

The background of the cover is a deep space scene. A large, dark planet with a bright horizon line is in the foreground. Above it, a smaller planet is visible. To the right, a ringed planet is seen with its rings glowing. The background is filled with stars and nebulae.

APOGEE

AN
AURORA
RHAPSODY



SHORT STORY

G. S. JENNSSEN

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AN AURORA RHAPSODY SHORT STORY

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APOGEE

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“The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.”

— Ralph Ellison

APOGEE



SENECA (EARTH ALLIANCE COLONY)

CAVARE, CAPITAL CITY

OCTOBER 2297

Moonlight cast the man's wife's skin in ghostly silver as he placed a soft kiss on her forehead. He hadn't meant to wake her, but she stirred before he could slip away, blinking to reveal bleary, unfocused irises.

"It's okay, Frannie, don't get up. I'll be home in a few days."

She nodded sleepily, mumbled, "Love you...good luck at the symposium," and rolled over. When her breathing evened out in slumber once more, he tiptoed out of the bedroom and down the hall to crack the door to his daughter's room. A mess of curls poked out of the bedcovers to fan out on the pillow. He smiled to himself and eased the door shut.

He didn't attempt to sneak a peek into his son's room. The boy had developed preternatural senses and would be wide awake in an instant. In truth he'd probably awoken the instant there was a sound in the hallway...but if so, he didn't emerge to inquire as to the reason for his father's early departure.

It was for the best. At fourteen, his son was not only no longer a child but also disconcertingly clever, and he would likely pose too-astute questions the man didn't dare answer.

Once outside he tossed his bag onto the passenger seat of his sky-car. The first steel-hued rays of dawn breached the mountains in the distance as he lifted off.

Twenty minutes later he stepped up to the security checkpoint entry for the Alliance outpost military base on the periphery of Cavare and waved his palm at the identity check. The officer on duty examined the readout briefly. "You're cleared for entry, sir, but may I ask what your purpose here is today?"

He canted his head at the young man. “Check your screen again, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant’s brow furrowed, but he instinctively obeyed the implied order. “Uh, right. Sir. You’re cleared for...whatever your reason is for being here.” Squared shoulders preceded a crisp forward hand motion.

It wasn’t unusual behavior for the man, as an Intelligence agent, to visit the Earth Alliance’s largest military base on Seneca, and he’d done so multiple times for legitimate reasons. And as an Intelligence agent he wasn’t required to disclose the purpose of his visit to anyone who challenged him.

He gestured a thanks and walked through the checkpoint, a wry smirk hovering on his lips.

My purpose is to start a war. Have a nice day.

LUNAR SSR CENTER

SENECA STELLAR SYSTEM

He didn’t gape at any of the other passengers on the military shuttle. Tension radiated off the soldiers to vibrate in the air so thickly he now inhaled it with every breath; he didn’t have to inspect them to realize they were on edge and prepping for a fight.

Personally, he hoped the fight wouldn’t commence until he was airborne again. He wasn’t a soldier—though he could impersonate one if need be—and this day was going to be difficult enough without wading through close-quarters combat.

His visit to the military base had been a brief one. On his arrival he was quickly directed through several dark service hallways to a small landing pad and ushered onto the shuttle. He

assumed this meant his traveling companions were also members of the resistance, but no one had so much as spoken a greeting during the forty-minute trip.

The Lunar Special Support and Research Center sprawled across a region of the moon that had been largely spared the brutality of relentless asteroid bombardment over the millennia, at least compared to the rest of the satellite. The test fields of the research facility stretched for hundreds of kilometers beyond the Center itself, and the crimson beacons denoting their various boundaries flickered against the otherwise ashen surface.

The shuttle dropped through the first of multiple force fields. The outer barrier protected the Center from meteoroids and other minor space objects that would burn up harmlessly if the moon had a natural atmosphere. Next came the triple-layer fields keeping the artificially generated atmosphere inside. The layers were a redundant safety measure, as a failure of the system would be catastrophic to the facility's equipment but more so to the people working there.

Even the multiple redundancies did little to assuage his disquiet, and he allowed the soldiers to disembark before exiting the shuttle. If it weren't for the paved surface beneath his feet and the structures visible at the opposite end of the platform, he would have sworn he was treading into open space and without so much as an environment suit to protect him. From here the discreet shimmer of the force fields provided only the slightest blur to the blackness of space and its expanse of stars.

He liked to believe he could handle virtually any situation he encountered, no matter how dire. But everyone had a weakness, and he'd never managed to get comfortable with open space...maybe because he couldn't control it.

