

Prologue

“IDENTIFY YOURSELF.”

It felt surreal to be staring at the face of Mathias Strauss on my Holoview. Captain of the UAS *Vanguard*, he was a legend of the Nine-Year War. Perhaps his greatest claim to fame had been destroying the Kastazi outpost in the Omega Sector, the enemy’s primary source of supplies and reinforcements. Strauss led the attack force that blew it all to hell. No one in the Alliance had batted an eye at the slaughter. There were no Kastazi civilians. Every last one of them was to blame for our suffering. Any action necessary to secure our freedom was justified.

That hard truth aside, Strauss’s attack on the outpost still had its troubling questions. The Alliance campaign on Titan Moon had already decimated most of what remained of the Kastazi forces, leaving them almost entirely incapable of defending themselves. Strauss carried on anyway. It wasn’t a popular opinion, but my mother had always believed his assault was more about revenge than necessity. As I looked into Strauss’s eyes, it occurred to me she was probably right. Something about him exuded a capacity for ugliness. It helped me see past all the shiny Alliance bars on his chest and accept him for what I knew he had become. A traitor.

“Identify yourself,” Strauss insisted a second time.

Sitting in the captain’s chair opposite Strauss felt equally surreal. Somehow fate had landed me in an absurd new reality—one in which I was the captain of the Alliance flagship, with the fate of Earth and the human race resting in my hands. *Surreal*. There was no other word to describe it.

“My name is Vivien Nixon. Captain of the UAS *California*.”

Strauss took two steps forward, his face filling the Holoview. “No. You are a child playing a dangerous game.”

“Let’s just get on with it, shall we?” I baited him, staying on plan.

Strauss angrily punched his fingers against his command module, and a three-dimensional identification photo appeared on the Holoview alongside him. *John Douglas Marshall: Age 18*. My heart broke all over again as JD’s image rotated on a 360-degree axis.

“John Marshall—where is he?” he demanded.

“KIA,” I replied.

Strauss’s angry expression gave way to something that looked a whole lot more like anxiety, as if JD’s demise had some greater consequence than I could have known. “I am placing you and your crew under arrest as enemy combatants of the Alliance. Lower your grids and prepare to be boarded.”

Not yet. I had to take it further. Make him believe we were ready to die.

“I’m afraid you have it backward,” I answered. “We’re all that’s left of the Alliance. You and your crew are treasonous cowards and Kastazi sympathizers. So just in case it isn’t clear . . . no, I will not be lowering my grids.”

Commander Gentry anxiously glanced over his shoulder at me, concerned I was overplaying things. His serving as my first officer added yet another layer of absurdity. Only fourteen weeks earlier he had been an ensign *and* my superior.

Strauss glanced at an officer stationed behind him. The officer nodded, confirming something for his captain.

“Then you leave me no choice but to destroy you,” Strauss replied, looking suddenly more emboldened.

“Give us your best shot,” I countered, knowing we had to take a beating in order to draw him in.

Excerpt: Devastation Class by Glen Zipper and Elaine Mongeon

“We will,” Strauss glibly replied as six hulking hostiles materialized from behind stealthing fields, three on either side of the *Vanguard*. The sight of the ships took my breath away. A peculiar amalgam of both Alliance and Kastazi technology, each was twice the size of the *California*.

One ship or seven, it made no difference. We still had to take it all the way to the brink.

I faced Strauss, narrowed my eyes at him, and issued the command I knew could very well be my last if everything didn't go according to plan.

“Fire all weapons!”