

Fractured Days

By Benjamin Levi Seims

## Prelude

### Best intentions

*IRIS, Bangor Nuclear Submarine Base, The Free*

“Don’t kill him?”

“Yes, I want him alive,” General Murdoch said. “And I want the twins, unscathed. Do you understand? Or do I need to find a cheaper pirate to do this small task for me?”

Shaun Blackthorn tasted the salt-saturated air in the back of his mouth as he studied General Murdoch. Seagulls squawked and danced over the rusted platform of an enormous crane they stood on, overlooking the loading of a submarine. Its sheen glistened, making it appear very much like a giant leech, frozen, bumping against the side of the docks as brackish waves lapped at its body. The wide expanse of the channel that led to the Pacific Ocean serpented between the swampy lands out to meet the cloud filled sky in the distance.

“General, this isn’t normal circumstances.” Blackthorn waved to his hawkish looking rotor-winged battleship on the airstrip; black and huge, yet still small next to Murdoch’s. “You’re putting my crew at risk by tying one of my hands behind my back.”

Murdoch smirked. “Don’t act like you actually care for your crew’s fate, Shaun.”

“Fine, but you’re putting my neck on the line.”

“And for a price you can’t refuse. I’m only making you this offer because you’re one of us. Even if you’ve lessened yourself with this pirate charade you’ve cooked up out in this god-forsaken place.”

Blackthorn stared at the sub being loaded. “That old nuke sub is really going to help you get IRIS going again?”

“Yes.”

“And we’re going to be one nation again?”

“Yes.”

Blackthorn let out a sigh, squinting at the sunlight bouncing off the water. “How do you know he’s heading through the old pass?”

“I have my sources.”

“Of course you do, and I’m just supposed to scour the mountain sides until I find them, with information from sources I’m not privy to?”

“Just go to the grid I gave you. They will be there, and I want them before our monk friends can get their hands on them.”

Blackthorn chuckled. “Has your relationship with the headmaster soured already?”

Murdoch ignored his him. “I’ll be flying to Galbraith with David to oversee the final part of our operation. Can I count on you?”

Blackthorn grimaced. “Ah, David. The new prodigal.”

Murdoch’s eyes narrowed, and glowed red from the cybernet wet-worked behind them. “Can I count on you?”

Blackthorn leaned back, as if trying to get a little more distance from the General, and sighed heavily. “I’m always delighted to succeed where others have failed.” His lips parted in a Cheshire-cat smile. “I can’t promise he won’t die. If it comes down to choosing, you know what the outcome will be, but I will make an honest effort.”

“I have a feeling you will figure out a way.” Murdoch eyeballed him again, and then let out a snort. “Captain Blackthorn. What a waste of talent. You could have been whatever you’d wanted if you’d stayed with us.”

Shaun met him eye to eye, a devilish grin parting his lips. “I couldn’t have been a pirate.”

The two laughed, and Shaun Blackthorn lurched forward as Murdoch slapped his back. “We’re going to make this country whole again, and we’re going to make sure we have the power and time to keep it that way. Stick with us, and you can pirate every country we take as we march across this world.”

One

Pirates!

“Hard to starboard!” The seven-foot-tall Sasquatch captain, Thorsgard, stood strong as the mast of a sailing ship; battle hardened, unwavering, shouting orders to his crew on the bridge.

“Hard to starboard!” echoed down the hull.

The winged rotor ship vibrated as blasts from REP cannons hammered the light outer armor, as if some giant air monster had plucked it out of the sky and had started beating on it with its fists. The *Princess Sophia* rocked and listed heavily in the air under the assault. The damaged rotary engines in her wings smoked and whined under the pressure of the maneuvering.

*Cam, try to get me a trace on our crew, and I want the damn schematics of that ship.*

*On it.*

John raced around the bridge to the starboard REP cannons, slid up under the shoulder mount that he was almost too short for, seized the twin grips, aimed and fired.

The small rotor ship shuddered again and listed more to the port side, knocking several people off their feet and sending them sprawling to the far side of the passenger hold. John glanced back and saw Sage land on her feet, bouncing off the wall and rigging as she headed towards the bridge.

“John, we’re getting the shit kicked out of us back there. What the hell is going on?”

