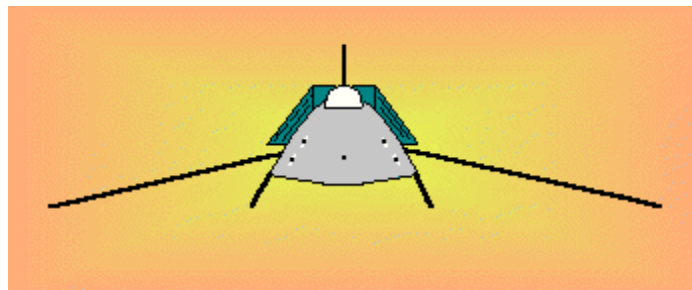
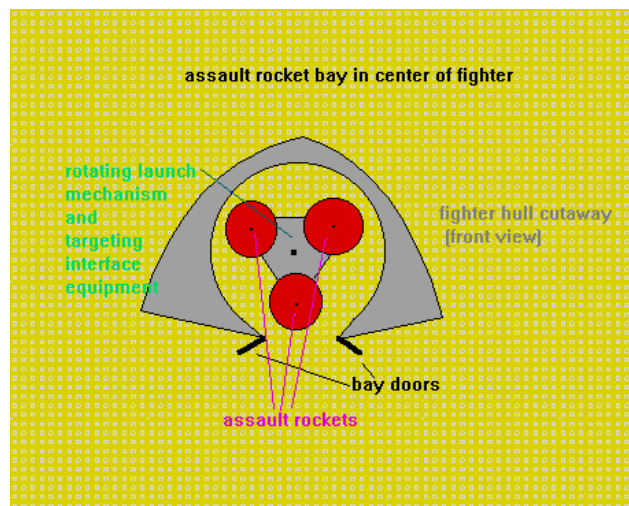


Sathar Onslaught

Novel by Doug Horton (Caelaris@Aol.com)



Converted by TIMOTHY R. NORRIS
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Prologue

The deck plates lurched beneath Kev'cect's many feet. Yet another Torpedo must have struck his heavy cruiser, the *Challenger*. The impact and detonation of it's powerful warhead blasted the *Challenger* sideways by at least a meter, judging from the way he was thrown against the restraints in his chair. His abdomen was strapped to the chair, and he was firmly supported by his eight legs, planted in a wide stance on both sides of the specially designed seat. His upper torso wasn't so lucky, and he struck his elbow against the console he was stationed at. Tentatively flexing his arm and five fingers, he discovered to his relief that everything was still in working order in spite of the needles of pain shooting up his arm. For the tenth time that hour, he cursed the fact that his security team wasn't patched in to any of the *Challenger's* command intercom links that would have enabled him to tell how badly the ship was wounded.

He had a different, but far less useful function in this battle. This fight would be won or lost by Spacers, as the spaceship crews called themselves. He could do nothing but wait in the eerie silence broken only by those few sounds loud enough to be transmitted into his space suit through the floor. His training was in hand to hand combat, small arms, support weapons, zero-G boarding operations, demolitions, and planetary assaults. He had no training in maneuvering a starship or firing the huge weapon batteries that would either win or lose them this battle. In a way, his job was the toughest of all. He had to sit at his console and wait while his fate was decided by beings he'd rarely even spoken to except while performing his job. A glance at his chronometer told him that it was time for the security status report. Three seconds later, his helmet headset came alive with a short burst of static, "Security teams report in. Station one, report."

Each team was stationed at a console by one of the *Challenger's* main airlocks or at the entrance to the Bridge. This was a standard United Planetary Federation Spacefleet procedure since the Second Sathar War. Like most of the Vrusk race, Kev'cect was dedicated and waited patiently for his airlock status to be requested. He could tell that the security chief, a human male named Henin, was handling the stress well. His voice betrayed no nervousness as he continued through the list of security stations. At Station three, he received no reply to his request for a report.

"Station three, respond!"

The silence hung in the air for an uncomfortably long time. Kev'cect knew Station three was the console by the Airlock on Deck 9, just two decks above his own position. He knew the human crew members manning that station, and fervently hoped that only the Intercom lines were down and not the station itself. When he

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heard, "No response, Station four, report." over his headset, it startled him. Hastily recovering, he replied, "Station four, all secure." He half heard station five report in the same, and dreaded the next ten minutes that would be spent once again in silence. To his surprise though, he heard Lieutenant Henin say, "I've just received a status report from Captain Galvin. We've defeated one of the destroyers after us, and the second has broken off pursuit. In about thirty minutes, the ship will be repressurized, and we can all get out of these damned spacesuits. Until then, remain at your posts and we'll continue the security checks by the book."

