

The Frontier Wars  
episode 1:  
"The Leaves are Turning Over"

by  
Nick Oakes

Based on "The Spacers Saga:  
Frontier Wars"  
stories by Nick Oakes

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BLACK SCREEN:

NARRATOR  
(v.o.)  
In March of 2026, the people of Earth learned that they are not alone...

FADE IN:

EXT. STAR FIELD:

OPEN on a star field. Rim of the Milky Way shines diagonally across the screen. CREDITS ROLL as narration continues.

NARRATOR  
Two centuries of expansion into the solar system followed, but all that was threatened when Mars fought for independence from Earth.

PAN across to reveal one especially bright star glowing in the lower left corner of the screen. PAN further to reveal the limb of Saturn, with its rings stretching out into the black - the star is Sol. The outline of a small, rocky moon shines against the backdrop of never-ending night.

NARRATOR  
After the Solar Civil War, a new balance of power emerged in the system: Earth and Mars ruled as a joint superpower, with the countless worlds of the solar frontier bent on their whims of political intrigue.

ZOOM in on the dark side of the moon. There are some traces of light, but we zoom toward one cluster in particular.

NARRATOR  
Now, another two centuries later, the specter of war looms large once again, threatening to tear down all that humanity has built...

CUT TO BLACK as the light resolves into a tiny outpost tucked into the moon's surface like a microchip in a motherboard.

TEXT FADES IN:

"PHOEBE- SATURN SECTOR"

"AUGUST 2485"

TEXT FADES OUT

CUT TO:

EXT. LISTENING POST - BALCONY

FADE IN on a courtyard in a primordial jungle. A small and subtly-built military outpost appears tucked into ancient volcanic rock in a clearing in the forest growth.

A lone MAN watches the night sky, holding a cup of tea in his hands. He looks tired, and his military flight suit coveralls are rumpled and careworn from much use.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
(o.s.)  
Commander Melrose? Sir?

COMMANDER STAN MELROSE (39), turns to see a young Lieutenant fast-walking toward him across the flag stones of the outpost's domed-in courtyard. We can now see that the "jungle" is merely a simulation, a tiny biosphere bottled up just under the domed surface of the little outpost.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
I've been looking everywhere for you.

He pauses to catch his breath as he reaches the Commander.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
(cont.)  
The sensory suite report you requested  
is ready, Commander.

He holds out a small sheaf of plasticine technical papers. The Commander smiles faintly and takes the proffered documents. He sets his cup of coffee on the rim of the balcony overlooking the untamed forest beyond the courtyard.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Thank you, Lieutenant. This could have  
waited until tomorrow, you know.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Sir?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Never mind, Lieutenant. Thank you, you  
do a credit to the whole Spacer Corps.  
Now, let me have some piece for a few  
more minutes, if you would.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Yes, sir.

The Lieutenant turns to walk away. He looks back over his shoulder a moment later to catch the Commander looking up at the night sky once more.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Sir? Is everything all right?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Hmm? Oh, yes, of course.

The Lieutenant, now stopped in his tracks, turns to look up at the sky, as well.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Are you... Are you wondering where they are out there, sir?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Actually, just the opposite. I was wondering where Earth is out there. We're far enough away you can't really even see her from here.

The Lieutenant looks back at his commanding officer.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Do you miss the Earth, sir?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
(sighs)  
Yes. I often wonder if I'll ever make my way back, on nights like this. What about you? Do you ever get to longing for the Blue Marble?

The Lieutenant smiles sheepishly and rubs his chin.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Well, sir, I grew up in the Shantou Orbital Cluster. My family had, uh, other things on our plate than making our way to Terra for a pilgrimage.

The Lieutenant chuckles nervously. His commander grins.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
I see. Well, I hope you get the chance to visit the home planet, someday.

Yevgeny grins awkwardly, unsure of how to respond to this. After a moment the Lieutenant comes to attention and snaps off a crisp salute.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Good night, Commander.

Melrose returns the salute before the Lieutenant turns on his heel and heads back inside the outpost.

When he is gone, the Commander looks down at the sheaf of papers in his hand. He sighs as he sits down on a lawn chair and starts sorting through them. He takes a long drag from his coffee before gagging - it has long since gone cold.

Melrose sighs again as he sets the cup back on the balcony wall. He looks at the papers in his hand, then stands and turns to walk back into the outpost's interior.

As he leaves, the shot PANS UP to show the bright, starlit night sky once more. When Melrose is out of frame, a small, ghostly dark spot in the sky that seemed stationary only a moment before begins to move from right to left across the screen. It begins to descend towards the planet.

CUT TO:

INT. LISTENING POST HALLWAYS

The Commander walks drowsily the halls of the small, tight-knit outpost, holding the papers in one hand and returning the salutes of passing spacers with the other.

Finally he arrives at the door marked "COMMANDER'S QUARTERS" and presses his thumb against the access pad next to the frame. The door slides open with a faint hiss.

Inside is a small, spartan berth, with a comfortable-looking cot folded down from the far wall, a small sink and mirror for shaving, an aluminum desk, and a few pictures of family and past military ceremonies on the walls.

Commander Melrose enters the room and hits the button to shut the door behind himself. He drops the sheaf of technical data onto his desk. He then presses the intercom button.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
(aloud)  
Captain Murasaki?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(over intercom)  
Yes sir?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
I'm going to try and get some rest for  
a few hours. Wake me if I'm not up by  
0500, would you please?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(v/o)  
Roger that. Good night, Commander.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Good night.

He sits on the bed, removes his boots, and begins to remove his flight suit. He lies back on the cot and closes his eyes, leaving the flight suit on but half unzipped.

CUT TO:

INT. COMMANDER'S QUARTERS

OPEN on a darkened shot of Commander Melrose lying where he fell asleep - partially propped up against his pillow, flight suit still half on, boots haphazardly dumped next to the bed.

An ALARM klaxon begins to blare from the base P.A. system. Melrose's eyes shoot open as the emergency lights flash to life on the wall next to his door.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
What the-?

He sits bolt upright in bed, only to knock his head against the curved bulkhead of the wall above him.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Oh, for-! God damn it.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(v.o.)  
Commander Melrose, sir?

The Commander is pulling his boots back on by this point. His flight suit is still in disarray, his eyes bleary.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Yes, Captain. What the hell is going on? Why are my alarms sounding off?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(v.o.)  
*We're under attack, sir!*

Melrose pauses as the words sink in. His face goes pale.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Wha-? How in the-? What happened!?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(v.o.)  
It's them, sir, the zharans. Somehow  
they slipped in under our sensor  
screens. They're attacking the base!

With his boots now on, Melrose practically jumps across the room and hits the open button his door. He sprints off down the hall, looking like some kind of alien in the low gravity.

As he departs, the camera lingers just a moment on something in the foreground - the sensory suite data on his desk. The top line shines clearly:

"LONG-RANGE SENSORY ANOMALIES - FOR YOUR EYES ONLY..."

CUT TO:

INT. LISTENING POST HALLWAYS

Commander Melrose sprints in his awkward low-gravity gait past confused spacers who are also running this way and that. Geared-up Security Forces head for the exits, and technicians in orange flight suits shield their heads as the piping is rattled loose by external explosions.

The Commander pauses after a particularly strong detonation rocks the base, causing several pipes in the ceiling to jump loose from their bundling and fall to the floor, nearly landing on top of him.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
(under his breath)  
The bastards...  
(full volume)  
They're bombing my base!

He keeps running, past a sign marked "COMMAND & CONTROL" with an arrow pointing along his path. The alarm klaxon blaring, and the lights flicker with each cacophonous explosion.

## INT. LISTENING POST CONTROL ROOM

Melrose emerges into the central command hub of his outpost in the midst of an unfolding crisis. Several spacers on the command staff have been injured by damage from the bombing, and the rest are in a frenzy of activity as they attempt to keep tabs on the battle now unfolding around the base.

In front of one command station, Captain Murasaki calls to the Commander without looking up at him. She has a bleeding gash over her left eye from falling debris.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

Sir, you'd better get in here! They're really working us over.

The Commander crosses the room, carefully picking his way over scattered debris and wounded personnel, and stands over the Captain's operations terminal. On her screen, a dozen enemy fighter bombers circle the base in a holographic projection of misery. The base shakes with another series of explosions as they make another bombing run.

COMMANDER MELROSE

Goddamn it all, who gave these wind-up pieces of dog shit permission to bomb my outpost?

Another rollicking explosion shakes the room.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

Don't think they asked for anybody's blessing, Commander.

COMMANDER MELROSE

They sure as hell didn't in the last war. Why weren't we warned, at least?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

(scowls, typing)

I have no idea, sir, and that's my informed opinion. They weren't there one second, and the next...

She trails off and points vaguely at a blip on the planetary radar sensor screen - one ship in low orbit.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

(cont.)

We've got a zharan cruiser on station. It's what's sending presents our way.

An explosion rocks the base as if to highlight her point. Murasaki rights herself in her seat and pulls up another holographic image showing five troop-carrying shuttles landing in a loose circle around the base.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

(cont.)

And I don't think they're in the mood for negotiations, either.

COMMANDER MELROSE

(mutter)

Oh for fuck's sake...

The holo-image now shows several dozen enemy soldiers moving toward the outpost through the jungle from all directions. They move with tactical, killer's efficiency. The outpost's SecFor spacers engage them at the outer perimeter of the outpost, but it is nowhere near an even fight.

COMMANDER MELROSE

Do we have time to evacuate nonessentials to the fallback position south of the plateau?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

Maybe, but it's dodgy. We'd have to send them the long way around through the eastern jungle. That's some pretty bad bush out there, sir.

COMMANDER MELROSE

Give the order, Captain.

She looks up at him, meeting his stern but firm gaze for just a moment before nodding and hitting a button on her station.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

(into P.A. microphone)

All station personnel, this is Captain Murasaki. Nonessential staff are hereby instructed to fall back to secondary pickup at RV point bravo. Take only what you can carry and go. This is an order directly from Commander Melrose. Repeat, take only what you can carry and leave now.

She lets up on the call button and looks back up at the Commander with a puzzled expression on her face.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
What about the command staff and  
security forces, sir?

He shakes his head gravely.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
We're staying behind. Someone has to  
try and get the word out to AEROCOM.

Her eyes widen for just a moment before resolve sets in. She nods, frowning, and turns her attention back to her station.

The Commander watches the holographic images playing across the air over her duty station. The interplay of the enemy bombers pounding the outpost one final time before the enemy infantry moves in under cover of their strikes is almost mesmerizing. He shakes his head to will away such thoughts.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Captain, I'd really love to know why  
exactly we *haven't* contacted AEROCOM  
yet. Quickly, if you don't mind.

She types furiously for a moment more.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
Dammit!  
(pause)  
They're jamming us, Commander. I don't  
how the hell they're managing it, but  
our signals aren't getting out.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
What? How the hell can they-?

Just then Lieutenant Yevgeny pops into the room. He grasps his injured right arm with his left. Blood pours down his sleeve and from a deep cut on his brow.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Commander, sir. They're inside the  
base. The enemy is already inside,  
sir! What should we-?

COMMANDER MELROSE  
(curtly)  
Get back to the SFs, Lieutenant. Tell  
them to buy as much time as they can!

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
Y-Yes sir!

Hesitating only briefly, he then turns and heads back off down the hall. Melrose gravely watches him go before turning back to lean over Captain Murasaki's duty station.