John continued blasting at the superior airship, targeting the guns. “We’re under attack.”

“Thanks a lot, genius.”

He gestured his head towards the back. “Everyone tucked in?”

“Oli’s got them strapped in tight. Won’t do much good if we get blown out of the sky. These more friends of yours?”

As their ship stopped shuddering for the moment, she let go of the hand bar and moved closer to him. The hulking black airship had ceased bombardment while it maneuvered away from his REP fire.

*Cam, track it*

Cam hacked into the small targeting system and linked it with his HUD. He fired a few more bursts but the craft had gone out of range.

*It’s coming back, straight down on top of us. It’s too fast.*

*Damn it.*

John turned, Sage was right behind him. A flash from incoming heavy REP rounds reflected in her eyes as they opened wide. “John!”

She tackled him to the floor on the other side of the gunner’s hole, bracing herself on top of him. A slew of rounds hammered into the hull again. Sage rolled off John and they stumbled to their feet. The gunner’s position where they had just been was gone, and the bits of armor that were left flaked away, and skipped down the side of the ship.

“Damn it!” John charged across the deck to get to the other gunners hole, but the ship lurched with the new wound, and veered again. John slipped and crashed against the inner hull. Sage jumped behind the gun, grunting hard against the weight of the shoulder mounts, and stepped up onto a bracket, bracing herself and maneuvering the heavy REP cannon back into position. She started blasting rounds at their attackers, getting them back off again, and gain some breathing room.

*It's an old battle cruiser, John. Heavy armor, and even heavier weapons protection.*

*Just our luck.*

*No way we win this match.*

*Any good news?*

*We're going to make it the bottom of the Cascades faster than we thought.*

*Where?*

*Ninety-eight kilometers northeast of Seattle.*

*Damn.*

The ship trembled as if it might split in two, and more alarms blared as the hull was breached. Air came rushing in. John grabbed Sage out of the shoulder mounts just as an electrical panel crashed down around the gunner's controls, knocking loose the bracket she'd been standing on.

He looked her in the eyes and smiled. "I don't think they like us."

"Duh."

*Way to go, genius.*

*Ungrateful, both of you.*

Another lurch of the ship sent them tumbling to the ground, and John landed on top of Sage with a thud. Sage grunted as she wiggled under him to free herself.

"God, you're so freaking heavy."

He winked at her. "Heavy? Is that your way of telling me I'm hunky."

She smirked at him and pushed at his chest to get him off her. "If you only knew how wrong you are."

*You really have the worst timing.*

*You're both just jealous that I handle my shit so well.*

*Sure, that's definitely it.*

John wrestled himself up, and helped Sage to her feet. They raced back to the passenger hold to check on Oliver and the twins, while Captain Thorsgard and his crew tried to right the ship and get the fight to the ground.

The ship took another solid hit, started an uncontrolled spinning descent, and then steadied itself.

*Ship won't take much more of this, John.*

*escape ship?*

*Two. Right below us.*

Cam showed John where the hatch to one of the two recon ships was on his HUD. He turned grabbed the handles and pulled them up, twisting to release the lock, and then pushed them in. The door slid back with a hiss.

“Sage. Think you can manage a crash course in Satch rotor ships?”

“Very funny.” She jumped down through the hatch and grimaced back at him. “Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

“Then I guess I can.” She flipped him off and started running over the systems; knowing her, she’d have them on line in minutes.

*One of the Satches paused beside John; their eyes locked and John nodded to him. Not everyone would be making it out of this alive. The Satch walked to the rear of the hold and opened the hatch of the second recon ship.*

*I still think you could have come up with a better nickname for them.*

*What’s wrong with Satch? It’s what the cool kids say.*

*Ugh. At least it’s shorter.*

John ran the few feet to the passenger hold, and grabbed Oliver’s shoulder. “Pay attention to the plan here.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Oliver unbuckled himself, and then Sierra and Quinn, guiding the wide-eyed twins over to the hatch, and down it. Oliver looked up at John, made as if to say something, but instead shook his head like he couldn’t believe what was happening, and dropped through the hatch. The ship rocked again, and John’s footing became iffy as they started careening towards the ground. John heard Adam clawing on the metal floor, and hurried to get him aboard the escape craft. He bumped Thorsgard who grabbed Johns hand and quickly put it to his forehead. John slapped the Satch’s shoulder and nodded. There was no time for anything more. Thorsgard met his gaze for a final time, then turned on his heels and headed to the other recon craft. John felt as if all the air in his chest was being sucked out as he watched his friend disappear, a knot in the back of his throat not allowing him to take even one breath, before clearing his throat, and snapping back into action. He sent Adam through the hatch to a waiting Oliver, took one look around at the smoking, scorched mess, and then dropped through the

