

“Forty thousand,” Tenzen called out. “Launch warning!”

“Six inbound,” Yitzen acknowledged, her threat display describing a half-dozen lines arcing toward them. Less than she had seen in her chosen probability. No surprise, there. By now the future would be a bubbling froth with so much going on. There was an old Ipper saying about staring so long at the horizon and failing to see the rocks in front of you. Or, in this case, missiles. She would judge her accuracy by the simplest of tests. Survival.

Visually, the battle was underwhelming, due in part to an immensity of scale. Jupiter still filled her vision with an angry ochre sky, and Io’s icy crescent barely moved behind them. She couldn’t see the closing projectiles nor the ship firing them. Her only cues were physical – the disquieting vibrations and alarms adding to the press on her body.

“Twenty thousand.”

“Copy, Ten,” she forced out. “Good swimming.”

“Good swimming, Yitz.”

Everything happened. Sharp clicks announced the release of her four spines. Bright dots raced ahead, joining Tenzen’s spread of missiles. Her engines abruptly cut off, followed by a startling *clang*. Hopefully those new armored clamshells would prove themselves by protecting her engine outlets. Especially since the Coshen had recently started wrapping ball bearings around their warheads. Now she was little more than a speeding missile herself.

Four miniature suns flashed ahead, the detonations fading into orange spheres before disappearing altogether. Decoys doing their job on four of the inbound projectiles. Except that there had been six incoming...

Everything went white. Dazzled, she felt the Dagger lurch hard, its fuselage rattling from impacting shrapnel getting through shields. Warnings hooted, but the most critical displays showed her capsule and engines intact. “Ten!”

“Busy,” Tenzen’s curt voice replied. “Capsule’s intact.”

Yitzen whooshed out a breath of air. “Same here.” *We’re alive.*