On taking a step away from the shuttle, he was promptly

overwhelmed by the expected but still unpleasant sense he was about to float off into the void. A wave of dizziness threatened to take hold, and he searched around for a signpost, anxious to get inside something, *anything*.

He grabbed a passing officer by the arm. The man jerked away and leveled an intimidating glower at him.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry. I need directions to Lab EE12c.”

The officer scowled at him for a beat then jerked his head. “See the last building on the left? The building behind it.”

“Thank you.” He hurried off in the direction indicated, toward the illusory but nevertheless seductive shelter.

The notion that one of its colonies would go to war with the mighty Earth Alliance, eighty-two worlds and fourteen billion people strong, was as ludicrous as the proposition that man would discover a means to circumvent special relativity and develop starship drives capable of velocities far exceeding the speed of light.

No one had believed the latter possible until it was achieved. So, too, would it be with the former.

“This is what we’re counting on. The Alliance hasn’t faced a successful colonial rebellion in a hundred fifty years of extra-solar expansion. It no longer believes such a thing can be accomplished, but we’ll turn the Alliance’s hubris against it. The slow response of its goliath bureaucratic machinery will give us time—time to get more ships out of production and into space as well as time to subdue any lingering resistance and gain full control of the government and military on Seneca.”

Darien Terzi sounded as if he were trying to convince himself of the validity of the plan more than those present, Brigadier

Eleni Gianni mused. She hoped the strength of his conviction did not fail him when the blood started flowing.

She clasped her hands at the small of her back, adopting a comfortable yet formal posture. “The military will not be as difficult to secure as one would expect. Eighty-three percent of the enlisted and seventy-one percent of the officers Commodore rank and below are Senecan-born. If presented with a persuasive argument for independence and an assertive demonstration of leadership, they will fall in line.”

Terzi nodded in acceptance. “And the higher ranking officers? The ones rotating through on a tour of duty?”

“They will not be so amenable. But we know who they are. Given the recent unrest, there’s never been a wider rift between our people and theirs. When we make our move, they will be detained and held in a secure location until we can put them on an Earth-bound vessel and send them on their way.”

A laugh bubbled up from somewhere behind her left shoulder. “Your plan may work for most of the officers, assuming you’ve got enough muscle on your side, but General Castillo is a first-class prick brandishing an ego far larger than the impressively sized gun he carries. I doubt he will agree to go quietly.”

She regarded the source of the comment with mild curiosity. Aristide Vranas was the ex-Mayor of Seneca’s capital city, Cavare. He had been deposed when the Alliance sent in its lackeys to take over key government postings three months ago in the aftermath of the worker riots. If asked to consider the question, she would conclude she liked the man. He possessed an unpretentious, easy charisma and a dry sense of humor that never got in the way of a fundamentally earnest nature.

“I doubt he will agree to go at all, which is why I will be

forced to disable him and may be forced to kill him. But either way, that's on me."

He gave her a small smile in lieu of a reply before returning his gaze to the window.

They were gathered in a small conference room in a remote corner of the Lunar SSR Center. This close to the precipice, meeting groundside held too many risks—too many Alliance loyalists skulking the halls of power.

Terzi had taken up pacing the length of the room. As the director of the Senecan field office of the Earth Alliance Ministry of Intelligence, he had as much to lose as she did. The sole difference between her fate and his if this venture failed would be the locations of their confinement until their executions.

On his next pivot he directed his attention to Vranas. "Aristide, when we're done here I want you to get back to Cavare then stay out of sight until it's time to go public. Local Alliance officials will suspect your involvement, and we can't risk them grabbing you. I assume the speech is ready?"

"The speech has been ready for years, waiting on the proper moment for its delivery to arrive. Let me worry about the public. You worry about the logistics."

If Terzi took offense at the barb, he didn't show it. "I have agents tailing the provisional mayor and governor. When I give the word, both will be taken into custody. We'll keep them isolated until I can get them on Gianni's ship to Earth. Fucking interlopers."

He dragged a hand down his face. "Once we declare we are cutting ties with the Earth Alliance, coordination and proper timing are crucial. A number of things must happen in the first hour or we will lose control of the situation. But the pieces are in place, and we're as ready as we're going to be." He looked to

them for confirmation and received it.

Vranas asked the most obvious and consequential question. “When?”

Gianno responded. “The Alliance First Brigade from Arcadia will reach its closest point to Seneca in three hours. We *want* it to be close—that timing you mentioned. If we miss this window, we won’t see a better one for six weeks so....” She lifted her chin. “I advise we go now.”

“Agreed. Give me a minute to arrange a few matters.”

Eleni moved to the window beside Vranas. A sea of stars gave way to Seneca’s familiar profile as the moon continued onward in its perpetual rotation.