Before he can give another order, the power to the command hub flickers off. Murasaki tries to flip on the emergency power but nothing happens.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
Goddamn it!

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Damn! Can we get the power back on in here before they overrun us?

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
I don't know, sir, we'll try!

She types in a furious string of commands onto her terminal. It boots back up with emergency power a beat later, and the red-tinted emergency lights flick on overhead a moment after that. Murasaki's fingers fly across the keyboard.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
Shit-!  
(pause, typing)  
Sir, the power capacitors have been forces offline, either through tampering or by direct fire. Either way, there's no way we can-

She stops short as Lieutenant Yevgeny stumbles back into the doorway of the command hub, silhouetted in the doorway by the dim and flickering light of the emergency alert system.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
S-Sirs?

He stumbles through the doorway, clutching his stomach.

LIEUTENANT YEVGENY  
(cont.)  
They... They're inside the wire...

The young man collapses face first onto the floor. His fall reveals several smoking blaster holes in his back as he lands on the floor. They smolder like simmering coals in the dim light of the overhead emergency lamps.

Commander Melrose rushes forward to roll the Lieutenant over. He is stopped in his tracks by a shout from the doorway.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
(accented English)  
Stop there!

Melrose looks up to see two enemy troopers standing framed in the doorway. One of them aims a sleekly organic-looking rifle at his face. Both of them are suited up in vaguely insectoid, all-black combat suits complete with face-obscuring helmets. Their getup only accentuates their non-human nature.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
Get back. Move back!

The Commander raises his hands and steps back as commanded. He keeps his body between the zharans and his staff.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Nobody say anything. We're prisoners now, and we have rights.

The nearest zharan steps closer to him, lowering his rifle. It cocks its head quizzically, almost like a puppy.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
Do you now?

He puts two fingers to the temple of his helmet and says something in his own language into his radio. He then addresses the Commander in English again.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
You may be prisoners , but it's up to the Colonel to decide your fate.

He points toward the door before raising his rifle again.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
This way. Move.

The command staff exchange glances. Commander Melrose nods and the group begins filing out into the hallway.

#### INT. LISTENING POST HALLWAYS

Outside the command hub, the captured command staff see dead SFs and living zharan troopers everywhere. The zharans all carry rifles that they don't bother to aim at the humans.

The lead zharan from before walks up behind Commander Melrose and prods him in the back with his own weapon.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1  
I said, move.

The group then heads off down the hall, in the direction of the front courtyard, surrounded by the zharan soldiers.

EXT. LISTENING POST - BALCONY

Outside the group finds even more zharan troopers milling about. Many are setting up scaffolding to scale the outside of the outpost's massive telescope arrays. Melrose stops and turns to face the lead zharan.

COMMANDER MELROSE  
Excuse me, what the hell are your people doing to my outpost?

A voice calls out from halfway across the courtyard in reply.

COLONEL JEREK  
(o.s.)  
I'm afraid it isn't your outpost anymore, Commander.

Commander Melrose turns to see another enemy soldier walking toward him. This one wears a black combat undersuit with a dark gray duster over that. He stops a few steps away.

COLONEL DAMON JEREK is of average height and build, with plain brown hair, and could almost pass for human. His most striking feature, however, are his mismatched eyes: while his left eye is yellow-golden, the right - surmounted amid a nasty, jagged scar - is electric blue.

COLONEL JEREK  
Commander Stanley Melrose. Seventeen years in the Interplanetary Defense Corps, currently on his third tour as commander of an Omega-series deep space listening station.

Jerek pauses and his lips pull into a grin.

COLONEL JEREK  
An honor to meet you, sir.

He extends his hand. Melrose grits his teeth & says nothing. He does not take the colonel's hand. Jerek considers him for

a long moment, his eyes piercing into Melrose's own. The colonel's grin changes, as if he'd just confirmed a suspicion. He turns to his subordinate and speaks in English.

COLONEL JEREK

Captain, it would really make my day to hear that the staff of this facility has been rounded up in their entirety. Is that the case?

The zharan captain looks at the human prisoners gathered nearby as if concerned they will overhear, but answers his commanding officer after a moment's hesitation.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1

Aside from that transmission we intercepted, we're still searching for some of the staff, sir. About thirty of them, if the data we received for this operation can be relied upon.

COLONEL JEREK

Oh, I vouch for our intelligence one hundred percent, Captain.

(turns to Melrose)

So I suppose that means it's down to you to vouch for those under your command. Tell me, Commander... Did some of them flee their posts? Possibly under your orders, as that pesky little transmission we intercepted seems to suggest?

Melrose says nothing. He doesn't have to too.

COLONEL JEREK

(grins)

Yes, that's what I thought.

The Colonel sighs, then turns to his Captain once more.

COLONEL JEREK

Begin searching the forest, Captain, and leave no stone unturned. I want them found... all of them. Try to bring a few of them in alive, too.

The Captain salutes before turning to inaudibly give orders through his helmet radio. Jerek turns back to Melrose.

COLONEL JEREK

It would be kind of you to make this easier for us, Commander. We're a busy group, you see. Lots of outposts to get to yet. You understand, I'm sure.

The Colonel draws a sleek and sinister-looking pistol from a holster under his overcoat and aims it at Captain Murasaki's head. She flinches visibly but holds her ground.

COLONEL JEREK

(cont.)

I'll give you to the count of, oh, let's say four, before I start picking off the members of your staff who are present. So if you would, Commander, please tell me where you sent the missing personnel of this outpost? Before I have to ruin the tacky grounds-keeping out here, that is.

Melrose shoots a sidelong glance at Murasaki. She begins to shiver, slightly at first and more noticeably as Jerek counts up. His grip on his sidearm never wavers.

COLONEL JEREK

One...

COMMANDER MELROSE

(talking over Jerek)

I swear to you, I don't know where they are. They could be anywhere by now. You have to believe me.

Jerek shakes his head as he continues, his cold mismatched eyes still boring into Murasaki's as he aims between them.

COLONEL JEREK

Two...

COMMANDER MELROSE

(pleading)

Please, be reasonable, you must understand that the safety of my staff is my utmost priority. I can't rightly endanger some to save the rest. You know that Colonel. You're giving me an impossible decision here!

COLONEL JEREK  
(glares, voice darkens)  
Three...

COMMANDER MELROSE  
(indignant)

Now you listen here, goddammit! We are prisoners under Article 21-Bravo of the Nüwa Ceasefire Accords. We are afforded certain rights and legal protections under both Colonial Administration and Alliance law.

Colonel Jerek pauses counting and turns his gaze to the Commander. His pistol remains pointed directly at Murasaki. He raises an eyebrow in an almost condescending gesture.

COLONEL JEREK

That would be true, yes...if this were a time of war. Isn't that right, Commander? Or did I miss a section of the Accords on my last read-through?

He smiles his vicious smile again.

COLONEL JEREK  
(cont.)

Because when last I checked, we weren't in a time of war...were we?

Melrose deflates in half a second. He looks plaintively at the Colonel, then over at Murasaki, then back at Jerek.

COMMANDER MELROSE

I'm sorry, Colonel, I-I am... But I cannot give up the safety of some of my staff for that of our own. I take full responsibility for that much.

Jerek blinks twice, then grins broadly. He casually lowers the pistol until his arm his by his side.

COLONEL JEREK

Well, that much I can respect.

Without another word, he raises his gun to aim at the Commander. The pistol fires before the Commander even fully registers he is in danger. He only manages to raise his eyebrows in surprise at the sudden motion before the laser bolt from Jerek's pistol drops him like so much dead weight.

Several members of the command staff gasp aloud. A few even let out cries of horror. Murasaki drops to her knees next to her dead commander and rolls him over. He is stone dead, a cauterized hole burned into the center of his forehead. His eyes are frozen open in a final look of mild surprise.

Murasaki jumps back to her feet, rushing at Jerek.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
You son of a bitch!

Two of Jerek's troopers catch her by the arms and hold her back. Jerek lowers his pistol once more, smiling.

COLONEL JEREK  
My, what loyalty. How charming.

He aims the pistol in the direction of her command staff. All humor has disappeared from his voice when he speaks again.

COLONEL JEREK  
(sharply)  
Now, shall we dispense with the parlor games? I am eager to hunt down those of your staff who have fled into the forest, Captain. Mind you, they are your staff now, seeing as I have just relieved the Commander of duty.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI  
(tears in her eyes)  
Go to hell.

Jerek's mouth curls into another savage grin. His cold eyes burn with a spark of utmost malice.

COLONEL JEREK  
(quietly)  
Don't threaten me with a good time.

His grin vanishes in an instant and he shouts an order in the zharan language at the semicircle of troopers guarding the captured command staff. They tighten their cordon in response and raise their weapons to aim at the crowd of humans.

COLONEL JEREK  
I have no more patience for your stalling, Captain. Tell me to where your staff has fled and I may spare those we capture alive.

He raises a hand, preparing to give the order to execute the surviving members of the command staff.

Murasaki stares at him, horror-struck. Her eyes, still wet with hateful tears, are now wide with shock. At last, she bows her head and gives in.

CAPTAIN MURASAKI

They headed north. Our extraction point is ten kilometers north of this base, on a plateau. You can't miss it.

The Colonel slowly lowers his hand, grinning again. He stoops down next to the captain and cups her chin in his hand, raising her eyes to face his again. His cold, predatory smile has returned as he gazes into her tear-glistened eyes.

COLONEL JEREK

Now, was that really so difficult?

He releases her and gestures to the two troopers holding her steady. They push her back into the crowd of command staff members huddled in the midst of their zharan captors.

Colonel Jerek turns on his heel and makes to leave. He speaks to his subordinate as he heads for the facility interior.

COLONEL JEREK

Comb the forest within ten klicks of this outpost. They can't have gotten far, wherever they really went.

The Captain follows beside him, nodding at the command. He snaps off a barked order in zharan to two of his own subordinates as he walks alongside the Colonel.

ZHARAN TROOPER 1

Sir, what about the prisoners here?

Jerek stops in his tracks and turns back to face the command staff now anxiously watching their captor stride away. He speaks just audibly enough for some of them to hear.

COLONEL JEREK

(smirking)

What prisoners?

The Captain pauses a moment, then nods. Jerek, still grinning, turns away from his captives, washing his hands of them once and for all. The zharan captain signals his troopers, who raise their weapons once more.

Inside the huddled crowd of spacers, the reality of their fate suddenly dawns. Some cry out, others weep, some merely close their eyes to shut it out. Captain Murasaki merely looks to the heavens, taking in one last look at the glorious starlit sky as her zharan counterpart gives the order. The tears in her eyes finally give way and rush down her cheeks. She closes her eyes and awaits oblivion.

The screen CUTS TO BLACK just as the shots ring out.

TEXT FADES IN: "THE FRONTIER WARS"

TEXT FADES OUT

NEW TEXT FADES IN:

"Episode 1"

*"The Leaves are Turning Over"*

TEXT FADES OUT

EXT. PLANET ORBIT

OPEN ON a shot of another planet, which glows bright with reflected sunlight against the dark backdrop.

The planet itself is a verdant Eden with swirling clouds, lush forests and great sapphire seas across its orb.

Text appears on screen:

"EARTH - CAPITAL OF THE SOLAR UNION"

"CENTRAL WORLD IN THE INTERPLANETARY COMMERCIAL ASSEMBLY"

Text fades out.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - AFTERNOON

OPEN on a sprawling college campus in the midst of an upscale downtown. It takes up roughly a hundred city blocks and straddles a meandering river in the heart of a bustling mid-24th century city in the heartland of the United North American States, one of the handful of successor nations to the old 21st century nation-states of America and Canada.