"Sir, any word about casualties yet?" Kev'cect tried to place the voice, but the static was so thick on the com line that he could only narrow it down as belonging to one of the two Dralasites in the security team. Whoever said it; Lieutenant Henin would likely be angry at the breach of procedure and would reprimand the culprit when this was over. Now he merely replied, "Not known at this time, but decks one, nine, and twelve, were severely damaged and four members of the damage control team were lost in the last explosion. I'll let you know when I hear anything about Station three." Kev'cect found it significant that Lieutenant Henin had said, "about" instead of "from" the security station. From the security command center, Lieutenant Henin had access to a wealth of data from external cameras and skin sensors. Although Kev'cect trusted his commanding officer to be truthful in what he said, what was omitted worried him.

After what seemed an eternity, the *Challenger's* undamaged decks were pressurized. After the engineers inspected the decks and seals, Kev'cect and all other crewmembers not repairing the damaged sections of the hull finally removed their space suits. Soon after, the damage report was relayed to the crew. The hull of the *Challenger* was severely damaged in four places; the Electron Battery was destroyed, as was the Rocket Battery and Disrupter Beam Cannon. The worst part of the report was the casualty list. Both of the security personnel were, as feared, dead. A total of eighteen other crewmembers were either killed outright by incoming fire, or blown through the hull of the ship to be left behind as the *Challenger* continued its retreat toward Federation space.

Kev'cect felt a twinge of guilt at leaving those crew to either die in space as the air in their suits ran out, or to be picked up by the Sathar. The worm like creatures were known to be brutal with prisoners of war. It was vital that the *Challenger* not turn back though. The pursuing Sathar warcraft would catch the ship and, this time, there would be no survivors at all. The unexpected bounty of information obtained in this system had to be brought back to the Frontier or the lives already sacrificed would be wasted.

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When the *Challenger* jumped into this system, F.S. 37 on the stellar navigation charts, it appeared to be uninhabited. No radar or other transmissions were picked up during the five day trip inbound to the system's only planet. It appeared no different from the other three systems the *Challenger* had jumped to during this reconnaissance mission. When one of the probes was launched toward the planet, it must have set off some form of proximity alarm. It was intercepted by a small Sathar fighter and destroyed soon after it entered the atmosphere of the world.

Before transmission from the probe was lost, it managed to get close enough to catch a Sathar I.M.P.P. unit on video. I.M.P.P.s, or Independent Mineral Processing Plants, were first encountered in system F.S. 30. A Frontier Expeditionary Force found a network of ten I.M.P.P.s on the surface of an ice covered world dubbed "Snowball". This network had been in operation for ten years or more, and had mined enough materials to produce eight heavy cruisers and assault carriers as well as at least twenty fighters. The planet was liberated from the Sathar, and the I.M.P.P.s were destroyed by the UPF just prior to the Second Sathar War. The production from those plants had almost tipped the balance of power irrevocably toward the Sathar armada.

Now a second I.M.P.P. network had been found. Captain Galvin explained that these plants must also be eliminated or the next battle would be more costly in men and ships. The *Challenger* approached the planet to bombard the plants from orbit, but was attacked by two Sathar Destroyers and a heavy cruiser before it could close to firing range. The enemy ships had been hiding on the far side of the planet. Captain Galvin had managed to outmaneuver the opposing heavy cruiser, but the two destroyers continued to assault the beleaguered ship during its outbound journey.

Now the *Challenger* was free of pursuit and days away from jumping back to Federation space. Soon, however, the Federation must return with enough forces to destroy the installation and defending forces. Kev'cect hoped his ship would be returning with the assault force. No member of the crew would object to helping to obliterate this Sathar outpost, avenging those who wouldn't be returning with the *Challenger* on this trip.

Ssrannqs swivelled his command couch toward the door when he heard his assistant enter.

"The enemy cruiser is still accelerating away from the planet and has disabled the *Insolence* and badly damaged the *Furious*" , the officer reported soberly, "Casualties are estimated at..."

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"I do not care about the casualties." Ssannqs interrupted, "All I need to know is if our scout has intercepted their subspace messages as I ordered."

Consulting the datapad in his fore-tentacle, Xenss replied hesitantly, "Yes... but it will take several months to crack the encryption code."

