

WHAT PRICE VICTORY?

**WORLDS
OF
HONOR
#7**

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PROLOGUE

Cutler Gustavus von Tischendorf was eight T-years old when he had his first space battle.

Though in retrospect, he realized it probably wasn't actually the first such battle he'd been in. He had vague memories of his mother disappearing for hours at a time while he floated in zero-gee in their cabin, listening to rumblings and thuds and occasional shouts from the passageways beyond. Afterward, when all was quiet again, his mom would come back into their cabin, and the deck would slowly become a deck again instead of just another bulkhead. Sometimes his mom would then go out again and not be back for another few hours, but sometimes they went off to the wardroom to eat. There was laughter and loud talk at those times, and he always got an ice cream sundae before his mom took him back and tucked him in for the night.

But it wasn't until the Battle of Jorgan's Star that Cutler finally learned the whole truth.

His mom was a *kapitän* now. That meant their cabin on *Schreien* was bigger than the ones on their previous ships. But it also meant that the cabin had a small set of repeater bridge displays that let Cutler see what was going on.

And it was glorious.

The rumbling was autocannon fire as the ship defended itself

from incoming missiles. The thuds marked the launch of *Schreien's* own missiles in response. The shouting was men and women swimming rapidly through the passageways on their way to fix equipment that had failed or to reroute power or sensor lines.

Finally, it was over. Cutler had kept track as he watched, and by his reckoning his mom and *Schreien* had destroyed three whole enemy ships.

And sure enough, an hour later, he got his ice cream sundae.

"Did you watch the battle from the cabin?" his mom asked as he dug into the bowl.

"Uh-huh," Cutler said. "It was really cool. We got three of their ships, right?"

"Three ships were destroyed, yes," she confirmed with a smile. "But we didn't do it all by ourselves. The other ships helped, too."

"Oh. Right." Vaguely, Cutler remembered other ships being in the battle. He hadn't paid much attention to them. "Was Uncle Gustav's ship one of them?"

"Oh, yes," his mom said. "His ship is *always* one of them. And always the best one."

"I don't think so," Cutler said firmly. "*Schreien's* the best. Because *you're* the captain."

"Well, thank you," she said with another smile. "I'm glad you think so." Her eyes shifted across the room—"Pablo?" she called.

"Yes, *Kapitän Jen?*" a swarthy man Cutler remembered seeing around the ship said, coming over to their table. He shot a smile at Cutler. "How you doing, *Kapitän Jen's* son?"

Cutler bristled. He hated when people on his mother's ship called him that. Almost as much as he hated it when they called her *Kapitän Jen*.

But she didn't notice, or else didn't care. She launched into some stuff with Pablo that was way too technical for Cutler to understand. "Yes, Ma'am," Pablo said when she'd finished. "I'll get right on it."

"Thank you," she said. She almost always said thank-you to people.

Cutler wasn't sure he liked that. He'd heard Uncle Gustav order people around, and he was a lot more firm and a lot less friendly sounding.

And they called him *Admiral Anderman*, not *Admiral Gustav*.

“Trouble?”

Cutler blinked. His mom was looking at him, her forehead wrinkled a little. “How come they call you *Kapitän Jen*?” he asked. “I don’t think that’s very polite.”

“Oh, they’re polite enough,” Jennifer assured him. “The thing is, when politeness and protocol are fighting practicality, the practicality—”

“What’s practicality?”

“Practicality is doing things the practical way,” his mother explained. “Being efficient. Making sure you get to the result you want in the simplest way that works. In this case, *Kapitän von Tischendorf* takes”—she paused, her lips moving—“seven syllables to say. But *Kapitän Jen* takes—?”

Cutler did a quick count. “Four.”

“Four,” Jennifer agreed. “A little over half as many. Besides that, *von Tischendorf* is a bit hard for some of the crew to pronounce. So I just told everyone to call me *Kapitän Jen*. You see?”

“Uh-huh,” Cutler said. But he still didn’t like it. A *kapitän* should be respected, not called by her first name. “But when *I’m* a *kapitän* I’m going to make them call me *Kapitän von Tischendorf*.”