TEXT FADES IN ONSCREEN:

"INDIANAPOLIS - UNITED NORTH AMERICAN STATES"

"SEPTEMBER 2485"

TEXT FADES OUT

The camera pans across the scene before cutting to sequential shots of students and professors mingling in the courtyards and common areas, or passing from class to class.

A small but noticeable number of students wear **Spacer Corps** ROTC dress - tan dress uniforms with navy blue duty caps. War is never all that far away in this era.

We focus in on three students in particular who certainly do not wear uniforms. One wears a black t-shirt and grey ripped jeans; the second wears a button-up shirt with sleeves rolled and front unbuttoned over a white t-shirt and green chinos; the third wears a faded blue Hawaiian shirt and tan shorts. All wear fancy retro sneakers - very en vogue circa 2357.

The oldest, SAM TASKARO (21), wears the dark shirt. It matches his medium-length black hair and dark eyes. He is tall, stocky but fit, and carries a longboard under one arm.

The second, DEVON WASTANI (20), is of average height and lanky. Their shoulder-length dark brown hair is dread-locked and tied into a knot behind their head.

Last but not least is MATT CAVANAUGH (20), who is shorter than the others and scrawny, with a shock of dirty-blond hair, blue eyes, freckles, and a wide smile.

Matt is currently engaged in explaining something to his two best friends. He waves his hands excitedly as he speaks.

MATT

I mean, why even bother? They can quiz us all they want for retention, but unless some dipshit like me can recall that stuff for real-world use, then what's the point?

SAM

Yeah, well you're right on one count.

MATT

Yeah?

SAM

Yep...you are a dipshit.

Matt's face falls, but he grins roguishly a moment later.

MATT  
At least I've got a winning smile.

Devon makes a face as if to say, "Well-l-l-l..."

DEVON  
I wouldn't count on that to get you through life either, my guy.

Matt looks sidelong at him before laughing boisterously.

MATT  
Yeah? Well at least I actually have an ounce of charisma, D.

DEVON  
(raises eyebrow)  
What's that supposed to mean?

MATT  
I'm just sayin', you'll never get anywhere if you have to rely on that winning personality of yours.

SAM  
Oh, listen to this.

He makes a rude gesture, holding his hand in a fist and jerking it up and down. Devon laughs. They are nearing the public transit station at the northeast end of the campus.

MATT  
What? What's the joke?

SAM  
C'mon, if you had to rely on a "winning personality", you'd be working at the movie theater forever.

Matt blows a raspberry and waves his hands dismissively.

MATT  
Yeah, yeah... 'Can't get no respect, no respect at all.'

DEVON  
Yeah, whatever you say, Rodney. Nice impression, by the way. What is this, the 20th century? Feel like I'm

watching one of those 'past on parade' flicks or something.

(exaggerated voice)

Like, w-w-whoa-a-a-a, man!

SAM

Yeah, maybe you can make a living on that one, Matt. Always thought you'd make a good comedian, didn't we, D?

Matt perks up expectantly and looks at Devon.

DEVON

Yeah, or if that fails he'd make a good sideshow at the circus.

Matt frowns, deadpan, before sighing and grinning in spite of himself. Sam & Devon share a brief laugh at his expense. They have now reached the overhang outside the transit terminal. They an stop walking and continue talking for a moment.

SAM

Well, at least you've still got your looks, bro.

(falsetto)

Ickle Matty!

He reaches out and starts to pinch Matt's cheek before the younger man swats him away.

MATT

Cut that out!

DEVON

(laughs)

Yeah, Sam. What are you, his grandma?

Sam rolls his eyes, flashing a smile.

SAM

Shee-it...

The three laugh, even Matt. They settle into a short silence before Devon looks at the digital readout on the station wall. They looks down at their own watch to confirm.

DEVON

Ah, damn. I'm gonna be late if I don't head out soon.

They shove Matt lightly at his shoulder.

DEVON  
(cont.)  
Which means you will be, too, slacker.

Matt grins sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck.

MATT  
Yeah, I guess so...

Sam smiles but looks at the time and date readout on his own data tab. He frowns and swears under his breath.

SAM  
(muttering)  
Goddamn it...  
(aloud)  
I gotta get going, too.

He turns melancholy for a moment, his eyebrows drawing into a frown. Devon and Matt exchange a worried glance.

Then he turns to Devon and puts an arm around their shoulder.

SAM  
I'll say hi to your little girlfriend  
for you, if you want.

Devon nudges him away, smiling sheepishly.

DEVON  
(mumbling)  
She's not my girlfriend, jackass...

Matt cuts in, oblivious to Devon's discomfort.

MATT  
Hey, could you ask her how her big sis  
is doing?  
(grins sheepishly)  
Haven't hardly heard from Alex since  
she went away to Field Training.

SAM  
(waves his hand)  
Whatever, man, whatever.

He turns to head for the approaching autobus. He waves over his shoulder at his friends as he departs.

SAM  
(cont.)  
See ya tomorrow, geeks.

Matt waves at his friend's back.

MATT  
Not if we see you first, a-hole.

He turns to face Devon and swats them on the shoulder.

MATT  
So, you good to head to work now?

DEVON  
Yeah, let's get it over with.

The two of them turn and head toward another approaching bus.

CUT TO:

EXT. DOWNTOWN INDY - NIGHT

A shot of the spacefaring city's downtown in the evening. Stardown has come & gone but a pair of moons glow in the sky with a warm light of Tau Ceti. Electric signs light the storefronts and dance music pulses from several posh clubs.

CUT TO a shot of a vintage movie house on the near east edge of the city center. It is lit from outside by spotlights hidden in the ground and glows with a mystic aura.

CUT TO:

INT. MOVIE THEATER

INSIDE the old building, we cut to a shot of Matt leaning against the railing at the upper balcony edge of a regal-looking theater. The light from the old-fashioned projection screen plays across the back wall and his face.

A different shot of the theater shows that the movie being played is a black and white classic from the nearly-forgotten Studio Era. It also shows the theater nearly empty.

On the screen, Humphrey Bogart laments the silence of America in the midst of some long-ago war. Matt watches silently, clearly transfixed. He mouths the words along with Bogart:

MATT  
(in sync with screen)  
"I'll bet they're asleep in New  
York... I'll bet they're asleep all  
over America..."

He grins like a schoolboy. The sudden clearing of a throat from someone behind him causes him to turn around. Devon stands in the balcony doorway, pointing at their watch. Matt nods and grabs his water before leaving the theater.

INT. MOVIE HOUSE - NIGHT

OUTSIDE the sanctum sanctorum of the theater, Matt and Devon walk across the ornately carpeted floor to the concession stand. Devon carries a broom loosely in one hand. The lobby of the movie house is as deserted as the theater itself. Despite its echoes of grandeur, the space has faded like a photograph. Devon turns to Matt, smirking blandly.

DEVON  
Y'know, I'm not required to pull you off breaks like that. I'm not paid enough to, to be honest.

Matt takes up his place behind the register as Devon starts sweeping bits of popcorn toward the robotic floor cleaner. It scuttles around the pair's feet like a curious pet.

MATT  
Yeah? Then why do you bother?

DEVON  
'Cause I don't wanna see your ass in a sling when Jess gets here, that's why.

Matt sighs and grumbles something inaudibly under his breath as he wipes down the counter. He surveys the lobby scene, taking in the near-total desolation of the movie palace.

MATT  
Can you believe this? Was a time places like this used to fill up all night, every night. Now people are so interested in the Immersives that you only get nerds like us out here to check out the old classics.

DEVON  
You mean nerds like you.

MATT  
(distracted)  
Hmm? Yeah, whatever.

DEVON  
(sighs)  
Time's change, my man.

They pause in their duties and lean on the broom.

DEVON  
(cont.)  
I mean, just look at the last thirty years. We're still the lucky ones, living here on Earth in a good city like we are. Could be lots worse.

MATT  
Yeah, yeah, I know...

DEVON  
Then don't complain so much. We coulda been drafted right out of secondary, would that have been more your speed? Maybe then you could take orders from Alexandra. Shit, you'd probably get some kinda kick outta that...

Matt grumbles quietly and continues scrubbing the counter. Devon just grins as they continue to lazily sweep loose popcorn shells and bits of trash toward the little wandering robot. Matt just leans on the counter, waiting for anything.

A moment later Devon stops sweeping. They turn to look at Matt, leaning on their broom once more as they does so.

DEVON  
Hey, can I level with you, dude?

MATT  
What, are you finally gonna ask Amy out? Good for you, my du-

DEVON  
(annoyed)  
No, no, I mean about Sam.

Matt quirks an eyebrow as he looks up at Devon. A strange little light is in his eye, caught someplace between innocent disbelief and genuine confusion.

MATT

*Sam?* What, you're not gonna ask him out, are you? 'Cause I don't think he's really into that sorta-

DEVON

I think something's bothering him.

MATT

What do you mean?

DEVON

I dunno, he's just been sorta...off the past few days. He's your friend, too, man. You haven't noticed?

MATT

I mean, I guess he's been kinda... Whaddaya want from me? I'm not exactly the best judge of all that sort of stuff, y'know? I mean, hell...

DEVON

Yeah, yeah, but listen. You haven't noticed he's been acting kinda... I dunno, different recently?

MATT

Um...no?

Devon frowns at him, face deadpan.

MATT

(cont.)

What, what do you mean?

DEVON

Matt, I think it's his brother. Mike would've been twenty-seven next month.

Matt hesitates, almost tripping over a response before stopping himself. He looks back down at the concessions counter and rubs the back of his neck.

MATT

And you think he's trying to think of a way to mark the occasion?

Devon's eyebrows draw together into a deeper frown.

DEVON

In a manner of speaking. You know what I'm talking about, Matt. You know how he gets this time of year, and-

MATT

Well what can we do about it? He gets this way every year. There's only so much we can do for him, dude.

(quietly)

It's not like either of us know what it's like to lose a brother.

Devon's face falls into a forlorn grimace. Matt notices a moment later and winces at his own lack of tact.

MATT

Shit, that's not- I'm sorry, D, you know that's not what I mean.

DEVON

Then what do you mean?

MATT

I just...well...

(sighs)

I just mean that he needs empathy. We can only offer so much, right?

Devon starts to speak but stops themselves. An idea comes into their mind, lighting up his face with a renewed smile.

DEVON

I think I know who can offer plenty of empathy, if that's what he needs.

Matt raises his eyebrow at Devon again. It takes a moment for the implication to dawn, but he brightens when it does.

DEVON

(cont.)

I think we could all use a nice vacation, anyway, don't you think?

MATT

Hell yeah, buddy!

He vaults over the counter and sticks out his hand for a high-five. Devon slaps him on the palm. They then come close enough to huddle and clench their fists in between.

DEVON & MATT  
(in unison)  
Salt life, baby, here we come!

They separate and raise their fists into the air.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT ROAD - DAY

OPEN ON a shot of a vintage muscle car speeding down a stretch of desert highway in the bright sunshine. The skies are cobalt blue with thin wisps of cottony clouds trailing across like tracks from great sky-bound tractors. The desert is vaguely similar to those on Old Earth, with the major distinction that the rock formations are more darkly red.

