkhead to Deck Green 19 turned and addressed a mate standing close by: "Follow the normal procedure and bring the group to Mess 15 Green – S 321 at 1700. The transport officer will be giving his talk before our ladies and gentlemen are sent off to pillow duty."

"Aye aye, sir," the mate replied.

Aided by three other crewmen, he began to energetically divide the cadets into three groups to channel them through "the procedure." All this meant was a medical scan, the distribution and calibration of personal DNA-coded ICs, the stowing of personal gear in the sleeping barracks, a short briefing on the ship's security guidelines, and an even shorter snacktime.

Leonidas had been awake for almost seventeen hours and was understandably tired, which is why it was not particularly surprising that at this point, no one in the group of cadets was especially curious or even responsive. Many

nodded off on their feet and were only able to follow the presentations on a subconscious level.

Once the cadets reached the mess hall in Green Section, Deck 15, Starboard Frame 321, at 1700 on the dot, fifteen of them practically fell asleep immediately upon sitting down. The crewmen had to wake them up and keep them awake.

"Everyone up! Attention!" The mate turned toward the officer who had just appeared. After saluting, he reported: "Major, all thirty-two cadets from Thebes are present and accounted for in the mess hall. All activities have been carried out as ordered. The cadets have been equipped and fed, sir!"

"Thank you, Martinez. At ease!" The officer turned to the cadets: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome on board the *Gladius*. I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words before you finally head to your bunks. Twenty-one years ago, I was sitting here, just like you, wondering what was going to come next..."

That was the last thing Leonidas remembered before he was roughly jostled awake.

"Let's go. Up! It's time to hit the hay. And, young man - I don't mean to nag, but perhaps you could manage in the future to snore a little less loudly. The major had a damned hard time drowning you out." With this, the crewman walked off to gather his group back together.

The subsequent march through the endless corridors, hatches, and stairwells was also not particularly well-suited for stoking the cadets' interest. Everyone was happy to finally reach their sleeping quarters, which they had only visited quickly when they had stowed their gear in the lockers at the foot of their beds, if that was what you could call those things. Leonidas fleetingly wondered why the beds resembled bulky capsules, and why these were being used instead of normal beds, considering that space was a seemingly limited commodity here.

These thoughts apparently occurred to several of the other cadets. As if the mate could read their minds, he provided an explanation: "So, undress down to your underwear and your personal watch com, which we call an IC around here, and lock everything else in your locker. Stretch out in your tank, connect the data cable to your IC, and just relax. You'll never get such a good night's sleep again. The spaceships have to abide by certain regulations which necessitate this kind of bed. Their main purpose is to make sure nothing happens to you while you're sleeping. Besides that, in your capsule, your odds of surviving a hull breach will be better. The Navy wants to make sure you're optimally protected, even while you're asleep. Alright then. Let's get a move on! I still have stuff to do today."

Without any fuss or further questions, the cadets dragged themselves to the lockers, got undressed, stretched out in the tanks/capsules, and connected their ICs to the cables. They were practically out cold before the crewman could make one last check down the length of the stasis chamber before activating the capsules. Blue light shimmered from each of the thirty-two chambers, and the ship's computer assumed the other life support functions.

"Man, Martinez. I always feel guilty about lying to the kids. All this shit is meant to tire them out. They haven't registered much of anything in hours. And then that crap about the conscientious Navy. It makes me sick."

"Pierre, you'd feel sick if you had thirty frightened brats around you, screaming for Mommy and Daddy because nothing scared them more than the thought of being 'frozen.' How would you suggest telling a five-year-old that, even though he's going to be frozen, it won't hurt and he'll wake up again?"

"You've got a point, but we almost lied to them about..."

"Pierre, I'm done with this. We never lie! We don't lie to the little buggers. We just didn't tell them the whole truth."

There's a difference! Even you have to admit that. Have I made myself clear, crewman?"

"Aye aye, sir!"

"Pierre, you idiot. We were just as honest as the Navy is with us. They never lie to us – they just don't tell us enough, early enough."

"Chen, you need to shut up now."

"Yes, sir. I just wanted to explain to our colleague, as straightforwardly as possible, the overarching wisdom of this decision for 'information reduction' in light of our own unique experiences, sir. I hoped I was intervening on behalf of your own interests, sir."

"Chen, with your big mouth, you should have become an officer so you could have enlightened the world with your insights. Unfortunately, you are just a petty officer, second class. Anyway, a great opportunity for you and comrade Pierre is now standing before you. Quickly check the cabling of the stasis chambers that aren't connected to the network. While you take care of that, you may, of course, continue your broad discussion of wisdom in general and its special application to the TDSF."

"Before or after supper?" Pierre asked.

"You'll be the end of me. As far as I'm concerned, after supper. Just make sure you're done by 2200."

"Aye aye, sir," Pierre and Chen replied in unison.

Martinez turned around and walked over to the wall communicator: "Major Stewart – reporting!"

"Martinez, are you alright?"

"Yes, sir! Everything's perfect as usual, sir." Behind his back, Chen rolled her eyes.

"Good, then report back to your station officer!"

"Aye aye, sir! Martinez, out." After a quick mental calculation, he turned back toward the two waiting crewmen: "I'll handle everything with Lt Gatow. You both have your orders. Take Masterson with you to speed things