"That will not be necessary, Xenss. I have already obtained the cipher. Have the communications technicians feed the message into the base computer."

Xenss' four pupils dilated in surprise. "Then you already knew that cruiser would enter this system from the last communication we intercepted. Why didn't you bring in reinforcements before it arrived? We could have eliminated the ship before it could escape or send a message to the Federation. Now that they know of the forces we've assembled here, the offensive must be called off."

Ssannqs eyed his inferior contemptuously. "That kind of thinking is what allowed our forces to be beaten back in the last conflict. I wanted that cruiser to escape. They know only what I allowed them to see. They have no idea that this is our forward outpost or of the supplies we've gathered here. I only let them see our production facilities, not supplies or troop ships. They will inevitably send a strike team to destroy the production facilities I let their probe find. When they do, the assault armada will be assembled here, and we will crush the forces they send. Then we will strike right into the heart of the Federation, and they won't have enough ships or troops to stop us!

"You may go now, Xenss." As the door slid open and Xenss slithered toward the exit, Ssannqs added, "Ensure our forces are ready in four days. It should take at least twenty before the UPF can mount a strike against us. I want our fleet in place and in prepared ambush points well ahead of that time."

Xenss slithered out the door with an obligatory, 'Yes commander.' He barely heard the threat that followed as the door began to hiss shut. "You know, there is only one price for failure."

After he had gone, Ssannqs studied the star chart once more. His forces were one jump from the Zebulon system. In twenty-four days after leaving this system, the fleet could be assaulting the Prenglar system, with its UPF spacefleet base and the largest spacecraft construction and repair station the UPF possessed. The systems the UPF called Truane's star and Dixon's star would be assaulted quickly or bypassed if they proved to be difficult to take in a minimal period of time. This time, the Sathar Armada would destroy these pitiful creatures once and for all.

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Chapter One: Minor Squabbles

Fortress Pale, Truane's star system FY 2/4/156

Commander Gev Braxal stormed into the office and slammed the datapad onto Rear Admiral Bolchak's desk. "What's the meaning of this?", she demanded. He knew immediately what she was referring to. Earlier that day, he had regretfully signed orders reducing the allotment of atomic fuel pellets for her fighter squadron. Atomic fuel pellets were 10 cm. diameter cylinders of enriched uranium used to power atomic drives. Each pellet only lasts for around ten solar days with the drives running at full power. Replacing these fuel pellets costs a minimum of 10,000 credits each, but with a high demand, the cost could be up to twice that. Instead of authorizing five pellets per month, he had reduced the allotment to a mere two. That meant a significant reduction in the number of flight hours she could distribute among her pilots to keep them proficient.

He had held off for as long as possible in issuing these orders, not because he feared a confrontation with Commander Braxal, but because he agreed that it was wrong. His hand had been forced by Elda Wilbanks. As the civilian Governor of Fortress Pale, she had an equal say in the distribution of resources during periods of relative peace. She had argued that the fuel pellets could be much better used by atomic powered freighters. Bolchak had hoped that if he backed down and compromised with her on this issue, she would be more reasonable in future negotiations.

He turned away from the report he was reading to face his angry subordinate. "The meaning of the report is clear enough isn't it, commander?" He deliberately stressed her rank when he replied, hoping she would get in control of her notoriously volatile temper.

Gev Braxal was a Yazirian. This race was the fourth to join the United Planetary Federation, and was the most technologically primitive at that time. They are very intelligent though, and most IQ tests placed them above the average of the four races. In appearance, they look like a combination of a large monkey and a flying squirrel. A thin membrane of skin attached to their forearms, torso, and ankles stretches taught when they raise their arms, forming a crude wing. This allows them to glide for short distances when leaping from heights. Socially, they are the most warlike race in the Federation, and are quick to take offense. Some Yazirians have learned to control their temper, but Gev was definitely not like these Yazirians. When she was having a bad day, everyone on the Station knew it, and steered clear of her. She was old for her rank, and her file had implied that it was these outbreaks of temper which had led to her being passed over for promotion to

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Strategic Fighter Command. It is a sad fact in Spacefleet that you have to be a politician in order to be promoted to the upper ranks. Gev Braxal's military career had reached it's zenith.