The car itself is electric blue with silver trimming and hubcaps. It's top is down, and the three people inside are jamming out to classical music blaring on the radio. All three wear sunglasses. Their hair whips in the wind.

The three passengers are Matt, Devon, and Sam. Matt sits behind the wheel, only nominally driving the A.I.-guided car, while Devon rides shotgun and Sam sits in the back. They shout out the chorus to the song with practiced ease.

DEVON, MATT & SAM  
(in unison)  
*"Born to be Wi-i-i-ld..."*

As the rock plays on, Sam, and Devon laugh aloud and mime jamming on faux instruments. Matt howls at the sun.

MATT  
Ow, ow-wow-wow! Man, it's been too long since we hit the road.

DEVON  
Hell yeah, brotha!

Sam takes a drink from a bottle of soda and puts it back in the cooler on the back seat floor. He leans back on middle of the back seat with his arms folded under his head.

SAM  
You said it, gents.

The car continues to scream down the four-lane rural highway, virtually solo in the vast expanse of southwestern desert.

CUT TO a shot of the car passing the outer boundaries of a distant Interplanetary Defense Corps space launch facility as a rocket plows headlong toward the Karman Line. Devon and Matt watch awestruck as it tears into the blue sky above. CLOSER shot of the rocket shows a Spacer Corps roundel on the body. The sonic boom hits the car a moment later. Matt lets out a long low whistle as the craft soars skyward.

DEVON

Where do you think they're headed?

MATT

Maybe one of those mining prospects in the Uranus Sector. There's a lot of new ventures out there, y'know.

Devon turns to face him, frowning quizzically.

DEVON

What, are you crazy? Uranus is way too deep into Alliance frontier space.

They turn back to watch the rocket's exhaust plume push for the heavens beyond the sky overhead.

DEVON

(cont.)

Nah, my guess is it's an exploration team outbound for the Kuiper Belt. I heard the Pathfinders found a pretty choice site somewhere near Haumea. Lotta cool alien shit still to be found out there in the Void...

Sam cuts in a second later without sitting up in his seat.

SAM

Or, they're spacer recruits on their way to Luna for EVA training.

Matt takes his eyes off the road for half a second to gawk at the now barely visible rocket plume. He hesitates for a long moment as Sam's suggestion sinks in.

MATT

Yeah, maybe.

(grins)

Heh, you guys remember our first EVA training runs? How I almost puked the first time they put me in that deep space simulator thing?

Devon smiles and even Sam cracks a small grin.

DEVON

No, as I remember you did puke. Pissed off the training sergeants pretty bad, too, if I'm not mistaken.

Sam lets out a laugh at this one. Matt just grins sheepishly and keeps his eyes glued to the road.

MATT

Yeah, those were the days, huh? We were three kings, young, dumb, and strong. And livin' the dream.

SAM

Then not much has changed, huh?

(cracks a grin)

Devon's still young, you're still dumb, and I'm still strong.

Devon laughs, but Matt just rolls his eyes. Still, a small grin finds its way to his lips.

DEVON

And what about living the dream?

Sam hesitates. He turns his head to the now receding distant launch facility. Another rocket's boosters come alive a moment later. The distant flash glints on his dark shades.

SAM

(half to himself)

You can keep the dreams for yourselves, kids.

In the front seat, Devon and Matt exchange another knowing look. In the back seat, Sam leans back as the car speeds off down the road. A moment later, he sits back up, turning fully in his seat to look back up at the ascending second rocket.

We see his eyes over the rims of his dark glasses as the afternoon skies and the distant spacecraft reflect off of them. His expression is grave, but resolute.

Ahead on the road, a sign looms atop an automated border checkpoint, manned in this case by a toll robot. As the car tears hellbent for the horizon, we CUT TO a closer shot:

"YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE PACIFIC STATES FEDERATION"

"BARSTOW - 200 KILOMETERS"

"LOS ANGELES - 385 KILOMETERS"

"PLEASE DRIVE CAREFULLY"

CUT TO:

EXT. COASTAL SHACK - DAY

OPEN ON a shot of the same brilliantly blue convertible muscle car pulling off another stretch of sunbaked desert road onto a beach somewhere on the coast of Baja California. The Pacific laps the sand as sea birds drift overhead.

Down the beach is a quaint and cozy-looking SHACK composed of all manner of spare materials - corrugated steel, plasticine sheets, cheap cinder blocks, and so on. The shack juts partly out over the ocean at the mouth of a tiny inlet, and a tiny fishing boat is suspended over the water on a riser.

Matt pulls the car to a stop next to a beat-up tool shed and honks the horn a few times as he, Devon, and Sam pile out.

MATT  
(shouts)  
Mr. Wastani? Hey, Mr. Wastani!

DEVON  
(loudly)  
You home, Jon?

The three walk toward the shack, then begin milling about as they search for the owner.

A voice calls out to them from the bluffs atop the beach.

JON  
(loudly)  
My Gods, they'll let anyone on this beach, won't they?

The trio looks up to see JON WASTANI (40) standing above them on the bluffs and beaming down. He carries a large net slung over his back and a box of fishing tackle in the other hand. His smile is radiant even from a distance.

DEVON  
(beaming)  
Hey, Jon! How've you been?

The older man makes his way down the steep but navigable path to the beach. He speaks as he approaches.

JON

Oh, you know... Getting old, feelin' raggedy, just tryin' to stay out of trouble. But always keepin' it real.

He reaches them and drops his equipment on the sand. He puts his hands on his hips, still smiling. He is tall, athletic, and good-looking, but clearly careworn and weathered as if by many voyages across the sea - or across the solar system.

JON

(shrugs)

Y'know how it is.

His close-cropped curly black hair is graying at the temples and he has a short beard of salt 'n' pepper stubble. His eyes are vibrantly blue. He wears frayed brown cargo shorts and a tattered old sleeveless shirt that shows off athletic arms. His right upper bicep bears a military-looking tattoo. It shows a crossed sword and lightning bolt over a shield. The insignia of the Special Reconnaissance Command.

Devon steps forward, grinning faintly. Jon holds their gaze, his own smile fading to a cool grin.

DEVON

It's good to see you, old man.

Jon starts to speak, but his eyes well up with unbidden tears. He then throws himself forward and pulls his sibling into a tight embrace. Devon returns this gesture with vigor. Jon pats them on the back, still wet-eyed.

JON

(quietly)

Good to see you, too, kid.

They separate and back up enough for Jon to get a good look at his brother's kid. He wipes his eyes but keeps the other hand on Devon's shoulder as if to make sure they're actually there. Something nags at him that remains unspoken.

JON

You're looking good, D. You all are.  
Always good to see you, Sam, Matt.

He nods at them and they nod back politely, smiling.

MATT  
Good to see you, too, Mr. Wastani.

SAM  
Likewise.

Jon smiles and points at the peach fuzz on Sam's face.

JON  
(cont.)  
See you're trying to take after me and  
your big bro and grow a tough guy  
beard, huh? Good on ya, Sammy.

Sam grins as he waves his adoptive uncle's jokes aside. Matt and Devon stand by in the wings, smiling awkwardly. Devon cuts in to turn the conversation back to the present.

DEVON  
You got my last message, right? Said  
we'd be in sometime about now?

JON  
(nodding)  
Yeah, I did. I was just taking some of  
my latest catch over to the local  
medicine woman. She's got two kids,  
and one of 'em is down with a cold, so  
she's kind of tied up this week.

He shrugs good-naturedly.

JON  
(cont.)  
I told her I'd bring her some of my  
catch this week. 'Least I can do.

Matt steps forward, extending a clenched fist for Jon to bump. Jon returns the gesture with a smile.

MATT  
Always the gentleman, Mr. Wastani.

Jon pulls Matt in close and rubs his knuckles against the 20-year-old's scalp. Matt squirms halfheartedly, still smiling.

JON  
Always the little brown-noser, Mr.  
Cavanaugh. Looks like you could use  
some more miracle grow, kid.

He releases Matt and pats him a couple of times on the shoulder. Matt rubs the back of his neck reflexively as he backs away, still smiling sheepishly.

JON

(cont.)

And how many times do I have to tell you? Call me Jon, the both of you. Not even my father was "Mister" Wastani. Makes me feel all official, yuck...

Sam steps forward, grinning with reserved calm. He extends his hand, which Jon grasps in a firm handshake.

SAM

(grins)

Sure thing, *Commander* Wastani.

Jon shakes his head and grins at Devon. They share in Sam's small in-joke at the mention of Jon's old spacer rank.

JON

Enough formalities! C'mon, let's get inside, I'm sure you're all hungry from the trip. How does fish and chips sound? I've got an old family recipe. Fresh fish from the Pacific, too!

MATT

You don't have to ask me twice!

The four of them share yet another laugh as Jon leads his three guests towards the shack and an eventual dinner.

FADE OUT:

EXT. COASTAL SHACK - NIGHT

FADE IN:

After a couple of days of relaxation, the three friends sit on the beach next to the shack one peaceful night. Jon can be seen inside, silhouetted in the window as he works on an after dinner snack. His antique radio plays a mix of oldies and classical Mexicana as the waves crash outside.

Sam lays back on a beach towel, hands behind his head. He watches the moon rise with muted fixation. Devon and Matt play a game of cards by lantern light a few paces away. The flickering of the amber lantern flame casts an eerily pulsing aura of calm over the whole of the scene.

Devon deliberates over his cards for too long, and Matt cocks his head and begins to lay into him.

MATT  
C'mon, dude, you gonna put some cards down, you gonna make a bet, what?

Devon eyes him narrowly but says nothing at first.

MATT  
(cont.)  
I'm getting old over here.

DEVON  
I'm just weighing my options, O' Ye of Little Patience.

MATT  
(grinning)  
Look... I know you've only got one of a few hands there. We've been through this before: poker isn't chess, you can't just logic your way through it and expect to win every time.

DEVON  
Yeah? Well, I'd at least expect to win a few times. Just a few, y'know?

Matt shakes his head, still grinning. He sighs exaggeratedly as he shuffles his own hand around.

MATT  
Whatever you say, my friend. The outcome will still be the same.

He flips through his cards with exaggerated malaise.

MATT  
(cont.)  
You're just delaying the inevitable.

Devon eyes Matt narrowly. They crack a faint grin, then drops their cards onto the upside down basket they're using as a card table. The hand they drop is a Queen-straight-high-flush. Devon grins as Matt looks down at the cards, blinking.

DEVON  
So, was that the outcome you were looking for? Boo-yah.

Matt rubs his chin, eyebrows raised, and sighs as he checks and rechecks his own cards. He eyes Devon suspiciously for a moment before his face brightens into a joyous grin. He throws down his own cards - a straight royal flush.

MATT  
(howling)  
Boo-yah, that! Whadda ya think of them apples, my friend? Hot damn I'm good!

Devon stares blankly down at the winning hand. They sit back and raise their hands, more in surprise than in defeat.

DEVON  
I just don't get it.

MATT  
What don't you get, D? How I whupped your ass, again? I'm just lucky, that's all. No real trick to it.

DEVON  
Oh, no, I'm well aware of how you always win. You cheat like a tax algorithm on a rich guy's returns.

Matt sits back himself, putting his hand over his heart and fluttering his eyelids to feign hurt feelings.

MATT  
I'm crushed. How could you point such a dreadful accusation at me?

DEVON  
Oh, I dunno... 'Cause it's true.

Matt rocks back and forth on his heels and grins. He shakes his head in denial but the gesture does not reach his eyes.