“Have you ever been to Earth, Brigadier?”

“No, I haven’t. I did my off-world training on Arcadia and Messium.”

“I attended a convention there four years ago. Lovely place. Enormous sapphire-blue oceans everywhere you look.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, as I suspect the only way I’ll ever step foot on Earth at this point is for a military tribunal, and I don’t intend to allow that to happen.”

Terzi reappeared next to her, and she abandoned the view to focus on him. The hour was late, and the time for talk to give way to action was upon them. “Has your agent arrived? I need to brief him and go over the ship’s capabilities, but we’re now on an exceptionally tight schedule.”

“He’s waiting outside. I’ll ask him to come in.”

The man who walked in bore a closer resemblance to a banker or a corporate executive than an Intelligence agent. Neatly styled, wavy black hair complemented a distinguished jawline and iced-cobalt irises. He carried himself with quiet, resolute confidence as he approached her and extended a hand. “Ma’am.”

They continued sizing one another up with practiced eyes as they shook hands. “A pleasure to meet you, Agent...?”

“Marano. Stefan Marano.”

Director Terzi and Brigadier Gianni departed after showing Stefan to the hangar bay, and he took the opportunity of a few minutes alone to study the reconnaissance craft. The muted bronze hull appeared to draw in the light surrounding it, giving it a faint lustrous sheen. Sleekly aerodynamic, the frame’s edges cut sharply enough he made a note to give them a wide berth.

He did reach out to run his fingertips along the body, however, enjoying the smooth coolness of the material. Senecan designed and constructed, it was not merely more elegant than anything the Alliance produced, it was *better* than anything the Alliance produced. Faster. Stealthier—

The air shifted around him, heralding a new guest. A woman joined him beside the ship; he continued his inspection of the hull while inspecting her in his peripheral vision. Dressed in standard-issue Earth Alliance BDUs, she was nearly as tall as him and muscular in the way most young military officers were, with shoulder-length dark hair bound back in a tight tail.

He acknowledged her with a casual nod. “I admittedly don’t know ships, but this is a hell of a good-looking one.”

“First of her kind, and I get to fly her.” She stuck out a hand. “Commander Helena Lekkas. I’ll be your pilot for the operation. Also the weapons officer, navigator and mechanic. You know, now that I think about it, why is it you’re coming along?”

Ah, so she was a smartass. It seemed to be a hazard of the piloting profession. He was fine with banter, but not until he controlled the relationship dynamic.

“Because this is a top-secret Intelligence black operation outside the purview of the military. And you’re not the weapons officer—I am. Any more answers will have to wait until we’ve departed.”

“That so? I assure you, I can hit a target perfectly well.”

“Not with this weapon.”

She glared at him silently for several seconds. “If you say so. Let me finish the preflight check, and we’ll be on our way.”

STEALTH RECONNAISSANCE VESSEL

SENECA LUNAR ORBIT

“In the wake of the declaration by ousted government officials that Seneca was formally severing ties with the Earth Alliance, martial law is now in effect across the colony.”

The news feed cut to vids of armored combat vehicles patrolling the streets and soldiers in riot gear arresting protesters outside one of the government buildings in downtown Cavare.

“We’re receiving scattered reports of weapons fire on the grounds of the Alliance military base. We’re unable to confirm these accounts, as our reporters are being denied entry to the base and a barrier is preventing aerial coverage. We do have footage coming in of a skirmish between law-enforcement officers and military personnel near the Civil Administration Building.

“It is clear the conditions on the streets tonight are very fluid, and we urge everyone to stay indoors if possible. What isn’t clear is exactly who, if anyone, is in control of Seneca.”

They drifted 0.1 megameters above the lunar surface, having departed the Lunar SSR Center before violence erupted. Several hours remained until their mission began, so for now they could

do nothing but watch the news feeds and, knowing something of what was in fact transpiring, wonder impotently whether the outcome would be in their favor.

The police and security departments had in reality never been under Alliance control and would not have assisted in enforcing martial law even if there were not a coup underway. Events inside the military base were certain to be far dicier.

The mission parameters forbade any contact with other resistance members, or anyone for that matter, given the small but non-zero chance someone in the Alliance could be eavesdropping. So they waited.

By the time the media figured out what was happening, it was already over, at least on the ground. The press conferences and prepared statements began to roll in fast and furious, all urging calm and all speaking the language of a new, independent, democratic government.

As expected, the Alliance ordered the Arcadia First Brigade to Seneca to establish a blockade. The news feed reporter wore a grave expression as he explained how commercial craft trying to leave Seneca would be ordered to land or risk being shot down.

