

## Second Coming

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### CHAPTER 1

My name is Ashen.

I live on the Orion class destroyer Galatae. It's not much for pretty, but it's home. The Galatae is one of the few ships to survive the Great War, and the collapsing of the jump node to Earth. It's getting a little worse for wear, and its entire population is moving to another ship, the Pandora, tomorrow.

The Pandora is another one of the ships in our battlegroup. It's an Orion2, which is a newer model that can hold more people. It's also shielded and better armed.

Right now, we're on the way to one of the most promising candidates for an alternate route home.

Ok, I think you deserve a little background on the situation. About 1000 years ago, in the year 2555, mankind sent out the first self-sustaining cruisers. The Titans. They were able to reach farther into the universe than we could ever go before. Their helium-iodine engines were capable of going almost the speed of light without and time distortion. In the year 2597, we made the first subspace jump. It involves tunneling through realspace and into an alternate dimension. With this new technology, we could reach other galaxies in days and weeks. Not years and millennia. Then, in 3135, we made contact with another sentient race. The Vasudans. They decided that we were "impure" and violated their religion. Then, the Great War began. We were locked in combat for almost 200 years. Then, the arrival of a third race changed everything. The Shivans were unlike anything we had previously encountered. No mercy, they never missed, and they would not die. They employed an external shield that rendered them all but invulnerable to conventional and energy weapons. After months of defeat after defeat, we managed to copy their shielding technology and make a weapon that could penetrate their shields. It finally seemed like we had a chance.

We were so mistaken.

We held them off and even managed to gain some ground when the Shivans revealed their most devastating weapon yet: The Lucifer.

The Lucifer was a shielded capitol ship. It used a type of shield we had never seen before. It was capable of destroying ships, cruisers, and even planets with a single blast of its main gun. We subsequently lost the entire Andromeda galaxy.

We began to retreat. We figured if we had offended them by going where we did not belong, we would return home. Where we were not alien. They followed. With the destruction of our now allies: the Vasudans' homeworld, they discovered the most important information, the information that would change the course of the war. They discovered a planet that used to have a sentient civilization on it. Shivan weapons had destroyed it. On this planet was the following message, decrypted by Vasudan archeologists: "This is our legacy. In subspace, they cannot use their shields. And into subspace, they can be tracked." And included, were plans for a device to track the subspace signature of the Lucifer.

A plan was made. We were to track the Lucifer and jump into subspace. The Galatae was supposed to follow. We were way off on our intel, though. We were to enter realspace right on the Lucifer's tail. But instead, we were almost 10k out. We could only send Valkyrie interceptors and Ursa

bombers equipped with the anti capitol ship Harbinger Bombs.

They succeeded... Almost.

The destruction of the Lucifer while it was exiting subspace into the Sol system caused the subspace node to destabilize. We could not go home.

Nevertheless, we saved Earth from certain destruction. Earth had been isolated from subspace jumps. But without the node, it would take years of node hopping to reach Earth. The original estimate was 93 years. So now we search for a way to reopen the node to Earth. That, or find a node that would get us close enough to Earth on conventional drive.

Back to the present:

"Ashen. Ashen, please report to the bridge immediately. Repeat..."

I was on my feet before the message had run through once. The cold metal beneath my feet made me shiver. I would probably never get used to the shock of cold every morning. Hey, it's more effective than coffee. I thought to myself. I ran up to the door and pressed my index finger to the scanner. The door slid open. Why do they have that on the INSIDE of the door? Meh. Nevermind. Captain's orders. I ran down the hallway that was just beginning to warm up. I heard a sudden ascending whine from beneath my feet. Crap. 6 o'clock already. I'm late. We had moved far enough from any source of energy that when power was shifted from the halls to the cabins, the halls dropped to mid 40s. I reached the lift and pressed the call button.

"Good morning." Said a voice behind me. I jumped.

"Oh. Good morning, Mr. Fisher."