MATT  
Nah, dude. Not at all.

DEVON  
Fine. But what I really don't get is, if you really did know what was gonna happen, 'cause you cheated, that is-

MATT  
Uh-uh! I play an honest game, worthy of any scholarly gathering.

DEVON  
Whatever. What I don't get is, if you knew how things were gonna turn out, why drag out the game? Why put on an act like you didn't know?

Matt raises a finger in a mock revelatory gesture.

MATT  
Ah, but you see, sometimes that's the whole point. If you can see what's coming, even if you're sure it's the end, why not go out in style?

Devon pauses for a moment as the words sink in.

DEVON  
(deadpan)  
Damn, what a remarkably bleak analogy you just served up.

MATT  
(laughs)  
Yeah, I guess so. But my point is, sometimes the only winning move is to keep the other guy playing.

Devon breaks into a wry, lopsided grin.

DEVON  
Been studying those game theory books I gave you, have you?

Matt says nothing but waggles his eyebrows in way of a response. Jon calls out from the shack.

JON  
All right, crab cakes are ready!

Devon and Matt make to get up. Devon stretches their arms while Matt reaches up toward the stars to work out a kink in his back. Matt turns to Devon as they head for the shack.

MATT  
Oh, and by the way...

He reaches up into the folds of his shirt and pulls out a few extra cards. He waves the cards in Devon's face, grinning.

MATT  
(cont.)  
I don't ever cheat, just so ya know.  
But I do make my own luck.

Devon swats Matt in the shoulder as he laughs boisterously.

DEVON  
(grinning)  
Jackass.

They stop next to Sam, who remains reclined on the sand, watching as the moon passes across the dark rural sky.

MATT  
Hey, didn't you hear? Food's ready.

SAM  
So go have some, why don't you.

Devon and Matt exchange another worried look.

DEVON  
You don't want any?

SAM  
I'm good.

MATT  
C'mon man, it's crab cakes! You've had  
Jon's crab cakes, and these'll be  
fresh out of the ocean!

Sam gets up on his elbows and glares at them.

SAM  
Then go have some already!

Matt and Devon reluctantly oblige. Devon pauses as they head into the shack and turns to look back at Sam. For just a second it seems as though they're about to speak, but they think better of it and turn away.

Sam lies in the sand and stares not at the moon, but at one of the stars nearby. Reaching into his pocket he withdraws a single dog tag. He holds it up and looks at the name engraved in stenciled letters on one face of the metal shard:

"TASKARO, MICHAEL A"

## INT. COASTAL SHACK - NIGHT

Inside the shack is lit by a mix of Chinese-style lanterns and retro wire bulbs on strings. The glow these lights cast is warm and richly burnt orange. The dark blue light of the moon above the beach beyond the windows is ghostly by comparison, as if the inside of the shack is its own world.

Devon, Matt, and Jon sit or stand around the makeshift kitchen munching on homemade crab cakes. Matt and Jon share stories - or rather, Jon regales Matt with old war stories and Matt eats them up with regular interjections. Devon leans against the fridge and stares out the window at the darkened beach beyond. Sam's silhouette can be barely seen against the flickering light of the lanterns.

JON  
(in medias res)  
...so there we were, right? Devon's father and me, trapped with basically no cover, surrounded by Alliance shock troopers. No way out, of course.

Matt's grin is broad as he nods along with Jon's tale.

MATT  
Oh, of course. Had to be about a hundred of 'em, right?

JON  
(laughing)  
More like two hundred, easily. Anyway, we had to make contact with the pickup shuttle and get to a safe LZ before the enemy pinned us all the way down, or we'd have been dead for sure.  
(smiles)  
Yeah, if it hadn't been for old Max I woulda died on that little rock.

Suddenly he stops short and shifts to the melancholy.

JON  
(cont.)  
Wasn't the first time your old man saved my ass, Devon. Or the last.

Devon turns at the mention of their name. They meet Jon's suddenly saddened gaze with quiet resolve, their brows pulled down into a slight frown as old wounds reopen.

DEVON  
You ever gonna tell me how he died?

Jon hesitates for several long seconds. He fumbles with his words for a while before ultimately giving up. He sighs and looks down at the ground, swishing the beer in his bottle as he finally speaks.

JON  
Like I said, he saved my skin more times than I can count. I just wish...

He trails off, rubbing his eyes. Devon notices he'd been welling up with tears again. The subject of Devon's father's death has always been a touchy subject between the two of them. Jon clears his throat and goes on.

JON  
(cont.)  
Just wish I could have been there when it really mattered, is all.

Devon and Matt say nothing as Jon continues looking anywhere but at his brother's child. Matt reaches out to shake his shoulder reassuringly a moment later.

DEVON  
Jon, do you... Do you think you could talk to Sam? I think he's dealing with a lot of the same pain you are right now, with his brother. That's part of why I made him come with us out here.

MATT  
(nodding)  
Yeah, the big lug almost stayed home. Who knows where he'd be wallowing now if he hadn't come with us.

Jon looks at them both, nodding slowly.

JON  
I guess it is that time of year.

Devon nods solemnly, his expression somber.

DEVON  
Yeah. Mike's birthday would've been in a few weeks. Hard to believe he's been gone three years now...

Jon sighs and puts his beer down on the kitchen counter as Devon trails off. He then gets on his feet and makes to go out onto the beach to have a chat with his nephew's friend.

JON

Oh, why not? I'll go see if I can put him a little bit more right.

DEVON

(grinning)

I know you can, Jon. If anyone can, it's gotta be you.

Jon waves a hand over his shoulder in acknowledgment as he passes through the open door and steps down onto the sand. Devon watches as he steps out toward Sam, the lights of the shack falling down his back until finally he, too, all but disappears into that strange otherworld beyond the walls.

A moment later Matt walks around to lean on the counter across from Devon. He suddenly seems very serious.

MATT

You think he'll be okay?

DEVON

What? Oh, yeah, he's a big boy. Just needs a little perspective, that's all. Needs to see he's not alone.

MATT

You talking about our best friend or your uncle there?

Devon looks at him, but has nothing to say for a moment. When they look back out at the beach, they can see their uncle squatting next to Sam's reclining form, nearly blocking the light of a lantern pole further along the beach. They frown as a thought occurs to them, but it dies on their lips.

MATT

(cont.)

I mean, I know your uncle is tough. Hell, you'd have to be, to do even half of the stuff he's done. But what about Sam? Losing your father and your older brother in just a few years, and all while you're still just a kid?

He shakes his head and blows out a sigh. He looks out at the two men speaking inaudibly on the beach, frowning sadly.

MATT  
(cont.)  
I can't even imagine, dude.

DEVON  
Yeah, that's why we came out here,  
remember. That was my point in the  
first place, wasn't it?

MATT  
Okay, sure, but my point now is that,  
it's been three years since Mike died.  
Sam's only been getting more and more  
bitter about it every year since it  
happened. Who knows how long it'll be  
before he does something, I dunno,  
rash? That's the word, right? 'Rash'?

DEVON  
(sighs)  
It's short for irrational, ya dipshit.  
But yes, I see what you mean.  
(pause)  
And no, I don't know, either.

They stare out at their best friend and last remaining  
family, wondering how they can help, if at all.

DEVON  
(cont.)  
Maybe none of us does.

The two of them look at each other again, another silent  
exchange of meaning that passes and fades away an instant  
later. Then they look out at Jon and Sam again.

The shot ends on a slow zoom-in on Jon sitting next to Sam  
before FADING TO BLACK again.

EXT. COASTAL SHACK - DAY

The next day, the trio is packing their belongings into  
Matt's car as they prepare to head back east for Centauri Day  
celebrations - the marking of the anniversary of first ever  
interstellar mission. Devon speaks to Jon outside the shack.

DEVON  
You're sure I can't convince you to  
come back to Indy with us for the  
Founder's Day celebrations? I'm sure  
Mrs. Cavanaugh would be more than

happy to make space for you at the dinner table. Right, Matt?

MATT  
She sure would. Heck yeah.

Jon releases his nibling from the embrace and backs away, shaking his head as he does so.

JON  
Nah, I'd only cramp your style. Don't need a broken-down old war horse like me at your Founder's Day festivities. Gods only know there's not much for me to celebrate in any of that.

The trio's smiles falter in varying degrees as Jon's unspoken lament falls upon them. Them Devon reaches out and clasps their uncle on the shoulder, smiling resolutely.

JON  
I promise we'll be back soon.  
Thanksgiving isn't all that far off,  
you know. We'd love to see you then.

MATT  
Yeah, and I'm sure my ma would be glad to cover your meals, anytime

SAM  
Same here.

Jon nods in acknowledgment of their offers.

JON  
You have my thanks for that. Now get going or you won't make it back before all the celebrations are over.

As the trio makes ready to get into the car, Jon beckons Devon over. He nods at Sam as the younger man climbs into the back of Matt's car. He speaks so only Devon can hear.

JON  
Keep an eye on him, would you?

DEVON  
I always do... One for each of them.

Jon chuckles good-naturedly in spite of himself.

JON  
Good. That's good.

He smiles, bowing his head as something occurs to him.

JON  
(cont.)  
You take after your old man more every year. Have I told you that?

DEVON  
Only every time you see me, Jon.

They share a brief laugh in spite of the moment.

JON  
Seriously, though. I think Sam will be all right. He's still young. But he's also full of fire and brimstone. Don't let it burn him up or it'll take other people with him, got it?

Devon nods. They look back at Sam, then back at their uncle. They smile and start to say something else.

MATT  
(loudly)  
C'mon, D! We're already missing the fun and fracas back home.

Devon turns to wave at him as if to say, "Hold on a moment." Then they turn back to their uncle, still stumbling over the right way to say what is on their mind.

JON  
Go on, kid, get going. Your time is now. Don't waste it on me.

Devon smiles awkwardly, and not without a twinge of sadness for his uncle's self-proclaimed obsolescence. Jon's proud smile is only slightly dulled by the sadness of watching his only living relative depart once more.

Suddenly a loud, repetitive beeping emanates from one of Jon's cargo pockets. Frowning, he reaches into the pocket and pulls out a palm-sized communication device. An electronic eye pulses with blue-white light in time with the beeps.

A scanning beam emits from the eye and reads Jon's face. The beeper stops pulsing and emanates a holographic line of text carrying a short electronic announcement:

*"User Identity Confirmed - Wastani, Jonathan D."*

The device next projects a new holo-message into the air between the electronic eye and Jon's face. It flickers for a moment before resolving into five words:

*"The Leaves are Turning Over."*

Reading the message, Jon's eyes go wide and his mouth falls open. He looks up to see Devon climbing into the passenger side of the car, joking with Matt about something he cannot hear. The camera zooms in on Jon's eyes as the horror of whatever information he has just been relayed sinks in.

JON  
Devon! Stop, wait!

The trio halts in their idle chatter and look around to stare at Jon. Devon straightens, having been halfway into the car.

DEVON  
Jon? What's wrong?

Jon's arm drops and the beeper slips from his hand and drops to the sand next to his feet. He slowly steps toward the car, mumbling at first but soon speaking coherently again.

JON  
I- We have to get to San Diego. Right now, you understand? Right. Now.

Devon and the others exchange worried glances.

DEVON  
Why? What's going on?

Jon's eyes flash with sudden mad fury.

JON  
There's no time! Get in, we have to get going on the double.

He then rushes around to the front passenger door and climbs in, almost shoving his brother's kid out of the way in the process. Devon looks warily at Sam and climbs into the back as Sam slides over to allow them room to sit.