Also as expected, Alliance forces on the nearby worlds of Elathan and Krysk, the only colonies in range possessing a combat-ready military presence, were put on full alert and two regiments ordered to Seneca to assist with the blockade. The meager details the media possessed scrolled in a repetitive loop on the feed overlay, and he soon tuned them out.

“Why did you decide to become a revolutionary?”

Stefan kept his gaze on the silhouettes of the planet and its satellite beneath them. “My kids. The Alliance claims to be a democracy, but it threw the principle out the window the second we caused it a tiny bit of discomfort. Overtaxing us because we

thrive—then using the money to prop up its bloated bureaucracy—isn't good policy, but marching in and removing our elected leaders by fiat due to a few worker riots? 'Disappearing' people who speak out against it? That's not a democracy, that's a dictatorship.

"Its leaders believe the Alliance is powerful enough to be both—a democracy on election days and a dictatorship on every other day—but they're wrong. No government should be so powerful. It's time someone demonstrates the error in their thinking."

"Hmm." Lekkas drummed her fingers on the dash. Having completed a thorough exploration of the new ship an hour ago, she had little to do until the action started. "What's all that have to do with your kids?"

"I don't want them to grow up in a dictatorship, obviously, or under any regime that can act as it chooses without repercussions. They have bright futures ahead of them, and I want better for their lives."

She didn't inquire further. She wasn't exactly the talkative sort, but in this instance he chose to prod her. "What about you? Why are you here?"

"Live free or die, man. That's my motto."

He laughed. "Is it really?"

"Nah. Gianni was a persuasive woman, particularly after my Alliance superiors grounded me for smarting off about what were unequivocally stupid orders."

He'd read her file and agreed they had been stupid orders. "Do you have any kids?" He also knew the answer to this question, but better for her to tell him.

"Daughter. She's four. Wants to follow in her mom's footsteps and fly starships. I'm not convinced I'm going to be

able to stop her, stubborn brat.”

“Children do turn out to have wills and minds of their own. Husband?”

She snorted. “Hell, no. Her father—” She snapped up straight in the cockpit chair as the primary scanner lit up in red blips. “Looks like the Alliance brigade is here. Took it long enough.”

He blew out a long, weighty breath, paralyzed by the weight of the actions ahead of him but unwilling to display weakness in front of his companion.

He hadn’t wanted this mission. Terzi had thrown praise and platitudes in his direction, called him an honest man and a true believer and someone the resistance could depend on. Perhaps most of it was accurate, perhaps not. He *was* a patriot—to Seneca, not the Alliance—and he understood the necessity of this war. Its time had come, and he felt compelled to play his part. But he selfishly preferred someone else bear the guilt guaranteed to arrive once the adrenaline relinquished its grasp.

Suspicious it had grown wild, he ran a hand through his normally tame hair. “All right, we need to sneak in behind them. Do it now, while they’re distracted getting themselves situated. Remember, staying undetected takes top priority. If they spot us, we’re dead and this is all for naught.”

“Not to worry. This ship has a custom cloaking shield built using original tech. The Alliance has never seen its kind. They don’t know what to hunt for and wouldn’t recognize it if they did detect it.”

“I appreciate that. Still, don’t take any chances.”

She grumbled as they accelerated away from the moon. “Pretty sure I don’t take orders from you.”

The last thing he needed was a renegade pilot. He circled around her chair until he was between her and the dash. “And I’m

pretty sure so long as I'm on this ship, you *do*. Intelligence mission, not military, remember?"

She stared at him, rich emerald eyes piercing through him. Then her chin dipped a fraction and she returned her focus to the HUD. "Whatever you say, *Agent*." Her fingertips glided along the virtual controls. "Speaking of which, I didn't get a name."

"No, you didn't."

A growing crowd of vessels orbited the planet—a hodgepodge of long, bulky commercial carriers; lightweight merchant runners; and elaborate, tricked-out civilian transports.

They were blocked by a brigade-strength collection of Alliance warships. For now the warships kept their distance, maintaining a 0.5 megameter stretch of space between the departing craft and the unofficial front line of the blockade.

A handful had tried to make a run for it and been intercepted by fighters. Thus far the civilian vessels had always retreated, and shots had yet to be fired.

A number of the civilian vessels were equipped with laser weapons—certainly more than the Alliance contingent had anticipated. Many of them were effectively ringers, high-powered corporate craft sporting almost as much weaponry and hull shielding as military ships.

Stefan checked the time as unease gnawed at his gut. The civilians ostensibly wanting to leave were here, the Alliance warships were here...but the expected resistance ships were late. Had Gianni encountered greater difficulties on the ground than anticipated? Had she failed altogether? He had no way to know and didn't dare risk a comm to find out.