“When *you’re* a *kapitän*?” Jennifer asked, raising her eyebrows. “You want to command a ship like this?”

Cutler looked around the wardroom. Of all the ships he’d been on, this was the one he liked the best. He liked it even better than Uncle Gustav’s battlecruiser *Seydlitz*. “Not a ship *like* this,” he corrected her. “I want *this* ship.”

“Ah,” she said. “Well, you know, there’s a lot of work to captaining a ship. And a lot of study and learning first. Are you ready to spend your whole life that way?”

Cutler looked around the wardroom again. “Yes,” he said firmly.

“Good,” his mom said. “Then finish your ice cream and let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Cutler asked. He stuffed in the last two mouthfuls, wincing at the momentary brain freeze.

“Forward Weapons,” she said, getting up and picking up his bowl and spoon. “Commander Pablo is going to tear apart one of the autocannon.”

She leveled a finger at him. “And *you*, *Kapitän Jen’s* Son, are going to watch.”

I

“*Bayern* to escort commanders,” *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf’s voice came over *Schreien*’s bridge speaker. “Call in ready.”

Cutler waited until the vanguard leader and each of the two flank leaders checked in with confirmations. After that, it was his turn. “*Schreien* reporting ready,” he called.

“Thank you,” the *Großadmiral* said.

Mentally, Cutler shook his head. There she went again—and a *Großadmiral* now, too—still thanking people for doing nothing more than their jobs. And probably still letting her senior officers call her by her first name. At the very least, he could hope it was *Großadmiral Jen* now.

Though if he wanted to get *really* technical, it was *Großadmiral Jennifer von Tischendorf von Tischendorf*. Gustav Anderman had always been amused by their family name, not just because of how incredibly German it was, but also because the “von” part made it sound like a relic of nobility from pre-Diaspora days. A few years ago, when Gustav started really leaning into his obsession with the Old Prussian leader Frederick the Great and began handing out titles and lordships, he’d decided to double down on the von Tischendorf name and also make it their title.

Cutler’s mother took it as a sign of affection for her and her son. Cutler himself wasn’t so sure it wasn’t just Anderman laughing to himself.

“Everyone stay sharp,” the *Großadmiral* warned. “We’re getting some gravitic signatures from behind T-116.”

Cutler peered at his display. Sure enough, someone lurking behind one of the larger asteroids in the distance ahead had lit off a wedge. Right on schedule, the Tomlinson Security Force was coming out to play.

For all the good it would do them. Andermani Naval Intelligence had already done a complete workup on the Tomlinson forces, and they weren’t in the least bit impressive: two frigates, five corvettes, and an unknown but probably small number of remote-operated missile batteries on some of the larger rocks of the asteroid zone the Andermani task force was currently decelerating through.

And with those seven defenders facing a battlecruiser, two heavy cruisers, two frigates, three destroyers *and* one of Gustav Anderman's incredibly powerful battleships, the Tomlinson force was going to be less than a speed bump on the way to teaching President McIntyre that destroying an Andermani heavy cruiser was *not* a good idea.

Especially when that battleship was the flagship of *Großadmiral* Jennifer von Tischendorf von Tischendorf.

"Getting telemetry signals," Cutler's sensor officer announced. "Probably sending to one or more local missile batteries. Jamming now."

"Acknowledged," Cutler said, glowering at the displays. Sitting back here in the three-ship aft screen, he could certainly disable the Tomlinson missile batteries. But that was about *all* he could do. Where he *should* be was near the center of the formation, between the battlecruiser and his mother's battleship, where *Schreien's* sophisticated EW suite could draw enemy attacks away from those high-value targets and then neutralize them with her heavy antimissile systems.

The problem was that there were three more warships in the TSF's collection: a frigate and two corvettes, warships that the ANI report said were currently undergoing repairs. But that was a conclusion, not hard data, and *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf was too good a commander to put her full trust in even expert extrapolations.