"I told you before. Call me Sam. I hate being called 'Mr. Fisher.'"

"Okay." Sam Fisher is my neighbor. He's a lieutenant, and one of the few people who actually know where we are and where we're headed.

"So, what do you think? Is this the way home?"

"I have no way of knowing that, Ashen. But you're heading to the bridge, aren't you?" "Yes, why?"

"Well, if that's what you called the elevator for, you should probably go." I looked behind me. The elevator had arrived.

"Oh. Thanks, Sam." I leapt into the elevator and pressed the button labeled BRIDGE. There was a whirring sound and a whoosh of the air rushing out from around the lift. The theory was, that the thing we were headed for was a subspace node generator. We had encountered things like them before, but they had always been damaged or otherwise inoperable. Random bits of junk that look rather like a breaching fish drifting through space.

Ding! I had arrived. The doors slid open and I walked out onto the bridge. The bridge is, actually, just that. It's a hall that connects all the different command centers. There were doors lining the hall with labels like "Communication" "Weapons" "Drive" "Mechanical" etc. It was very warm on the bridge. People had shifts here all night, so the heaters never turned off. The heater for the bridge was actually a rather ingenious one. The tech room held the ship's primary computers. These are the

computers that account for making sure the drives are working, making sure we're not flying straight into a star, figuring out where we're going and how fast, etc. The computers pump out about 40,000,000 BTU per hour. And most of that heat is lost to space. But the designers of the ship came up with the idea of using some of that heat to heat the bridge. (And most of the front half of the Galatae, for that matter.)

I reached the door marked "Navigation" and was prompted to look into the visor immediately in front of me.

"Please state your name," said the door. This was a trick question. If I responded with anything but today's passcode, I would be hit with a tazer, and security would be alerted.

"4932 hyphen 2097."

"Please wait while your retina is scanned to confirm your identity."

"Alrighty, then." A very bright blast of pure white light issued forth from the visor. "Agh!" I fell backwards onto the "Tech" door. I heard snickering from beyond the door. Evidently I wasn't the first person that'd happened to today. "Identity confirmed. Have a nice day, Ashen Taat."

I walked onto the Navigation CC, rubbing my eyes. "Good morning, Ashen. I trust you like the new toy the security guys put on the door?" That's the Captain, he's gotten used to me, and it's probably a good thing, because with or without security clearance, I'd know what's going on. I was the one who pointed out just how hopelessly insecure the command centers originally were when I managed to see the briefings for three weeks by sneaking in through the air vents in between the heating cycles.

"About as much as I like being impaled on a poisoned spear, sir." He laughed.

"Well, let's get you up to speed. And when are you going to start wearing shoes?" I looked down at my feet, and noticed that in my haste to get here, I had forgotten to get dressed. Luckily, I had anticipated this and slept in my clothes. "Probably never, sir."

"Hmm. Well..." He walked over to the screen that the entire room is built around. "About 4 days ago, long range sensors picked up another one of those 'ancient artifacts'." "Another fragment?" "We thought so, but this one's different. It's giving off an energy signature." "So were the others." "Yes, but this one's huge. We place original estimates in the trillions of watts. This artifact showed up as being much larger than the others, too. As we got closer, we could tell that the individual artifacts were no larger than the others we've been finding."

"Wait. You're saying that there's more than one of them? How many are there?"

"Fourteen."

I was speechless. The largest number we've found to date was two at the same place. And they were only together because they had smashed into one another.

"Are you sure you haven't miscounted? Have they stayed there long enough for it to not have been a coincidence?" "We checked twice. And they aren't 'staying there'. They're orbiting something. They're arranged in an approximate circle, and rotating faster than normal drives could get them going."

"How long until we're there?"