They floated silently and fully cloaked in the middle of the

Alliance blockade, trying to imitate a hole in space. Lekkas was peering out the viewport, scrutinizing the hulls of several vessels that lurked worryingly close.

“Think they’ll hear me if I start singing the Greek national anthem?”

“What?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing. When’s the cavalry scheduled to show?”

“Twenty minutes ago.”

She arched a brow and settled back into her chair.

He tried for small talk to divert their attention from the ticking clock. “Have you ever seen live combat?”

“A year or so ago, when the Triene cartel made a hard run to claim Bellici for its own. It took us a week to decimate them and another week to run off what was left. Couple of smaller skirmishes before then.”

“Why did—” He cut off as the imposing contours of two military cruisers accelerated in from starboard to take up positions between the civilian vessels and the Alliance formation. “Can we listen in on the wideband communications without alerting them to our presence?”

“Yep.” She punched in a series of instructions, and a new screen joined the already crowded HUD to display the transmission details. A few seconds later the audio feed kicked in, and an unfamiliar voice reverberated in the cabin.

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): “Captains of the EAS Inchon and EAS Verdun, you are in contravention of direct orders from Earth Alliance Strategic Command. If you do not surrender control of your vessels and retreat immediately, you will be deemed mutineers and subject to general courts-martial.”

There was no delay in the response.

Unidentified (SFS Verdun): “That’s a negative. We have commandeered all Alliance vessels on Senecan soil in the name of the Senecan Federation.”

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): What ‘Federation?’ You have no allies. You have nowhere to run. You are ordered to stand down now.”

Stefan’s hands tightened on the cockpit chair’s backrest as half a dozen frigates cleared the atmosphere below and joined the rebel cruisers. Maybe his involvement wouldn’t be required. He found himself hoping the Alliance would open fire and absolve him of responsibility.

The luminous halo of Seneca’s sun above the arc of the planet dimmed as two additional groupings of Alliance warships advanced. He realized his foot was tapping loudly on the skid-resistant flooring and forced it still. “This should be the regiments from Elathan and Krysk.”

Lekkas glanced over her shoulder at him. “They’re on our side, right?”

“That was the plan. Can’t say if the plan succeeded.”

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): “Fourth and Seventh Regiments, adopt positions flanking the mutinying ships.”

Unidentified (SFS Ankara): “We must refuse to follow that order. In accordance with the directives of the Elathan and Krysk governing bodies issued as of 1021.0930 Galactic, the military commands stationed on those worlds pledge their allegiance to the newly formed Senecan Federation.”

They both sighed in relief. If the rebels on Elathan and Krysk hadn’t been able to gain control of the dispatched vessels, this would’ve become a rather lopsided battle and a damn short war.

The silence had begun to grow uncomfortably long when the reply came.

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): “Very well. This ‘Senecan Federation’ and its members are seditionists in violation of the Second Earth Alliance Constitution of 2146. Any and all actions it undertakes are illegal, null, and void.

“Any Earth Alliance military personnel who, whether through affirmative acts or by inaction, assist these seditionists are guilty of treason and will be held accountable. To all present military personnel: you have five minutes to respond accordingly.”

Lekkas chuckled. “Bet more than one scuffle just broke out on board those ships.”

“Any second thoughts?”

Her head shook tersely. “We’re all traitors now.”

“It’s not traitorous to want to be free.”

“Oh, God, you’re an idealist.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. Idealism wasn’t an easy outlook to maintain in his profession, but it kept him sane. “I suppose I am. It’s served me well enough so far.”

She opted not to challenge him on it, instead checking all the HUD screens for the Nth time. “We wait for Gianni, correct?”

“Correct.”

She nodded slowly, and together they stared out the viewport. It felt as if the fabric of spacetime itself had frozen, the universe holding its breath together with them as the decreed deadline drew ever closer. Every object in the galaxy was surely fixated on this point, eager to witness what transpired on the other side of the event horizon.

Thirty seconds of the five minutes remained when a new arrival emerged out of the glare of the sun, rising from beneath the demarcation line to take up a position in the center of the rebel contingent.

Like the craft he currently occupied, its hull was a muted bronze, though the sun's reflected light painted it burnished copper. Also like the reconnaissance craft, it sported sleek curves and knifed edges.

It was, of course, far larger than the recon craft—around fifteen hundred percent larger in fact, and twice as large as the Alliance cruisers. It wasn't a dreadnought, as hiding the construction of one of those behemoths would've been a doomed undertaking, but it was the next closest thing. Built from the ground up using Senecan materials, technology and weaponry, it was the flagship of what would hopefully become a significant fleet of Senecan Federation warships.