MATT  
So, um... Where to, again?

JON

Just head for the ICA HQ in San Diego,  
and hurry! I'll explain en route.

Matt puts the car in gear and backs up to head down the beach to the road cutoff. As they head away, the camera pans down to view the beeper laying in the sand amid Jon's and the others' footprints. The ghostly bluish message still hovers flickering in the air above the emitter eye.

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. ALLIANCE CITADEL COURTYARD - NIGHT

OPEN ON the courtyard of the **Alliance of Free Worlds'** Central Command Citadel. The great orb of Jupiter hangs high in the nighttime sky, casting an eerie glow on the scene. The Citadel grounds are a kilometer on a side, with sloping walls rising from each boundary like the sides of a pyramid.

TEXT FADES IN:

"AURORA CITY - CALLISTO - JOVIAN SECTOR"

"CAPITAL OF THE ALLIANCE OF FREE WORLDS"

TEXT FADES OUT

NARRATOR

(v.o.)

Far from the benign decadence of Earth, in the heart of the deep space Frontier, lies Callisto, regional capital of the rival Alliance.

Artificial waterfalls cascade down the sloping walls at regular intervals, with alien trees lining the bases and terraces breaking up the slopes like rice paddies. The entire courtyard is rendered in vibrant tan-orange hues, with glossy dark silver water running along the crevices between the flagstones. The entire courtyard resembles a cross between the Forbidden City and some long-dead Babylonian culture.

The north end of the courtyard is faced by a massive wall done up in a style as much reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian as Southeast Asian. The plinths leading down the walkway to the three-story entrance are surmounted by eternal flames.

NARRATOR

The dominant force in Solar Space for the past decade, the Alliance of Free

Worlds now draws its grand designs  
upon the whole solar system.

The carvings over the opening proclaim the following in three languages - English, a frontier dialect called Maanak (*reminiscent of Hindi*), and Zharan (*written in the form of cubist glyphs more similar to QR codes than actual writing*):

"LIBERTY THROUGH UNITY"

NARRATOR

Soon, these ambitions will be the  
lynch pin in the fates of many...

The terraces along either side of the entryway are patrolled by suited-up zharan soldiers wearing gray ghilly suit-style overcoats and carrying fierce long-barreled rifles.

CROSSFADE TO:

INT. CITADEL HALLWAYS

Inside the Citadel, uniformed human and zharan officers mill about or head from one task to another within the sprawling compound. The human Alliance officers wear grayscale dress uniforms or lizard-striped duty uniforms. The zharians mostly wear mottled green and coyote brown flight suits, with only the high-ranking officers wearing their dress uniforms.

The humans and zharians mostly avoid one another, preferring to stick to similar company unless required for duty. Only a handful willingly venture into the others' internal enclaves to discuss matters of mutual importance. The security forces are joint human and zharan, with unlike pairs guarding each junction point in the vast internal facility.

RIVERA

(o.s.)

Today, I argue not for a continuation of the appeasement of our enemies, but a renewed resolve to stand against their aggression and respond with an altogether reinvigorated resolve...

CUT TO:

INT. COUNCIL CHAMBERS

Inside the inner sanctum of the Allied Central Forum, the gathered Councilors watch as one of their senior members gives an impassioned speech on the state of human space.

RIVERA

(cont.)

...to stand against Terran and Martian imperialism and their oppression of frontier peoples. We can no longer afford to stand idly by while the corrupt government of Earth and its puppet states throughout the Sol system strangle the free expression, free thought, and free trade of the free peoples living in Solar Space.

The man's name and post appear onscreen in the lower third as he comes into view, standing atop the central dais:

"BANNACK RIVERA"

"COUNCILOR FOR THE INNER WORLDS"

Rivera (53) is carrying on to a full chamber of gathered Allied Worlds councilors. The chamber itself is roughly spherical, with a flat floor halting the downward slope of the walls and a high vaulted ceiling overhead. The councilors sit in curving rows of terraced parliamentary seats, all facing Rivera where he stands in the center.

Rivera himself is tall and stately, with a slight paunch bulging the front of his dark gray Nehru suit. The only decoration on the suit is a pin of the dual black banners of the coalition: one with the starburst and triple orbs of the AFW, and one with the red trefoil of the **Zharan Collective**.

His face is regal and his dark brown eyes flash with both innate cunning and hard-won authority as he speaks. He waves his hands here and there for emphasis.

Elsewhere in the gallery, a regal-looking Alliance officer sits watching the Councilor's speech. Her name also overlays across the lower third as she observes the proceedings:

"ADMIRAL PETRA TORSI"

"COMMANDER, ALLIANCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES"

TEXT FADES OUT

TORSI (42) is tall, with short, graying brown hair, icy blue eyes, and olive skin. She wears a smartly-pressed Alliance dress uniform and has her hands folded on the desk in front of her. She isn't smiling as she listens to the speech.

As the camera pans across her, we see her personal aide. Her own name and rank are likewise displayed before fading away:

"MAJOR ISABEL LEDECKY"

"PERSONAL AIDE TO ADMIRAL TORSI"

Ledecky (34) is an officer in the Allied Worlds Armada, the Alliance's military wing. She is shorter than Torsi but sturdily built, with a soldier's physique and wolflike hazel eyes. Her dark auburn hair is pulled back into an intricately knotted bun. She smiles as she listens to Rivera, enraptured.

Next to her, Admiral Torsi slowly shakes her head. Ledecky notices this and turns to face her boss, frowning. Both of them converse in hushed gallery tones.

MAJOR LEDECK

Admiral, I should think you of all people would enjoy this. The Councilor is in rare form today, after all.

ADMIRAL TORSI

Mm, yes. That much I'll give him.

MAJOR LEDECKY

So why the disapproval, if I may ask?

Torsi sighs and waits a beat before answering.

ADMIRAL TORSI

Suffice it to say, Major, that I've heard this tune before. It does not, in fact, get better with repetition.

Ledecky frowns again, eyebrow raised.

MAJOR LEDECKY

Ma'am?

ADMIRAL TORSI

The whole point of this meeting was to argue on whether or not to maintain the armistice, correct?

MAJOR LEDECKY

Yes...?

ADMIRAL TORSI

(sighs)

So the point I am making is that

arguing the case for sustaining peace or preventing a renewed war doesn't matter. Not anymore, at least.

Ledecky's eyes drift back to Councilor Rivera gesticulating on the dais as he nears his crescendo.

MAJOR LEDECKY

And why is that?

ADMIRAL TORSI

Because at this point, arguing the case for war is a moot point.

Both of them fall silent as Rivera carries on. They watch in silence for a while as Rivera pontificates.

RIVERA

Without our zharan comrades, we would not be here to debate the idea of continuing our struggle against our mutual oppressors. It is only by standing together that we shall weather the storm of what is to come, and only by facing that storm with the will to endure its trials that we shall achieve victory. This we pledge: forward, but only by striving together. Liberty through unity!

A rumble of applause courses through the chamber. Torsi runs a knuckle across her chin as she speaks.

ADMIRAL TORSI

See, that's just it. Right there. The decision for war has already been made. And not by us. No, not by us...

Rivera's speech reaches its crescendo and the sound of applause fills the chamber. Rivera basks in the glow on the dais, smiling around at the gathered Councilors.

MAJOR LEDECKY

I'm afraid I still don't understand.

ADMIRAL TORSI

You will. The decision to make war has been out of our hands for a long time now. Maybe ever since we signed our pact with the zharans. They've been drawing their plans against the ICA

for so long that I hardly think our indecision would slow them down.

MAJOR LEDECKY

So, when you say the decision has already been made, you mean...?

She trails off, letting it go unsaid. Next to her, Torsi sighs. She steeplest her fingers and watches Rivera receive his standing ovation. The human councilors in the gallery roar with adulation as Rivera basks in the glory.

ADMIRAL TORSI

Yes, Major. The time to decide one way or the other has passed. All that's left is to win the war they're starting. If it even can be won...

Ledecky looks over at her now decidedly pensive boss before turning to gaze back down at the dais. Her own face is more thoughtful now, too, and both are half in shadow as Rivera continues to bask in the aura of jubilation his speech has brought. Jubilation laid at the altar of war.

CROSSFADE TO:

EXT. SAN DIEGO STREETS - AFTERNOON

Matt's car navigates the streets along the southern edge of the San Diego-Tijuana metropolis. The urban expanse sprawls for many kilometers along the sea, with towering buildings of glittering composite steel its abundant monuments.

Even as far from the city center as the car and its passengers are, people are already swarming the streets lighting off firecrackers, barbecuing in their yards, or generally sharing in the celebration of C-Day.

Matt rounds a corner to head for the ICA headquarters and comes to a sudden stop. A block party effectively seals off the street about a hundred meters ahead of them.

MATT

Damn it!

DEVON

Shit, this is the fourth one so far.

They turn and look back down the street.

DEVON

(cont.)

Try the next one over, we might be  
able to get around this-

SAM

No, no, that street is one way, says  
so here on the map I pulled up.

The three younger passengers begin to argue but Jon cuts  
across all of them with a sudden edge to his voice.

JON

Knock it off, you three. Matt, drop  
back and head two blocks west. Should  
be an alley next to a pizza shop we  
can cut through to avoid this.

Matt backs the car into an empty driveway and turns around.  
He drives back down to the last intersection and turns right.

MATT

Did he say pizza? Man, I'm starved.  
Could we maybe-

JON

(angrily)

There's no time! Just drive.

They drive in silence for a moment. Devon speaks up first.

DEVON

So, you're really a hundred percent  
sure about all this? An invasion?  
Like, for real... No B.S?

JON

(sighs)

As I've said a dozen times already,  
yes. The code we set was crystal  
clear. There's an imminent invasion of  
the ICA frontier planned by the  
Alliance. And now I have to get a  
warning to AEROCOM immediately or  
there'll be hell to pay.

Another moment of awkward silence passes as Matt slows to  
turn northward again. A loud fireworks display nearby causes  
Jon to flinch noticeably in the front seat.

MATT

So... You're still not gonna tell us who you set this code with in the first place, are you?

JON

If I didn't the other six times you asked, what makes you think I will now? Just keep driving, kid.

Matt sighs and drives slowly past a group of kids playing with sparklers at the mouth of a cul-de-sac. They laugh and shout with glee, oblivious to the tension in the car.

MATT

But I don't get it... The armistice was slated to last until at least ninety-two, right? Why break it now?

JON

I'm the last person to ask about high-level Alliance strategy. All I can say for sure is that if they made the decision to jump into the deep end again, they've got a damn good reason for taking such a risk.

Devon and Sam exchange meaningful looks in the back seat. Sam leans forward to speak to Jon.

SAM

So assuming this is all on the up-and-up, I mean, that the Allies really are about to hit us, why doesn't AEROCOM already know about it? They should know by now, shouldn't they?

JON

In an ideal world, they would. But strategic intel can be a tricky beast at the best of times. And the zharans have always been sneaky bastards.

Matt pulls past the outer edge of a second, smaller block party and gives the car more gas.

MATT

Well, you had me drive manually, so I guess whatever is going on, it's gotta be pretty friggin' serious.

SAM  
Yeah? Why's that?

MATT  
Because this is a vintage car, man!  
Things aren't meant to be pushed too  
hard, y'know. I mean, I'm an ace  
driver and all, but c'mon...

Jon turns toward him as Matt shakes his head.