hatch, landing on the metal floor with a clang. He reached up and shut it from the inside, twisting the latch hard to seal them in. Sage had the rotors going already and the thrumming could be heard in the hull.

John leaned over her shoulder. "Ready when you are. Can you get this bucket the ground?"

"Oh, I'll get us to the ground alright. One way or another."

*She's really giving me warm fuzzies, John.*

*Yeah, this might be the shortest leg of our trip yet.*

*I'm really tired of almost dying.*

*Tired is an understatement.*

John looked over and saw Oliver strapping the kids into their seats. The escape crafts were made to fit four or five Satches, so it was plenty big. Hull walls were lined with cargo boxes, electronics, a couple HUD systems, and two small bench seats. At the front of the craft Sage was still prepping to release the ship from the docking clamps of the Princess Sophia, her fingers flying over the controls as if piloting this craft while abandoning ship was an everyday occurrence. A holo image was displayed on the HUD in front of her.

She turned to face John and winked. "We're going to drop. Might want to get ready, cupcake."

John sat in the control seat behind Sage, strapping in, and scanned for any pursuit from the attacking vessel. Sage hit the highlighted docking clamp and they thrust off from the spiraling ship. A hard right to the control stick sent them down and away from the Satch rotor-ship.

*Did she just call you cupcake?*

*I don't remember. Can you jump?*

*Not into their control system. I can get you outside cameras though. Cupcake.*

*Real cute, Cam, just show me.*

Cam put the visual up on John's HUD. Thorsgard's craft had ejected from the Princess Sophia, and was charging for the assault carrier, maneuvering like a hornet, firing at the ship as it advanced and weaving away from the heavy return fire.

*Damn.*

*It's a suicide run, John.*

Cam pinged a landing zone, and sent it through to John's HUD, pulling him away from the fight for a moment.

"There." John tapped Sage on the shoulder, and then pointed to a clearing in the forest below. She pushed the throttle as hard as she could to get them away from the fighting and on the ground. An explosion came from behind them, sending their ship lurching forward.

*John--*

The explosion of Thorsgard's ship reverberated through the air, tinting the sky orange and red. John gritted his teeth and closed his eyes tight, a deep breath escaping from his lungs, feeling like a tree trunk had just hit him in the gut.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

*What now?*

*Survive this landing first, then we'll fill in the blanks.*

John glanced at the display showing the ship now in full pursuit. A large gray mass against the sky, blotting out the sun as it gained on them, two long, triangled prop wings holding up a flat black body like an osprey. REP cannons blasted from every side of it as Sage tried to zig-zag them down to the ground. The pursuing ship's rotor wings tilted back, slowing them down just enough to show the belly of the ship. Against the flat gray of the hull someone had painted a huge metallic blue skull atop a pair of cross rifles..

*Pirates.*

John turned to face everyone. "Brace yourselves!"

Another volley, fired from the bigger cannons hidden behind the eyes of the blue pirate skull, tore the hull of their small ship open. They listed, and started a spiraling descent as Sage fought with the controls.

She yelled over the blast of cool air twisting like a hurricane through the cockpit and hold. "We're done, John. This isn't going to be pretty!"

*"Just get us to the ground alive."*

John got up from his seat and staggered to the back, where Oliver, Sierra, Quinn, and Adam sat looking at him as if he was their only hope to stay alive. He checked each of them and tested their straps to make certain

they were secure. He picked up Adam, who had been sure-footing himself all over the passenger space, and secured him as best he could in one of the large cargo containers.

"John!"

*John.*

"I'm one it!" John raced to his seat and buckled in.

Sage pulled back as hard as she could on the control stick and tilted the one rotor that was still working to try and slow them down. The ship slowed slightly, and then hit the ground like a rock skipping across a rippling river.