She did have her strong points though. Gev had a natural piloting skill the likes of which few in Spacefleet have seen before. She was qualified to fly any ship in the UPF Spacefleet inventory as well as all civilian starships and small craft. When she flew, it was as though she became one with her ship. Although she had been offered command of a Frigate, she turned it down in order to stay with her fighter squadron. She was an exceptional combat leader and her squadron members were almost fanatically loyal to her. She, in turn, treated them like family. Bolchak had no doubt that concern for them is what led her to his office to discuss the fuel situation.

"Admiral Bolchak, you can't possibly be serious about this! In fifteen years of flying fighters, this is the lowest number of flight hours for a seven fighter squadron that I've ever seen. How are we supposed to maintain operational readiness with so few hours?"

Her eyes dared him to disagree with her. He paused to get his anger in check. Although nearly the same age as commander Braxal, Admiral Bolchak hated to be lectured by a subordinate. "I know damn well that the flight hours that amount of fuel allows won't be as much as you're used to commander, but Phoenix squadron has had it much better than any other squadron in Spacefleet. Hell, you've run more flight hours in the past month than any other squadron has for two!"

"Sir, with all due respect, Phoenix squadron is a training squadron. I get all the fresh fighter jocks from Gollwin Academy and it's my job to see that they're trained well enough to stay alive! If you cut those hours, we'll be in a world of hurt when the war resumes."

Bolchak knew there was a large element of truth to what she said, but he had to keep his eye on the big picture. He knew that until the assault carrier *Vengeance* was finished being overhauled, there wasn't much chance that Phoenix squadron would see action.

"Commander Braxal, the fuel allotment will have to do. I have limited resources to deal with a large number of problems, and right now, your squadron is the least help in dealing with them. I've authorized an increase in simulator hours to help make up for the reduction in flight hours."

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"But sir, you know that simulator hours are a poor substitute for actual flight hours, particularly when it comes to learning combat maneuvers."

"Take a look at this, commander." Admiral Bolchak walked around his desk and gestured to the strategic system display. "These are just a few of the difficulties I'm dealing with right now."

"The pirate vessel *Avatar* is believed to be in system, but the last sighting came two solar days ago by the Pale Militia Assault Scout *Raven*. They lost the *Avatar* when it entered the tail of Smorg's comet, which hid the ship from radar. It probably slipped out when the comet passed through the Conundrum asteroid belt. I've got the UPFS frigate *Stormwind* searching for it now, as well as our two assault scouts, but I don't think they'll have much luck. Until we chase off or destroy the *Avatar*, I've got to assign an armed escort to each freighter or mining vessel that enters the system."

"On top of that, Volturnus colony in the Zebulon system reports that it's deep space radar tracked a small ship that jumped in-system just four hours ago. As it failed to identify itself, it's either Sathar or another pirate ship. I'll have to dispatch a ship to back up the Zebulon provisional task force as soon as possible."

"In short commander, I'm up to my neck in problems and dealing with them as best as I can, so I'm in no mood to hear how your squadron is getting the short end of the stick. You're dismissed."

Gev opened her mouth to reply, but seeing the look he shot her, thought better of it. Instead she replied, "yes sir." grabbed her datapad and strode out of his office.

After she'd left he resumed reading the system status report. It showed nothing out of the ordinary for the Pale system, and did little to distract him from worrying about the overdue cruiser *UPFS Challenger*. As spacefleet force commander for the Truane's star and Zebulon systems, he was responsible for the security of three populated worlds and eight warships. The lives most in jeopardy were those eighty-nine crew members of the heavy cruiser he had sent to an unexplored star system.

The Challenger project had been his personal brainchild when he had first been promoted to Rear Admiral. At that time, he had been assigned to a think tank tasked with determining the whereabouts of Sathar worlds and production centers, as well as military bases. The whole purpose of the spacefleet is to provide security for the Federation against spaceborne threats, and the biggest threat yet encountered was undoubtedly the Sathar.

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When they'd first appeared in their warships, they overwhelmed what few planetary defenses and armed ships that had defended the new colonies. They then destroyed those colonies and proceeded toward the core worlds of the Frontier. A human named Vincent Morgain had called for a cooperative alliance between all four races to use their combined might to beat back this new threat. The four races reluctantly agreed, and the defense of the Frontier had been successful.

Saved from annihilation by this alliance, the four races entered negotiations to make the alliance permanent. After two years of negotiation, the United Planetary Federation was formed. It provided for raising a united spacefleet, a system of fortified space stations, and an interstellar law enforcement agency. The formalized relations between the four races, Humans, Vrusk, Dralasites, and Yazirians, led to an economic boon and a greater sense of security. However, it was not without problems. Getting four diverse sets of attitudes and cultural values to agree on anything greater than the basics was quite difficult.