But that all depended on the outcome of this confrontation, here, today. Arguably it depended on the outcome of future confrontations as well, but those would never occur in the absence of a victory here.

Unidentified: “*This is the SFS Thermopylae. On behalf of the Senecan Federation, I request all Earth Alliance vessels desist in their blockade of civilian traffic to and from Senecan space. Further, I request such vessels depart the Senecan Stellar System forthwith, as they are trespassing on Senecan Federation territory.*”

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): “*There is no such thing as Senecan Federation ‘territory.’ You are all deserters and turncoats, and you will be treated as such. You need to be very, very careful what you do next, or you will find yourself with a war on your hands.*” The Admiral's voice bled barely controlled incredulity and rage.

Unidentified (SFS Thermopylae): “*We do not desire a war. As stated in the declaration transmitted to Prime Minister Ioannou, the leadership of the Earth Alliance Assembly and*

EASC Board Chairman Breveski, we intend to institute our own government, one based on legitimate self-determination and the principles of freedom the Alliance once adhered to but has now abandoned.

“We expect the Earth Alliance government to allow any colonies that wish to join the Senecan Federation to withdraw from the Alliance without incident. Our desire is to coexist peacefully alongside the Alliance, but we will not be subject to its rule any longer.”

Stefan’s hands trembled on the backrest; annoyed, he clasped one over the other in an attempt to subdue them. “Move into position.”

Her hands swept across the controls. “And by ‘position’ you mean approximately ten centimeters beneath the laser turrets of this Alliance cruiser here?”

“I do.”

“Got it. Piece of cake.” The reply was delivered through gritted teeth and a clenched jaw as they oh-so-carefully skimmed forward and rose toward the hulking shadow. Though they flew in a deliberate, cautious manner, the cruiser’s hull raced by overhead. It was a long vessel at three hundred and ten meters, and the weapons were located a third of the way down the underside.

“Careful—don’t crash into the hull!”

“I’m...*not*...” A distinct growl had joined the gritted teeth and clenched jaw.

The large weapon housing hung beneath the frame ahead of them. They slowed to a stop less than ten meters behind it.

“Hope they don’t decide to move before we’re done.”

Stefan’s voice came out clipped as he leaned into the HUD beside her. Would a second chair in the cockpit have been too

much to ask? “Hold us steady. I’m locking onto the target.”

The HUD screen directly in front of him became a reticle. It pulsed as he painstakingly maneuvered it until the center settled on the subtly gleaming bow of the *SFS Thermopylae*.

“What’s so special about this weapon?”

“We stole the Alliance schem flow and amped up the power so it mimics a cruiser’s weaponry. The targeting system works a bit differently as a result.”

Admiral Himura (EAS Fuzhou): “I will say again: stand down now, relinquish all Alliance ships and materials in your possession and present yourself for court-martial proceedings.”

Unidentified (SFS Thermopylae): “Negative.”

Stefan exhaled. Point of no return, come and gone. “Firing.”

The laser streaked out from beneath the viewport. The shot was larger and more powerful than those generated by the weaponry typically found on a recon craft. It also utilized the ytterbium-crystal pulse laser materials wielded by Alliance military weapons, so anyone looking in their direction would swear the fire had originated from the Alliance cruiser situated directly above Stefan and Lekkas.

The *Thermopylae* was in motion, denying the sieging warships a convenient target for the attack it had been likely to provoke. As it streaked across the line of blockaded ships, a large commercial transport emerged from beneath it headed in the opposite direction.

The laser struck the civilian vessel full-on broadside.

Lacking sufficient shielding, it ruptured into a ball of roiling white and coral as both the active impulse engine and the thankfully dormant sLume superluminal drive exploded.

The *Thermopylae* returned fire. Everyone returned fire, and space lit up in an infernal clamor of interweaving lasers and

detonations. The cruiser above them accelerated to port, and bedlam unfurled in its wake.

Lekkas had fallen back in her chair, leaving their ship drifting and exposed. “You...you hit a *civilian* ship! How did you miss a bloody battlecruiser?”

Shock replaced horror as the dominant expression animating her face when she discovered Stefan’s gun pointed at her chest.

“Your psych profile indicates you respond to extreme stress with enhanced reaction speeds and sharper focus. So get us out of here in one piece, would you?”

Her mouth snapped into a thin, hard line as her pupils contracted. “Yes, *sir*.”

She seized the controls once more, and he re-holstered his gun. The floor pitched beneath his feet as they too accelerated, albeit away from the cruiser, and banked hard. He stumbled away from the dash and grabbed the top of her chair to prevent being thrown to the floor.