Hence, *Schreien's* position in the aft screen. If the TSF had managed to get the frigate and corvettes back to operational status, they might hide them out here among the asteroids to pop out behind the Andermani force and attempt to throw some missiles up their kilts. Such an attack would be a long shot at best, given that the Andermani were still racing away from such a theoretical ambush and those theoretical missiles, which would give the *Großadmiral* plenty of warning and enough time to pitch wedges against them. But it *was* possible, and the *Großadmiral* wanted to make sure *Schreien* was there to foil any such backstabbing attack.

"*Trakhener* and *Drachen*, decrease deceleration fifty gees," the *Großadmiral* ordered.

The two commanders acknowledged, and on Cutler's tactical the frigates' icons began drifting forward of the main group. Now that contact with the enemy had been made, the admiral was sending the

flanking ships ahead of the force to hopefully sniff out any surprises the Tomlinson defenders might have planted up there.

For whatever good it would do them. In a few hours—a few days at the most—Tomlinson would cease to exist as an independent nation.

They had only themselves to blame, of course. Gustav Anderman had never intended to create an empire out here. He'd been perfectly happy to take over the struggling colony world Kuan Yin, rename it Potsdam, find a solution to the genetic plant problem that was killing the crops and starving the colonists, and accept their gratitude in the form of being proclaimed king.

But not everyone had been so pleased with the planet's regime change. Seven T-years after Anderman's arrival, Ronald Devane of Nimbalker had allowed one of his vassals, Baron Sigismund, to raid the New Berlin system. At the time, the prevailing theory among Cutler's circle of friends and fellow officers was that Devane had known what was happening to the Kuan Yin colonists and had a solution, but had deliberately withheld it in the hopes that everyone would die off and he could pick up some new real estate at bargain prices. Gustav's arrival had ruined that plan, and so he was going to call out the upstart and see what he was made of.

On paper, at least, the plan looked reasonable. Nearly a quarter of the Liegnitz, Ltd., officers and spacers had chafed at the prospect of settling down on Potsdam, and had been permitted to take their ships and return to mercenary life elsewhere in the galaxy. Many of those who stayed were rotated from shipboard duty to civilian police and ground security forces. Looking at the resulting "official" size of what was then the New Potsdam Protectorate Navy, Devane had clearly concluded that Gustav's fighting strength was almost nonexistent.

But numbers were only half the story. Devane should also have looked into the tales of Gustav's fighting skill and checked out Liegnitz's success rate. He hadn't, and as a result was forced to watch as his world was annexed barely a T-year later. Three years after that, New Berlin and Nimbalker were formally redesignated as the Andermani Empire, with King Gustav now Emperor Gustav.

That should have been the end of it. The Empire's other neighbors should have taken the hint and steered clear of New Berlin. Certainly

Gustav wouldn't have made any further trouble on his own. Even before his coronation he'd told his closest friends, including Cutler's mother, that he had no interest in further expanding his new empire.

But Hereditary President Trudy McIntyre of Tomlinson was rotten at taking hints. There had been tension between the Tomlinson and Nimbalker systems dating back well before Gustav arrived on the scene, and McIntyre wasn't the type to let a change in management interfere with a good feud. Six T-years after Nimbalker's annexation she sent three frigates to attack the heavy cruiser SMS *Sirene* in Nimbalker space, destroying her and her entire crew.

To no one's surprise, except possibly McIntyre's, Gustav took it personally.

Which was why today, eight T-months later, *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf and the battleship *Bayern* had arrived to deliver an ultimatum: McIntyre would surrender herself, and the remainder of the Tomlinson government would cede control of their world to the Andermani Empire.

There was no *or else* included in the message. Cutler was pretty sure no one on Tomlinson needed one.

Maybe this would be the end of it. Once Tomlinson had been dealt with, maybe all the other small nations out here would leave the Andermani alone. A few hours, a few days at the most—

"Contacts!" the voice of *Trakhener's Fregattenkapitän* Rosten came suddenly from the com. "Six contacts, bearing—"

"Wedges!" Cutler's tactical officer snapped. "Six wedges forward, three each starboard and portside."

