

*CITY*  
**OF** *RUINS*



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OF RUINS**



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For Dean



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# ***THE BEGINNING***



# ONE

**T**he *Ivoire* dipped, then rose, then flipped and doubled back. Inside the bridge, the crew could feel no difference despite the rapid movements. The only way anyone could tell if something had changed was the flow of data coming through all the monitors.

The six-person bridge crew had fallen into their various roles, speaking rarely. They all knew what to do. They had to evade the ships, which were coming at them fast and furious from Ukhanda.

The ships were small and feather-shaped. They looked harmless, but already two of them had seared the *Ivoire's* exterior with some kind of blast weapon.

The *Ivoire's* captain, Jonathon "Coop" Cooper, had been in tight situations before. He knew how to maintain focus—his own and the crew's. He had just ordered the wall screens on the bridge darkened. Normally he could see through the screens to whatever was happening on the ship's exterior.

But seeing things just outside the wall as if he was looking out a window didn't help him now. He had the navigational images front and center. Along the sides, a smaller image of the ship herself, and the enemy vessels pursuing her.

By rights, those ships shouldn't be anywhere near the *Ivoire*. The *Ivoire* had left Ukhanda's orbit nearly a day ago to rendezvous with the Fleet and figure out what had gone wrong.

No ship the Fleet had ever encountered had the speed to cover that distance in such a short time.

And this wasn't just one ship. It was a damn armada.

"Whose ships are these?" he snapped at the bridge crew.

The question was legitimate. Sixteen different cultures called Ukhanda home, although the Fleet had had contact with only two of them.

Anita Tren answered. She was tiny—so small, in fact, she didn't fit regulations for bridge crew. But she exceeded all expectations, outperforming every other officer in her class, and Coop couldn't see any reason to deny her the post she'd earned.

Even if she did have to kneel in her chair half the time to see what was happening on her console.

“Quurzod,” she said.

That surprised him. He knew the Quurzod were advanced enough to have space travel—they had taken their war with the Xenth into space more than once—but he hadn’t expected such sophisticated ships from them.

He had expected something big, with more weapons than power. He should have known that expectation would be wrong. The Quurzod were the most violent human culture he had ever encountered, but the violence was ritualized, damn near beloved. Their approach to violence was sophisticated, so why wouldn’t they have sophisticated violence delivery systems?

“I suppose good information on the ships is scarce,” he said dryly.

“The Xenth captured only one,” Anita said. “The Quurzod had already destroyed the command center. But those things have a lot of weaponry.”

As if to prove the point, six ships fired at the *Ivoire*. Coop could see the bursts of light on the navigational screens. Nothing showed up on the screens that depicted the ship’s exterior. Of course not. The Quurzod had made the blast weapons difficult to see.

Coop’s first officer, Dix Pompiono, moved the *Ivoire* laterally, and the shots went under one of the gull-shaped wings on the left side of the ship.

“Captain, those things have greater maneuverability than we do.” Dix was hunched over his console, but then, Dix always hunched over his console. He was tall and thin. Yet he could bend himself as if he were made of string and fit into the smallest of places. “They’re tiny and they’re fast, and in large numbers they’re a real threat.”

Coop nodded. The ships were like insects. One or two were annoyances. But a swarm could overwhelm a larger and more powerful foe. And the *Ivoire* was alone. The Fleet was at least a half day away.

“I can maneuver around them maybe twice more,” Dix said, “and then they’ll have us all figured out.”

“Another wave of those things just left Ukhandia,” said Kjersti Perkins, the junior officer on the bridge crew. This was her first space battle. She clutched her console a bit too tightly, her short blonde hair mussed. But to her credit, her voice didn’t shake and she seemed as calm as the rest of the team.

“How many?” Coop asked.

“Twenty-five. No. Thirty. Make that thirty-five.” She looked over at him, her blue eyes wide. “An entire other wave. Did we know they had this many ships?”

“I don’t think anyone knew,” he said. “Yash, figure out if they’re single-shot ships or if we have a bigger problem on our hands.”

Yash Zarlengo, his on-site engineer, nodded. He trusted her more than anyone else. A former athlete, raised planetside, she had her family's knack for anything technological.

"Those things are built to fight," she said. "If I had to guess—and that's all I'd be doing, since they're still too far away to scan—I'd say they're stocked with weaponry."

"Given what we know about the Quurzod," Dix said, "I'd expect the fight to be vicious, bloody, and to the death."

Coop flashed on the images of Mae he'd seen when they brought her on board the ship: blood-covered, too thin, eyes wild. The Quurzod had killed twenty-four members of her linguistic team. Only three survived, and two of those had fled before the massacre. Mae had somehow managed to escape during or after the bloodbath.

"I think you're right, Dix. We're in for a real fight." Coop cursed silently.

He hadn't wanted this. He didn't have the weaponry for this—not if the Quurzod swarmed.

"Send a message to the Fleet," Coop said. "Let them know the situation. We're going to engage the *anacapa*. Twenty-hour window."

"Yes, sir," Dix said.

Coop hated using the *anacapa* drive, but he saw no other choice. The *anacapa* created a fold in space. If the ship was in trouble, it activated its *anacapa*, moving into foldspace and then returning to the same point in regular moments or hours later. Sometimes moments were all it took to confuse the enemy ships.

The *Ivoire* had the firepower, but not the maneuverability. Staying would subject the ship to too much damage, damage he could avoid with a simple sideways movement into foldspace.

"Fifty more ships, sir," Perkins said. "Maybe fifty-five. They just keep coming."

Coop nodded. That was what worried him. Too many small ships, too many small weapons.

"Activate the *anacapa*," he said to Yash.

"I hate this thing," she muttered, but hit the codes, then slammed her palm against the console.

As she did, half a dozen shots hit the *Ivoire*.

The *anacapa*, going through its cycle, froze. Dix's gaze met Coop's. Coop held his breath—

—and then the *anacapa* reactivated.

The *Ivoire* slipped into foldspace for just a moment while it waited for the Quurzod to give up.