A fighter shot past their bow as they dove away, and in the next blink they were dodging two additional fighters and skimming the hull of a frigate. His stomach lurched, and if it hadn’t been many hours since he’d eaten, he would’ve vomited its contents.

The viewport briefly cleared—then another frigate was bearing down on their location. It didn’t know they were there, but it was moving far too fast to divert in any event.

“Shit!” Lekkas yanked the ship vertical, sending him thudding to the floor and skidding into the main cabin. His head slammed into the leg of a workstation as they finally leveled off.

“Okay back there?”

He massaged the back of his head and struggled to his feet. “That wasn’t funny.”

“You should’ve strapped in to the jump seat.”

“Given your certification scores, I expected it to be a smoother ride.”

“Must have been the extreme stress affecting my skills.”

When he reached the cockpit, he was relieved to see the surrounding space beginning to thin in a more permanent fashion. They had soared above the bulk of the fighting and were now racing away. Their job here was done, and the campaign would be won or lost without their participation.

“Are you going to point a gun at me again?”

“No. I simply needed to short-circuit your tirade and refocus you on the task at hand.”

She swung her chair around and crossed her arms tightly over her chest. “Asshole. How could you miss? Do you know how many innocent civilians you killed?”

“Seventeen.”

“Are you kidding? That transport could hold four hundred people. Even if it wasn’t full to capacity—”

“There were seventeen people on the ship. A skeleton crew. And I didn’t miss. It was my target.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “*Why?*”

He thought about Frannie, believing her husband was off at an engineering symposium planning a spaceport expansion and new levtram routes. He’d scheduled a series of messages to her to be delivered once the coup began so she didn’t worry. What would she think of him if she knew what he had just done, what he *did* for a living?

He met Lekkas’s furious stare with an equally cool one. “Because that was my mission.”

“Your mission? No. Your mission was to simulate an attack by the Alliance cruiser on our new warship, instigating the

Thermopylae to open fire.”

“No, that was *your* mission. My mission was to hit the civilian vessel. It was specifically chosen since it would be all but empty, thus minimizing casualties, and Brigadier Gianni made certain the *Thermopylae* crossed its path at the pivotal moment.

“See, nobody will care how many people actually died. They’ll only care that the Alliance opened fire on a defenseless merchant vessel. Public opinion will be on our side, which means more colonies will offer support or even join the Federation. Money will flow to our cause so we can pay for the ships that are essential if we expect to prevail.”

Outside the viewport an amber burst flared. The sun was now behind them, and the eruption created a stark contrast to the space beyond it. Another ship destroyed, on and by one side or the other.

She shook her head as if to tangibly deny his point. “So that’s the real reason I wasn’t trusted to handle the shooting—and rightfully so. It wasn’t required. A shot at the *Thermopylae* would have been enough.”

“Possibly. Not my call to make, but I can’t disagree with the logic. We need every advantage we can create in these early hours and days if we’re to stand a snowball’s chance in Hell at winning this war. The Alliance military has nearly six thousand warships, and that’s before you start counting the fighters and support craft. We need them arguing over how to proceed instead of sending their entire damn fleet to Seneca. We need them doing what they do best: debating, prevaricating and creating a dozen committees to draw up rules of engagement. We need *time*.”

“Why lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie. I implied, you inferred.”

“Don’t play semantics with me. I’m not one of your marks.

So....” She tossed her arms weakly in the air. “What now?”

“Now we follow the plan. We go home and go our separate ways. We keep our secret, no matter what happens—kidnapping, torture or a billion-credit bribe be damned, we *keep our secret*. Lastly, you stop having a nervous breakdown. You didn’t kill those people. I did. You sleep well at night because their blood isn’t on your hands, and I sleep well at night because it was...necessary.”

“*Necessary*. I refuse to believe that.”

Stefan shrugged. “Believe what you want. I believe their sacrifice will save far more lives in the long run—and that *is* our goal. If it helps, which I doubt it does, their families will be well taken care of. Our leaders will set a precedent by demonstrating the Senecan Federation honors its fallen war heroes.”

The burden of having started a war in which tens of thousands and perhaps tens of millions would die was a heavy one, but one he’d been prepared to bear. The burden of starting the war by murdering civilians...well, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t known it would be heavier.

He wasn’t a soldier, and dammit but he didn’t want to have been here.

The justifications stumbled over one another in a ragged loop in his mind. Lives would ultimately be saved as a result. War meant the spilling of blood. It meant death, and he’d be blindingly naïve to assert otherwise. But war also brought the prospect of a new world, a better world. He had to believe it was worth it.