He turned around and touched the screen in a complicated pattern that I could not follow. His fingers danced across the screen, opening prompts and closing them faster than my eyes could follow. Finally, the screen stopped flashing and opening prompts on a black screen. The text at the top read "GALATAE FRONT BOTTOM 1, 6:07". The black gave way to an array of squares that I recognized as glitches in the camera.

I heard chatter from behind me, and from it I was able to gather that the device was giving off a strange energy field that the camera couldn't compensate for. The Captain groaned and approached the screen.

He began another headache-inducing flurry of motion across the screen. Finally, it froze yet again on a black screen with the words "GALATAE FRONT HAZARD AVOIDANCE CAM 1, 6:08" on the top.

The blackness gave way to a familiar set of squares... Which became smaller and more detailed as time passed.

"This was a problem before. We haven't had trouble with the field inside the ship yet, but outside, there's a strong enough EM field to disrupt most of the cameras."

"But... Are we going to go through the node it's creating?"

"We can't afford to. If the field is as strong as we think, it could disable the Galatae before we could power up the subspace drive."

"But we could send a probe."

He pointed to the screen. "Magnify" He said. The screen zoomed in on a tiny speck, just on the edge of sight, drifting closer and closer to the center of the device.

"We already did."

"I noticed that."

Suddenly the familiar wall of shimmering water that was the signature of a subspace jump appeared in front of the speck. The screen changed.

I was now looking at the wall of water much closer. And I was moving towards it at quite some speed. The text at the top read "GALILEIO PROBE #1 PRIMARY FORWARD CAMERA"

"Why can we see through the probe's primary camera at that distance but not the Galatae's at this far away?"

"The probe is meant to be exposed to that level of radiation. Also, the probe has much less surface area, and the field passes right through it. We think it could have something to do with the stealth technology it has onboard."

Stealth technology was one of the last great leaps in technology in the Great War. It rendered the ship equipped with it impervious to all radiation, and with more advanced types, visible light passed right through it. It involved making a subspace window with less than the optimum amount of power, so you couldn't see as well, but your enemy couldn't see you at all.

The probe entered the subspace window.

"It should take some time for it to reach the other side. Why don't you go get some breakfast?"

I was surprised.

"How did you know I hadn't eaten?"

He smirked. "I know you too well."

1000 miles away, patrol gamma

"Look, I'm telling you. There is no way that carbon is a better element than helium! I mean, helium can make your voice all squeaky..."

"And it causes cancer faster than anything else in existence."

"Hey, Tucker? Shut up."

I shook my head. This had been going on for three hours. If they didn't just agree that it doesn't matter which atom is cooler I'm going to have to step in.

Oh, and my name's Goran, by the way.

I run a patrol wing for the GTVA, but mostly for the Galatae. My orders come from the Galatae, even though it's not a command ship. We're prohibited from protecting just one ship, but it's an unspoken fact that every ship has their protection wing. Or seven. We're all supposed to protect "the group", but everyone knows if there's trouble at another ship, and you leave to help, the battle will be over by the time you get there, and your ship will be under attack.

"If I have to tell you one more time..."

"Argh!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I tapped the cockpit front window. Immediately the bottom turret control window popped up. I selected target, subsystem and communications.

The turret fired twice, and did not miss. I flicked my own headset back on. There was nothing there. Good. It's about time those two shut up, even if it's just until their autorepair finishes getting their comm. back up. I turned slowly towards the next marker on the way to our AWACS ship. The AWACS ships are what keep you alive during firefights. It's equipped with radar that penetrates further into space than your weapons and eyes can. It sees subspace disturbances, and can recognize ships that are cloaked. It can tell you where, what, and how many bad things are headed your way. It takes the element of surprise away from the enemy.

That said, the AWACS ships are VERY fragile, and almost unarmed. They depend on sending the signal to other, heavily armed ships to destroy threats. Some dub it "the ship that goes running to daddy". It's actually a rather good simile.

"KGSSSSSHHHHHEEERRRRR" My helmet screamed.