JON  
Actually, I think you could stand to  
give it a little more "oomph", if you  
don't mind. We are kind of in a hurry.

Matt gives him a quick sidelong glance.

MATT  
You want me to what now?

JON  
I want you to step on it.

MATT  
Uh, sure, I can do that... Whatever  
you say, Mister- Uh, sorry, Jon.

Sam and Devon exchange another nervous glance. Matt shifts the gears and stomps on the gas, tearing off down a more or less deserted stretch of street toward the built-up city center. Detonating fireworks dot the skies all over the city itself, and a massive drone light show hangs over downtown, mingling with the afternoon sunlight.

INT. CITADEL INTERIOR- NIGHT

Inside the offices of the **Zharan High Command**, high-ranking zharan military and government officials carry on in avid discussion over the subject of the predicted war.

Here, in their own inner sanctum, the zharans reveal their true selves, without the face coverings of most of their kind throughout the compound. Although outwardly very similar to "typical" humans in appearance, they all bear at least two distinguishing characteristics:

- 1) All zharans naturally have honey-golden irises, resembling those of African lions more than anything else; and
- 2) Virtually all of them (save those on special infiltration

assignments) are decorated with often intricate facial markings not unlike tribal tattoos of Earthbound humans.

The most common of these markings to see is a thick red line, bordered thinly in black, horizontally across the middle of the face and passing above the eyes and down to the bridge of the nose. This marks members of the soldier caste.

One very senior member of the soldier caste enters the central HQ. Her facial markings are turquoise wings extending up and outward from the outer edges of her eyes (not unlike Ancient Egyptian makeup), a small horizontal turquoise strip across the bridge of her nose, and another vertical one extending down from her lower lip. She is tall, lanky, and regal in appearance, with a short side-swept mop of platinum blonde hair only a few shades darker than her pale skin. Her golden eyes are stern. Her name and rank appear onscreen:

"ONARA VILAYIS"

"CHIEF COMMANDER OF THE ZHARAN ARMED FORCES"

As Vilayis passes through the office space, lower-ranking officers and officials move aside and snap to attention. For the audience's sake, their language is translated to English. Two junior officers prove bold enough to step forward.

ZHARAN OFFICER 1  
Good afternoon, Chief Commander!

ZHARAN OFFICER 2  
How did the meeting go this morning,  
Chief Commander? Well, I trust?

ZHARAN OFFICER 1  
We heard that the Alliance leadership  
is in agreement with our case for war.  
Have you any news of that?

She throws the younger-looking zharans a stern sidelong glance as she passes. They diminish instantly.

ONARA VILAYIS  
It will be on the Network in short order, I'm quite sure. Until then, you all have much more important matters to attend to than gossip, do you not?

ZHARAN OFFICERS  
(in unison)  
Yes, Chief Commander!

With that, they scurry off to complete other, more important tasks. Vilayis continues to the center of the command center and opens the sliding door to her office. Although spacious, it is relatively spartan in décor: a flag of the Zharan Collective on the wall behind the desk - black with a gray roundel emblazoned with the red **Zharan Trefoil**; bookshelves containing actual leather bound tomes of human writing on various subjects such as history, art, and war; and a shrine to the Zharan deity of death and rebirth.

It is who is in the room that causes Vilayis to scowl.

The other zharan is tall, though not as tall as Vilayis. He is also gaunt, thin, and not too dissimilar from Joseph Conrad's original description of Kurtz as a "papier mache Mephistopheles." His oily black hair is slicked back and well-groomed, and his golden eyes appear almost sallow in their sockets. His name and title appear onscreen:

"SADIRO KEVAR"

"CHANCELLOR OF THE COUNCIL OF PRIMARCHS"

He is clearly whip smart and ruthless, and all the more dangerous for it. His facial marking is a pair of tapered dark green stripes jutting down from the bottom of his eyelids, appearing like emerald tear stains on his face. His yellow zharan eyes seem almost faded with age.

He turns from scrutinizing some of the books on Vilayis' shelves upon hearing her enter. His voice virtually drips with barely contained conniving mendacity.

SADIRO KEVAR  
Ah, Chief Commander Vilayis! How good  
to see you again. Just getting back  
from the war meeting, I trust?

Vilayis holds her scowl before fully entering the office. She takes off her ceremonial cloak and hangs it on a hook by the door before beginning to wash her hands in the pool of water being renewed by the waterfall in the shrine.

The shrine itself is vaguely Shinto, with a small, six-legged alien figure praying in the lotus position under the awning and two craggy peaks representing the duality of the universe on either side of him. The left peak is taller but cracked open, as if rent asunder by lightning. The small figure's eyes are silver and it holds a shepherd's crook in one forehand and the hilt of a sheathed sword in the other.

ONARA VILAYIS

Whatever you want, Chancellor, the answer I end up giving had better not leave me with a bad taste in my mouth.

Kevar smiles silkily, his white teeth flashing like daggers.

SADIRO KEVAR

As charming as ever, Commander. Why is it that I can't simply drop by the Strategic Command to check in on my military counterpart? Especially now, on the eve of our Great Crusade?

Chief Commander Vilayis holds up a hand to cut him off.

ONARA VILAYIS

Enough, Kevar. You're not in the Council Chambers anymore. We may share the responsibility of leading our respective halves of the government, but that does not mean I have to enjoy your presence in the slightest.

She dries her hands and turns to face him, gaze stony.

ONARA VILAYIS

(cont.)

I assume that's where you've just come from, at any rate. The Council meeting was this morning, I believe?

SADIRO KEVAR

Quite so. I was just on my way to brief the Primarchs. Regarding the aforementioned Crusade, that is.

Vilayis sighs and closes her eyes. The reality of the war now imminent on the horizon of human space weighs heavy on her.

ONARA VILAYIS

So it's done, then. No turning back.

SADIRO KEVAR

Come now, Commander. You can't seriously be somber about this, can you? You are a soldier by caste, after all. The thirst for challenge and conquest is programmed into you.

She rounds on him, eyes suddenly glaring daggers.

## ONARA VILAYIS

No, Chancellor. I am a member of the officer's caste. This means I carry the duty of sending our soldiers to do battle against the enemies of the Alliance. To the death, if need be. A task which I do not take lightly, you would do well to remember.

Kevar's silky smile falters only slightly.

## SADIRO KEVAR

Quite. The fact remains, however, that the decision has been made. In fact I'm surprised you weren't made aware at today's Command Staff meeting.

## ONARA VILAYIS

Unfortunately, we covered less thrilling topics. Things like the defense of our shared borders with the ICA, for example. Or perhaps the ever-persistent thorn in our side that is the Colonial Liberation Front?

Kevar waves his hand dismissively.

## SADIRO KEVAR

Forget all that. The CLF will be dealt with soon enough, as you are well aware. As for the ICA, all we should concern ourselves with now is what we fill face in the days ahead.

He gives a faint snort of recognition.

## SADIRO KEVAR

(cont.)

The clock is ticking, Vilayis. Final preparations are underway. I'm quite surprised you don't know already.

Vilayis folds her arms across her chest, facing away from Kevar and out the window of the office to the glimmer of Jupiter high over the distant, silhouetted mountains.

## ONARA VILAYIS

(sighs)

How long?

He turns to the window, hands now clasped behind his back.

SADIRO KEVAR  
Less than fifteen hours, by our time.

ONARA VILAYIS  
So soon? Seems rather hasty.

SADIRO KEVAR  
Our Sovereign felt a swifter entry to  
war would be preferable.

ONARA VILAYIS  
And I take it you presented this case  
to the Supreme Council?

Kevar says nothing, his own form of an answer. Sighing, Commander Vilayis leans heavily on her desk, looking suddenly very sullen indeed. The weight of responsibility for an entire military about to plunge into war is upon her.

ONARA VILAYIS  
It's done then.

Kevar's grin fades and he, too, become solemn.

SADIRO KEVAR  
Yes. It's done.

They stand like that for several moments - Sadiro with his hands behind his back and Onara leaning on her desk - in silence. Neither looks at the other. Both understand that war is upon them. There is nothing left to be said.

CUT TO:

EXT. SAN DIEGO STREETS - AFTERNOON

Now in the heart of the city, Matt drives through streets littered with confetti and other refuse left from the celebrations. Jon points to a huge, stately building at the end of the avenue. Its limestone façade bears the emblem of the **Interplanetary Commercial Assembly**: a map of the inner solar system encompassed in a circle flanked by twin olive branches - just like the old UN emblem. The ICA is the de facto government of Terran-controlled space.

JON  
Thank Gods! I just hope we're not too late. Matt, hurry up and park the car.

Matt heads down the now more abandoned streets of the central government district. As he pulls into one of the many parking

spaces left open on the street, Jon immediately jumps out and gestures for the others to follow.

JON  
C'mon, let's get in there!

The other three pile out of the car and hurry after him. They race up the steps to the main entrance to the building, where a bored-looking uniformed security guard signs them in. Once inside, they find the building nearly deserted.

MATT  
Uh...is this supposed to be empty?

Sam smacks him across the upper arm.

SAM  
No, they sent everybody home to keep  
'em from having to look at your dopey  
face. Whadda you think, shithead?

Ignoring them, Jon notices two more security guards lounging behind the front desk munching on donuts and watching news coverage of Mars' Founding Day. He hurries toward them and Devon motions for Sam and Matt to follow. The two guards barely even notice the newcomers as they watch the vidscreen. On it, an exuberant anchor carries on with "exciting" copy:

T.V. REPORTER  
(on-air)  
...as you all know, today marks the  
four hundredth anniversary of the  
first permanent Martian settlement,  
affectionately referred to as 'Aldrin  
City.' Now, Martians and Mars-lovers  
everywhere mark the occasion by...

JON  
(interrupting)  
Excuse me, Sergeant. Where are your  
superiors? I need to speak to Colonel  
Yates immediately.

The Security Forces sergeant looks at him, bemused. His junior NCO partner takes a big bite of donut next to him.

GUARD 1  
I'm, uh, sorry, sir... Everyone was  
sent home for Founder's Day.

GUARD 2  
Well, almost everyone, huh?

The younger guard snickers in spite of himself, oblivious to Jon's growing ire. Jon picks up the remote control tab off the edge of the desk and mutes the vidscreen.

GUARD 2  
Hey, what gives?

JON  
I'm telling you, I will speak to Colonel Tobias Yates at AEROCOM in the next two minutes or you both will be on latrine duty on a waste freighter for the rest of time. You got that?

The duty sergeant stands up, hand resting casually on the flex-baton on his belt. Devon, Sam, and Matt stare at the rising standoff with wide eyes and open mouths.

GUARD 1  
Yeah? On who's damned authority?

Jon stands up to his full and imposing height.

JON  
Commander Jonathan D. Wastani, Special Operations Detachment Alpha, reporting directly to Colonel Yates of Aerospace Command. That's who.

The younger guard's face slackens. The Sergeant hesitates but holds fast. He points at his partner.

GUARD 1  
Get on the system, check this guy's credentials. I don't buy this for-

Jon cuts him off with a terse wave of his hand.

JON  
You can look me up all you want, but while you waste time covering your ass, the intelligence I have for Colonel Yates will become more obsolete, and we will all move closer to catastrophe. You copy that?

The two stare each other down for another moment, tension thick in the air. The younger man butts in a moment later.

GUARD 2  
Uh, Sergeant? Look...