Lekkas patched in to the *Thermopylae*’s internal comms so they could monitor the opening salvos of the clash. The chatter provided a welcome distraction from the troubled ruminations of his conscience.

Brigadier Gianni (SFS Thermopylae): “Elathan Seventh Regiment, your sole mission is to take out the Fuzhou. Cut the head off the snake, and do it now. Krysk Fourth Regiment, run interference and occupy the frigates protecting the Fuzhou.”

As they swung around on nearing the Lunar SSR Center, the full expanse of the battle spread out before them. The smaller, all-but-defenseless merchant vessels had vacated the area, leaving the military warships and armed civilian craft free to wreak havoc without fear of collateral damage. Most of the warships were outwardly identical, which made it difficult to judge the ebb and flow of the conflict. But it hardly mattered in an arena littered with debris and illuminated by incessant fire and explosions.

Once, humanity’s warriors had killed using swords and spears. Now they did so using weapons whose power approached the fury of a sun.

Brigadier Gianni (SFS Thermopylae): “Let’s show them exactly what this ship can do. Don’t hold anything back for the next battle, or there may not be a next battle. I see an Alliance cruiser and frigate lingering too close to one another W 43° –6° Z. Also, they’re harassing Auxiliary Group Three. Make them regret it.”

The *Thermopylae* cut through the fog of war, aggressively engaging an Alliance cruiser as it maneuvered with remarkable agility through the chaos. Attacks from multiple fighters and a damaged frigate splashed off its defense shields like rain off a pitched roof.

It was a beautiful ship, quick and powerful. A ship worthy of a new federation.

Stefan hoped the people building that federation proved themselves worthy of it.

*

Twenty-five years later, people live under an uneasy détente among the mammoth Earth Alliance, the defiant Senecan Federation and a handful of wealthy independent colonies. When a powerful force threatens humanity's continued existence, their only chance to survive is to put aside their differences and unite against the threat. But despite the clear need to do so, the sins of the past...complicate matters.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I published *Starshine* in March of 2014. In the back of the book I put a short note asking readers to consider leaving a review or talking about the book with their friends. Since that time I've had the unmitigated pleasure of watching my readers do exactly that, and there has never been a more wonderful and humbling experience in my life. There's no way to properly thank you for that support, but know you changed my life and made my dreams a reality.

I'll make the same request now. If you loved *APOGEE*, tell someone. If you bought the book on Amazon, consider leaving a review. If you downloaded the book off a website with Russian text in the margins and pictures of cartoon video game characters in the sidebar, consider recommending it to others.

As I've said before, reviews are the lifeblood of a book's success, and there is no single thing that will sell a book better than word-of-mouth. My part of this deal is to write a book worth talking about—your part of the deal is to do the talking. If you all keep doing your bit, I get to write a lot more books for you.

This time I'm also going to make a second request. *Sidespace* was an independently published novel, written by one person and worked on by a small team of colleagues. Right now there are thousands of writers out there chasing this same dream.

Go to Amazon and surf until you find an author you like the sound of. Take a small chance with a few dollars and a few hours of your time. In doing so, you may be changing those authors' lives by giving visibility to people who until recently were shut out of publishing, but who have something they need to say. It's a revolution, and it's waiting on you.

Lastly, I love hearing from my readers. Seriously. Just like I don't have a publisher or an agent, I don't have "fans." I have **readers** who buy and read my books, and **friends** who do that

then reach out to me through email or social media. If you loved the book—or if you didn't—let me know. The beauty of independent publishing is its simplicity: there's the writer and the readers. Without any overhead, I can find out what I'm doing right and wrong directly from you, which is invaluable in making the next book better than this one. And the one after that. And the twenty after that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



G. S. JENNSEN lives in Colorado with her husband and two dogs. In less than two years she has become an internationally bestselling author, selling in excess of 60,000 books since her first novel, *Starshine*, was published in March 2014. She has chosen to continue writing under an independent publishing model to ensure the integrity of the *Aurora Rhapsody* series and her ability to execute on the vision she's had for it since its genesis.

While she has been a lawyer, a software engineer and an editor, she's found the life of a full-time author preferable by several orders of magnitude, which means you can expect the next book in the *Aurora Rhapsody* series in just a few months.

When she isn't writing, she's gaming or working out or getting lost in the Colorado mountains that loom large outside the windows in her home. Or she's dealing with a flooded basement, or standing in a line at Walmart reading the tabloid headlines and wondering who all of those people are. Or sitting on her back porch with a glass of wine, looking up at the stars, trying to figure out what could be up there.