"Aahh! Ow, ow, ow!" Their comms had come back. I couldn't have been more disappointed.

"That was not five minutes!"

"Oh, I know. I modded that part of my Valkyrie." Simmons. He was on the Helium side of the earlier argument, and is a very good fighter. However, when he's not in combat, you just wanna kill him.

"What was that about? You could have just asked!" Donut. I swear to god, that's his real name. I think his parents were dropped on their heads over and over again, right before they were asked, "What's his name?" He's pretty good mechanically, but I don't think he belongs in a fighter. He's really only here because he wanted to do something in the military and there wasn't a great need for mechanics.

"Yes, I know. But that way was much more fun."

"Screw you."

"And as I was saying, helium is-"

I selected target, subsystem...  
The Galatae

I walked down the rapidly warming hallway to the cafeteria. The whole way is a rather long and boring walk except for one point where you can see into the fighterbay. That view... That view alone made it worth it to walk the almost 2 miles to the lunchroom. The rest of it was mostly through maintenance halls that I wasn't supposed to be in. But I knew the ship well enough, if I didn't want to be seen, I wouldn't be.

Finally I arrived at the window. It's a marvel of modern engineering that the Galatae can hold as many fighters as it can. In the event of one being destroyed, another can take its place in as little as 1 hour, thanks to the advanced nanolathes that have been developed.

From the partially built ship sitting in the construction hold, they were building a Hercules heavy attack ship.

I'd love to have one, but they're only for clearance Lambda and up, with adv. Flight training. Where I am clearance Epsilon, and no flight training whatsoever.

So my chances of actually getting one are slim.

I'm planning on taking flight training soon, and applying for a higher security clearance.

The Hercules is actually one of the slowest, and ugliest fighters that we have. But it's well armed, and is one of the stronger things out there. It can actually be flown through a star. Granted, on the other side the pilot will be gone, or at least blackened and charred, but the ship would be fine.

"Ashen!"

"Jesus..." Altar, one of the new guys in the military wing, it's kind of obvious that he'd like to go out on a date, but I think he just hasn't worked up the nerve to ask. Recently he's been practically stalking me, and it's a little creepy.

"What?"

"Nothing. How are you?"

"Good. Yourself?"

"Okay. Just headed over to the cafeteria."

"Great! So am I!"

Crap. There's nothing to do here. If I continue without him, I'll crush him and I try to avoid destroying young lives left and right.

"Off we go, then."

Patrol Gamma

"Now if we're done trying to kill each other, we have to finish the patrol."

"Fine." Then in a much smaller voice, "kissass."

"What was that, airman?"

"Nothing, sir."

Jeez. Can't kill them, they'll dock your pay... Can't kill them...

"Engage Subspace node on my mark, 2, 1, T-0!"

A wall of water appeared in front of me. This would never stop being disconcerting. I don't like using a technology that I have absolutely no idea how to repair, build, or maintain. The whole node is inside a small, solid container. The node case is NEVER opened. It's made of an alloy, the composition of which is classified. If you open it, and somehow manage to survive, you're at the event horizon of something even more powerful than a black hole. No one knows where the nodeholes go, but they're non-persistent. They stay around for a couple seconds and then leave just as suddenly as they came.

The ship glid through the portal with a rather strange SHLOOP noise and Suddenly I was surrounded by the inside-out world of subspace. Everything became translucent for moments, and then solid. Then the gradual return to transparent.

"Alright, we're only here for a couple seconds. Initiating group node shutdown in 3, 2, 1, -"

We dropped back into realspace, everything snapped back to the way it was supposed to be, and I could no longer see my own digestive system.

"Goddamn, I hate that!" said Tucker.

"You think you're the only one? I never need to see my lunch after the fact again." Said Church.

"Quit whining, you babies. We make twelve jumps a day. One would think you'd get used to it."

"Hey, where are we?"

I looked around. I didn't recognize any of the star configurations.