"All ships, pitch one-eighty positive," *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf ordered, her voice as glacially calm as always. "*Trakhener* and *Drachen*, return to flanking positions. Aft screen, stay sharp for an up-the-kilt ambush. *Schreien*, increase your missile battery jamming if you can."

"Aye, aye, *Großadmiral*," Cutler said, eyeing the tactical. The six unknowns were clearing the edges of the oversized asteroids they'd been lurking behind, about midway to the TSF ships the Andermani force had first spotted in the distance. The plan had probably been for the first group to act as decoy, holding the Andermani forces' attention long enough for them to sweep past the lurkers, whereupon

the latter would swoop out of hiding and put the Andermani into a pincer.

But thanks to *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf's caution, the lurkers had been spotted before that could happen. The Andermani force was now bearing down on them, alerted and in the proper attack formation to quickly deal with the threat.

There was only one problem. Even if the *Großadmiral* had been right about the missing TSF ships being functional again, that only added up to three extra ships.

So why were the Andermani facing *six* wedges?

And then, the ship IDs came up on the tactical, and for a frozen heartbeat Cutler found himself staring in disbelief.

The ambush force wasn't the missing frigate and two corvettes. It was, instead, a full squadron of six corvettes.

Six corvettes.

Someone on *Schreien's* bridge swore softly. Cutler couldn't blame him. There had been no indication of additional warships in the Tomlinson system: nothing the task force had seen, nothing that ANI had heard even a whisper about.

But they were here. And all six were charging toward the Andermani force, toward *Bayern's* forward screen and toward *Bayern* herself.

"Here they come," *Großadmiral* von Tischendorf's voice came over the speaker. If she was startled at the size of the unexpected attack force, it didn't show in her voice. "All ships: cease deceleration on my mark: *mark*. Aft screen, hold position."

Cutler hissed out a silent curse. *Hold position*. In other words, stay back where he and his two companions would be completely out of the battle.

That was insane. *Schreien's* whole reason for existence was to be out there in the open where she could draw off the attacks that would otherwise be directed at *Bayern*. But his admiral had given him an order, and he had no choice but to obey.

Unless he saw an additional threat that needed to be checked out. Or even just *suspected* there was such a threat.

"Pitch twenty degrees positive and move us up one hundred kilometers," he ordered. "I want to be able to see behind that asteroid ahead to portside."

“Twenty degrees positive, up one hundred kilometers,” the helm acknowledged.

“*Herr Flottillenadmiral?*” Cutler’s XO asked quietly.

“The asteroid in question is large enough to conceal another corvette,” Cutler told her. “I want to make sure nothing sneaks up behind us.” And in the meantime, once they reached their new position they would be fully clear of *Bayern*’s wedge, allowing the Lorelei lure of *Schreien*’s EW signal to hopefully draw away some of the attacks the corvettes were about to launch.

“Yes, Sir,” the XO said.

“Missile tracks!” the call came from CIC. “Incoming—*Gott im Himmel!* There are *twenty-four* of them. Repeat: twenty-four missile tracks.”

Cutler stared at the display, his brain momentarily refusing to accept the evidence of his eyes. Twenty-four missiles—four from each attacking ship—was insane. A typical corvette could barely control half that number.

Which meant these corvettes were anything but typical. Modern corporate ringers, beyond a doubt.

And with that salvo came terrible danger. Even with *Bayern*’s forward screen and flankers running at top efficiency, twenty-four missiles were almost certain to overwhelm their defenses. One or more of those missiles were going to get through.

And their target was certainly going to be *Bayern*.

His mother’s ship.

“Helm, get us in there,” he bit out, tearing his eyes from the tactical long enough to start running some numbers. “*Leipzig, Danzig*—hold position. Watch for additional attacks.” At full acceleration, once *Schreien* was at the new position he’d specified . . .

The XO got there first. “We’re not going to make it, Sir,” she murmured. “We’re still in *Bayern*’s impeller shadow. There’s nothing we can do about that salvo.”

