

Part One: Ezichi
"Not bad, for a dirt-farmer's daughter."

Those words had been burned into Commander Ezichi Hansen's memory since her father first uttered them. From when she graduated from High School as the salutatorian - to when she was accepted into the Solarian Naval Academy - to when she received her commission - to when she became the SAMV Shieldmaiden's Executive Officer. It was never exactly that. Sometimes "not bad" was "pretty good", or he farmed something other than dirt.

Over the years, it started to strike Ezichi as being more than a little sad. Maybe it was because she loved her father, but she always figured he amounted to more than just that. Raising a child, alone, while paying off the fees for his prosthetic and doing back-breaking physical labor all the while? A lot of people would've cracked under that pressure. He didn't.

Ezichi sighed through her nose without noticing that she did. It was a habit of hers, one she never knew that she had.

The Shieldmaiden was dead in orbit over Reade, and nobody was coming to save her. A Legion torpedo had blown her sub-FTL thrusters, and she was drifting. The ship was old - A Valkyrie-class frigate. The Valkyries were designed during the height of the Interstellar War, an assault frigate designed as both an escort and a heavy landing craft. Nothing special to begin with, the Shieldmaiden herself would've been mothballed more than a few decades ago in an ideal world. The Admiralty, though, could not afford to throw away perfectly good ships, thinly-stretched as the Navy was - even with the bloated defense budget of the Alliance.

Pride with her station came not from the ship, but the fleet. The Thirty-Fifth was one of Sol's few battlefleets - self-sufficient invasion forces headed by Grand Admirals. Not even Frost was a Grand Admiral, before he became Prime Minister. The Grand Admirals could be counted on just a few hands. And she was XO on one of the Thirty-Fifth's ships - not quite the major leagues, but she was getting up there, eventually...

Ezichi shook her head a little. Daydreaming, again. The Shieldmaiden was dead in orbit over Reade... And nobody was coming to save her. Not for lack of want - but because it was an impossibility. She was burning hard when her thrusters got blown, and inertia flung her away from her Strike Group. The only reason that anybody on the Shieldmaiden was still alive was probably because the Cetites thought she was going to die on her own - that, or they wanted to board her. Distantly, a siren blared.

"Commander Hansen, ma'am?" were the words that broke the woman out of yet another introspective episode. Sub-Lieutenant Tate tapped her shoulder with the back of his hand, a tablet held out for her to see. "Commander Ngubu just sent this up. It's the damage control report..." the young man bit his lower lip. "He's managed to stop us from drifting with the auxiliary thrusters, but... He, uh, says we're going to need somebody else to get us out of here. We're going nowhere alone."

Which meant they were screwed. Unless there was some master plan to win the battle over Reade, the Shieldmaiden was going to get taken, at best. Ezichi, obviously, had no idea what Ozdemir's plans were - there were some suggestions that he was pulling some strings, trying to get reinforcements in. From where, Hansen had no clue - she figured that if the Fleet was going to win now, it'd be because NanoTrasen played their last dirty trick, and even with the Van wiped out, they couldn't stop the Thirty-Fifth. Ezichi couldn't help but doubt that - if it was the case, they'd never have pulled back from Biesel.

"And-- Captain Bành wants to speak to you. That's all, ma'am." Tate lowered his tablet, pale face making him look sick in the harsh, fluorescent lighting of the bridge. She paused, sighing through her nose again.

"Thank you, Mister Tate." she said, feeling uncompelled to say anything more, before turning and walking towards the comms monitor near the airlock.

Captain Bành Anh Vũ was a serene, intelligent man who was even shorter than she was, but better built than most. He struck Ezichi as the ideal Captain - better than her last CO, anyway. Rogers was a prick - Bành was genuinely inspiring. She might've balked at Ozdemir's war, if it wasn't for the speech her captain gave the whole crew when the orders came down. Captain Bành was a good man, she told herself, and he'd know what to do.

The console in front of her lit up, and after a brief loading screen, the CO's face glowed on it. Blue light, harsh. The CIC, then - the light in the CIC was always blue. Psychological measure - blue light was supposed to encourage strategic thought, calm the nerves... It shouldn't have surprised her that he was there. It's just that everything was fuzzy, since she hit her head - when the torpedo hit, Ezichi smashed her head onto the nav console. She was out cold for a solid few minutes.

"Miss Hansen. I need you down here. We're going to be boarded."