He points to a document on his personal tablet's screen. The Sergeant looks down to read it, and blanches upon seeing the lines of redacted text and numerous "CLASSIFIED" warnings. When he faces Jon again, he nearly trips over his words.

GUARD 1  
Oh, Commander Wastani! Of course, my apologies... Let me connect you to Colonel Yates, sir, right away, sir.

Jon nods curtly and turns to face his three companions. He smiles at Devon and his brother's only child smiles back. Matt and Sam exchange a look of equal parts disbelief and amazement. Devon slaps Jon on the shoulder.

DEVON  
You crazy old space rat! I thought you were retired?

JON  
Technically I am... But my service record is still active.

He winks at them and Devon grins. Sam & Matt smile as well.

GUARD 1  
Commander? I've got him on here, but the signal is... Well, it's-

Jon snatches the tab and holds it up in front of his face. A holo-image flickers to life, showing COLONEL YATES (48), a barrel-chested man with graying peach fuzz and thick eyebrows. He wears a button-down shirt and a Panama hat, and looks nonplussed at having his vacation interrupted.

COLONEL YATES  
(tinny)  
Jon? Is that you? What in the hell is going on? I thought you were-

Jon cuts across him without a moment's hesitation.

JON  
Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt your leave, but I've just picked up new intelligence that you need to know.

COLONEL YATES  
What? What did you say? Damn it all,  
Jon, you're breaking up here-

JON  
Colonel, it's Archangel! I received an  
urgent communique from Archangel just  
a few hours ago. It's happening, sir!

COLONEL YATES  
What? What are you...

He stops short and his eyes widen.

COLONEL YATES  
(cont.)  
You... You're not serious, Jon. This  
is not something to joke about!

Something interrupts him offscreen and he spits a curse.

COLONEL YATES  
God damn it, what now?  
(pause)  
Jon, I'm sorry, I have to take this.  
I'll call you back. Yates out.

JON  
No, no Colonel! Don't-!

Too late. The call cuts off and the hologram flickers out.  
Jon grits his teeth as he clutches the tablet in his hands.  
Devon steps forward and puts a hand on his uncle's shoulder.

DEVON  
Um... Jon? Are...are you all right?

Jon turns to answer, but before he can the younger desk guard  
notices something on the muted vidscreen and nearly chokes on  
his latest bite of donut.

GUARD 2  
(coughing)  
Holy-!

Everyone swivels to see what is the matter. On the vidscreen,  
the coverage of Founder's Day has been replaced by breaking  
news. The suddenly very weary-looking anchor tells a tale of  
woe: "...attacks on the frontiers of the Jupiter, Saturn, and  
Ceres sectors. Incoming reports suggest several fleets of the  
Armada are engaged in a massive breach of friendly..."

The audio trails off as the screen shows a montage of horrors from a dozen worlds, all told in the haphazard footage of citizen reporters caught up in the invasion: cities bombed by the Alliance; refugees screaming amid burning settlements; spacers under fire on the new front lines of a suddenly very real war. Chaos, with all the shaky-cam to match.

GUARD 1  
What in the name of God...?

Jon turns away from the vidscreen and brings a hand up to his brows. His voice is somber when he speaks.

JON  
It's already begun. We're too late.  
The war has started up again.

He slumps into a bench along the outside of the guard station and hangs his head. Devon looks at him, confused and frightened by their uncle's sudden display of melancholy.

DEVON  
Jon? What's going on...?

Jon looks up at him, his expression grave. Sam and Matt step up to each side of their friend. All three quite suddenly seem very young and lost in the headlights.

SAM  
Yeah... What's up?

Jon turns to face the vidscreen again. He and the five others in the room watch the parade of unfolding terror play across the news feed, silent as the grave. Then he turns and faces Devon and his friends again.

JON  
This, it's... It's war. We're too late  
to stop it. Too late...

Then the camera pulls in close on Jon's face. A thousand unspoken emotions play across his visage as his moment of defeat transcends into a steely visage of determination.

A moment later, Jon clenches his fists and raises his head. A look of renewed resolve is painted on his face.

JON  
(cont.)  
But it's only just beginning.

He rounds on the two guards, fire back in his veins.

JON  
Sergeant, get in touch with Colonel Yates as quickly as you can. Tell him Commander Wastani is ready to report in for resumption of duty, ASAP.

The guard turns and fumbles the call receiver in his confusion and momentary sense of panic.

GUARD 1  
Uh, y-yes sir! Right away!

Jon nods and turns back to his three companions.

JON  
This is it, guys. This is the real deal, there's no turning back now. You're all reservists, so you've got big choices ahead of you. I trust you'll follow your hearts, and if you do that, you'll be just fine.

He puts a hand on Devon's shoulder and squeezes it gently. The three friends smile tentatively at each other and at Jon. He turns to leave, but the desk sergeant calls out to him.

GUARD 1  
Commander! What about Colonel Yates?  
He'll be looking for you, sir.

JO  
(over his shoulder)  
He knows where to find me! I've got some things to attend to before I go off fighting another war.  
(to the trio)  
You guys go on without me. I'll catch a ride share back to my shack.

He then heads for the doors and into the world beyond, where celebration is only now being interrupted by the news. Matt calls out as the front doors slide open for him to leave.

MATT  
Hey, wait! What about us?

Sam turns to face his younger friend, eyebrow raised.

SAM  
What about you?

MATT  
Well, I mean... Uh...

DEVON  
I think he means, what are we gonna do now? We're in the Reserves, after all. We could get called up to active duty any day now, maybe even tomorrow.

Matt shoots them a serious glance. The idea of going off to fight a real war hits them both suddenly & hard. Sam, however, seems only to be more resolved than ever.

SAM  
I'm going.

The others round on him, taken aback by his declaration.

MATT  
What? Where are you going?

SAM  
That's not funny. You know exactly what I mean, so quit screwing around.

MATT  
Uh, no, not really, but, uh...

DEVON  
(gravely)  
Sam, you can't be serious.

Sam swivels to face his friends, his eyes wide in a glare.

SAM  
Why the hell not?

DEVON  
Sam, c'mon, this is war! We can't just rush in headfirst like-

SAM  
(coldly)  
Listen to yourself, will you?

Devon pauses, mouth agape. Matt looks on, frowning.

SAM

For the first time in years, I know exactly what I have to do. This is why I joined the Corps in the first place. Why we all joined, or so I thought.

He jabs his finger in the direction of the vidscreen, where the news feed shows a young girl crying over the body of her parents in the midst of a freshly-bombed settlement.

SAM

(cont.)

*That's why . These bastards killed my father, my brother... They'll keep killing people like me forever unless someone stops them. If I have any chance at all to put a stop to it, you can be damn sure that's what I'll do.*

Devon stares their friend down for a moment. Matt steps up next to Sam and puts his hand on his shoulder.

MATT

(grinning)

And we'll be right there beside you.

Sam looks at him, taken aback by his friend's display of solidarity. Devon looks sideways at Matt, as well.

DEVON

That's no small promise to make, Matt. You realize that the risks of this are, well... I mean, huge, really.

MATT

Yeah, maybe. But my dad fought the Alliance just, and my granddad fought the Draconists. And I'm a descendant of Cam Powell, after all. Guess I've got service in my blood. Plus I'll be damned if I stand by while innocent folks are getting pillaged and bombed. Especially not if my two best friends have gone off to fight all that.

The three of them share a warm smile. Sam rustles Matt's hair and Matt reaches out to gently punch him in the upper arm. The two of them turn to face Devon. They look back and forth at their friends for a moment before smiling.

DEVON

All right, all right. Sheesh... You guys wanna go off and get killed, I'll be along for the ride. Don't say I didn't warn you, ya couple a' jerks.

The three cohorts share a good laugh at that. All three secretly hope it isn't the last laugh they will share. In the background, the scenes of war continue to play, foreshadowing their coming descent into a new world of madness.

CUT TO:

INT. ASV *TRIUMPHANT* BRIDGE

Far from Earth, the flagship of the Zharan First Fleet drifts in the midst of a massive flotilla - over a hundred and twenty spacecraft of every size and class. The backdrop of stars & the galactic rim is broken up only by the silhouettes of their hulls. They are poised to join the coming invasion.

TEXT FADES IN:

"ZHARAN FIRST FLEET"

"EDGE OF JOVIAN ICA SPACE"

TEXT FADES OUT

On the bridge of the flagship, ADMIRAL GRAVUS TELDARI waits to give the order to move. His command staff stand at attention at their stations, awaiting that order.

In a corner of the bridge, Damon Jerek sits with his feet up on an unused console, digging under his fingernails with a curved knife. He wears the same gray duster over a plain duty uniform in infantry tan and green. He watches the solemnness with quiet amusement. His cold eyes flicker in the starlight.

Next to him stands his second-in-command, MAJOR LUVARA SEKAYO. She is of average height, though taller than Jerek, with a wiry and athletic frame and close-cropped jet black hair. She stands at parade rest, her body rigid.

MAJOR SEKAYO

Why so glib, Colonel?

COLONEL JEREK

Oh, no reason... Just seems to me that with all the preparation we've made for this war we could just get on with

it already. Before someone flinches.

MAJOR SEKAYO  
You can't think the Primarchs will  
lose their nerve, can you?

Jerek waves his hand casually, even dismissively.

COLONEL JEREK  
It doesn't matter either way. The  
sovereign will keep them in line, of  
that you can rest assured.

Just then, a quick two-toned alarm sounds. Captain Teldari calls the bridge to attention, as if they weren't already.

ADMIRAL TELDARI  
Zhar'Aea, attention!

A holo-projector in the center of the bridge floor pulses to life and a holo-image of Chief Commander Vilayis emerges from the ether in the middle of the bridge. Captain Teldari salutes smartly as her image comes into focus.

ADMIRAL TELDARI  
Chief Commander! An honor, to be sure.

ONARA VILAYIS  
Aye, Admiral. The Council has just resolved to end the armistice. The Great Crusade is now underway. May your forces be blessed with safe passage, and good hunting.

ADMIRAL TELDARI  
Aye, Chief Commander.

He salutes again. She nods gravely and cuts the transmission. Teldari hits a button on his command station and his voice is broadcast to every spacecraft in the assembled flotilla.

ADMIRAL TELDARI  
To all vessels of the Combined Fleet of Solemn Retribution, this is Admiral Teldari. We have received word from Callisto. As of now, we are at war.

The bridge command staff lets out a few chants of "Hurrah!" in unison. For his part, Jerek just sits silently, observing. He seems almost bored by the proceedings, as if the notion of starting a war mattered less to him than fighting it.

COLONEL JEREK  
And just like that, life gets  
interesting again.

MAJOR SEKAYO  
How so, Colonel?

COLONEL JEREK  
Renewed purpose, Major. You and I have  
a task to see done. From Sovereign  
V'Ran himself, no less. I expect it  
shall be... *Interesting*.

Sekayo grins slyly as the implication sinks in.

MAJOR SEKAYO  
Quite interesting indeed, Colonel.

COLONEL JEREK  
Yes, Major. Quite.

Jerek grins his predatory grin and absently examines the shiny edge of his knife as the flotilla moves out.

COLONEL JEREK  
(cont.)  
"Cry Havoc", and all that...

An intangible wall in space, only meaningful so long as both sides agreed to honor it, has come crashing down. A teeming hoard of warriors now prepares to pour into unsuspecting regions of space, to fall upon an unknowing enemy still devoted to a peace their attackers have already cast aside.

The **Frontier Wars** have begun anew.