Cutler ground his teeth. “Then we’d best make sure we’re there for the second, hadn’t we?”

He sensed her wince. “Yes, Sir.”

Schreien was still moving to get clear when the salvo hit.

The result was as bad as Cutler had feared. The forward screen took the brunt of the attack, with the heavy cruiser *Bretagne* blazing

into scrap with the nuclear fire of missile strikes and the even brighter starfire as her ruptured reactors exploded. The destroyer *München* survived, but the attack took down her wedge, forcing her to fall out of formation and head for the hyper limit as best she could. The battlecruiser *Rosbach* also survived, but suffered two near-misses which neutralized her forward sensors and missile launchers and likewise knocked her out of the fight.

And *Bayern* . . .

The battleship was tough. Tougher than most people who'd never faced anything bigger than a battlecruiser realized. The single missile that got through her defenses would have destroyed any other warship. But *Bayern*, while severely damaged, survived the blast.

But it was only a respite. With the forward screen and *Bayern's* own defenses gone, the attacking corvettes had a virtually clear field for their next salvo. Only the flanking frigates were still in position to counterattack.

They were doing their best. Both ships had pulled in closer, trying to bring *Bayern* into the protective shield of their autocannon. Simultaneously, they were throwing their own missiles as fast as they could at the enemy.

But it wasn't enough, Cutler knew. Each of the Andermani frigates could only control two missiles, and even if by some miracle all four of them found their targets that would still leave two corvettes ready to throw another eight missiles at their undefended prey.

Bayern's only hope was for Cutler to get close enough to draw that second salvo to himself.

And then, he spotted something. A telltale flicker in *Bayern's* nodes, a clear sign that they were about to go.

Again, he quickly ran the numbers, keeping an eye on the readouts of *Bayern's* wedge and nodes. Another flicker, and then a third. The battleship's last gasp . . . and possibly also her last hope.

"Change vector," he snapped, keying the new course over to the helm. "Execute at once."

"Ah—" the helmsman hesitated, peering at the numbers.

"Execute at once!"

The helmsman twitched violently. "Aye, Sir."

"*Herr Flottillenadmiral*—" the XO began urgently as *Schreien* leaped forward.

“Yes, I know,” Cutler cut her off. “Don’t worry. *Bayern*’s wedge will be gone well before we’re in danger of intersecting it.”

“Sir, that’s an assumption,” she countered. “And if it isn’t gone—”

“Then we die,” Cutler said harshly. “What’s the matter, XO? Are you afraid of death in the line of duty?”

“I’m not afraid of death, Sir,” she said stiffly. “But I have no interest in dying for no reason.”

“The reason writhes in pain in front of you,” Cutler said, just as stiffly. “*Bayern*, and however many of her crew still live. Without us, all of them will die. With us, some may yet survive.”

“And if you’re wrong, not only do they die, but so do all of us.”

Deliberately, Cutler turned back to the tactical. “I’m not wrong,” he said. “Make sure all EW systems are operating at full efficiency, and prepare missiles and autocannon.”

They were ten seconds away from crossing wedges with *Bayern*, and Cutler was starting to wonder if he might indeed have made a mistake, when the battleship’s stress bands gave one final flicker and vanished.

Leaving the battleship helpless . . . but also leaving the enemy corvettes open and vulnerable in the distance ahead.

“Stand by missiles,” Cutler said coolly, permitting himself a small smile as the tac lit up with the tracks of the corvettes’ second salvo. “Autocannon ready. Flank ships, prepare a full salvo on my signal. As soon as this attack has been dealt with, we take the battle to the enemy.”



It didn’t work out that way. In the end, Cutler had no choice but to take the task force’s remaining ships and abandon the field, leaving the twisted hulk of *Bayern* and an unknown number of survivors behind.

But it wasn’t over, he knew. There would be a day of reckoning. And it would come very, very soon.

II

“*Flottillenadmiral von Tischendorf?*”

With a start, Cutler looked up from the flag-draped coffin resting