"Oh my god..." said Tucker

I turned around...

200 light years away, the crew of the Galatae had no idea what had happened to patrol Gamma. Only one person on the radar even noticed they were missing, and in 17 seconds, she would suffer a fatal heart attack, and with that, their disappearance would pass unnoticed.

200 light years from all that, patrol Gamma vanished in a searing pulse of white light.  
Galatae

I was almost to the cafeteria. I was beginning to feel the effects of not having eaten breakfast.

The broadcast system crackled to life.

"Warning: Unidentified objects approaching."

"Crap." This meant I had to turn around and start heading for the bridge. Damn it, I was actually hoping to eat something.

I turned around and headed for the bridge transport.

"Come on, Altar, we should get-"

Hey, where was he? Nevermind. I had to get to the transport before it took off for the bridge without me. I broke into a run, seeing the transport station and its display reading 'TIME TO DEPARTURE: 0:00:06' there was no way I'd make it. I turned and headed to the restricted access corridor used by important people and maintenance workers.

I was neither.

I looked to see who was on duty guarding the corridor, if it was someone I knew, I might have a chance to get in 'unofficially'.

I didn't recognize the guard, so he probably wouldn't let me past. I'd have to get in the difficult way. I ducked behind the wall to the delta class corridor. Once the guard looked away from the panel I'd make my move. I'd timed this to a fine art. Every 30 seconds, whoever is at the booth has to check all the security camera feeds, in case the automatic detection system missed something. The moment they do that, I set an alarm to go off on my Phud system, and I run to the other side of the opening. Once there, I remove the bolts from the electrical wiring panel, and depending on what conditions were like in the pipe, from there I play it by ear.

He looked down to the monitors, and I ran across the corridor. I set to work on the panel. There were only two bolts in place; someone had been slacking off on the job. I got out my multitool and removed them quickly. They weren't even all that tight, so I began to suspect someone had taken my route before me.

The panel came loose and I removed it and set it down quietly behind me. Now I slipped into the

small cramped space, careful not to put all my weight on any one wire. I replaced the bolts in the panel, took it, and dropped it on the ground with a loud CLANG!

"Who's there?" Said the guard.

I put my hands around the conduit and slid silently down to The Pipe. Up above I heard the guard inspecting the panel.

"Lousy stupid workers. Second time that's happened today."

Now I was sure someone was stealing my route. I ran down the Pipe. After about 200 feet there should be a small tramline that the electrical workers use to navigate the ship. Assuming there was no one already on the tram, I should beat the main transport to the military section. The hissing of steam, whooshing of coolant, and humming of the fusion drives could easily mask my footsteps, but it easily could mask others', too.

I reached where the trams were supposed to be, and there was a tram ready at the station, almost waiting for me.

I was wary. I'd not been caught in the Pipe in a long time, and this time of day there was nobody supposed to be here, but old memories of hiding in the shadows, waiting for people to go away, when your breathing sounds like a wind tunnel and your heart sounds as loud as a Prometheus cannon.

I stepped into the tram, satisfied that there was no one there.

I flicked out the lights and pressed the button labeled 'Bridge'.

"Hi, there." I suddenly felt a gun on the back of my head

In that moment, time seemed to slow. This moment would play in my head millions of times over the next few days. In one fluid motion, I turned around and unholstered my FN-7.

I swept my empty hand through the air behind my head and hit the gun, setting it off and firing a bullet into the chair in front of me.

I then struck my attacker with the FN-7. He caught the gun and tried to push it into me. I aimed a punch for head level, causing my assailant to emit a yell of pain. I pushed my gun into the neck of my attacker and pulled the trigger. In that 1/100th of a second, the muzzle flash illuminated a face that was stunningly familiar.

My heart stopped.

The entire exchange had taken 3 a seconds.

And the body of Sam Fisher made a graceful fall over the railing of the tram, and into the bowels of the ship.