One-hundred fifty-six years after the formation of the Federation, the fights over distribution of resources, funding, and levels of autonomy of the various worlds continued unabated. One thing they had all agreed on was that the war should be brought to the Sathar. The problem was, no one in the UPF knows where the Sathar homeworlds are. An idea of where the Sathar would strike from would be most helpful in prosecuting the war. To that end, exploration ships were sent out to systems surrounding the Frontier worlds. Few of those ships returned.

That was when Rear Admiral Bolchak had recommended that one of the old decommissioned heavy cruisers be modernized with the latest in advanced astrogations equipment, engines, and exploration equipment. In the event that it encountered a Sathar outpost, it would have far more firepower than the other ships that had been sent out. The wisdom of this had proven itself on two previous missions, but after Admiral Bolchak had sent it to system F.S. 37, the *Challenger* had failed to return as scheduled. Although the ship was only two days overdue, Admiral Bolchak feared the worst for the *Challenger's* eighty-nine crew members.

Regretfully, there was little he could do about that now. Even if his forces weren't stretched dangerously thin, none of his remaining ships had the *Challenger's* advanced astrogations equipment. Without that, any rescue ship would likely misjump and be lost in an unintended destination. He sighed in frustration and reluctantly returned to the report.

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"Hey, wait up!"

Gev slowed her pace when she recognized the voice as belonging to her executive officer, Fleet Lieutenant Samantha Rand. Though human, Samantha was about the same height as Gev, with curly red hair that she kept trimmed to shoulder length. She had a friendly enthusiasm that was evident in whatever she was doing. It was said that she could charm a Vrusk into giving up company secrets, which Gev thought unlikely given the average Vrusk's devotion to his employer.

Her charms were particularly devastating when employed against human males, who apparently found her irresistibly attractive. Ever since she was promoted to Phoenix squadron executive officer almost a year ago, she had more than proven her worth in the administration and logistic tasks that kept the atomic powered fighters operational and combat ready. Her ease in dealing with people and skilled negotiation of the complex bureaucracy that was a part of all military forces tended to make up for Gev's impatience and unfortunate penchant for stepping on toes along the way. They had developed a close friendship in spite of their cultural differences, and hardly a day went by when Gev didn't thank the powers that be that she had been assigned to her squadron.

As she caught up with Gev, the playful gleam in her eye told Gev she already knew the answer to the question she asked. "How'd things go with ol' Bolchak?"

"Take a good guess", Gev replied dejectedly.

"Whoa, that bad huh? So I guess we need to revise the training roster again".

"Well, we would if I were to take this lying down, but you know me better than that. Are you up for a trip to Belcore City?"

Samantha smiled mischievously, "So, you plan to pick up fuel pellets on the black market again eh? Count me in. I think I still have some connections on the seamier side of the spaceport."

"I was counting on that." Gev's voice shifted to a more business-like tone as she continued, "Any word on our newest squadron member?"

"He should be coming in on the Starliner *Golden Dawn* in about an hour. I've checked into his academy records, and his scores aren't bad. He's a Dralasite from the Dramune system, and a fair pilot. I was going to assign him to the number five ship, and shift Che'kek to number three. The techs still haven't isolated the cause of that intermittent radar glitch, and I think Che'kek would handle it much better than

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any newbie." Newbie was the somewhat derogatory name for a recent graduate of Gollwin Academy. As the premiere military academy in the Federation, ninety percent of the UPF spacefleet officers are trained there. The school has a deservedly excellent reputation, but conventional wisdom held that experience is still the best teacher.

"I agree, I'll tell Che'kek he's got the jinxed ship. He'll love that." Gev glanced at her chronometer, "We have time for lunch before the *Golden Dawn* arrives. Do you feel like checking out that new Vrusk restaurant in the civilian ring?"

Samantha's nose wrinkled up in distaste, but she said, "Might as well, I wanted to lose a little weight anyway, and eating at a Vrusk restaurant might just do the trick!"

An hour later they were waiting at the docking collar where the starliner *Golden Dawn* had arrived. As the passengers continued to file off the ship through the airlock in front of them, Gev noticed her friend looking a little ill. "Your color is not right Samantha. Is something wrong?"

"You should know you sadist. 'Oh, go ahead and order the K'banks'la,' you said, but you forgot to mention that Vrusk serve it while it's still moving!"

"It doesn't keep well after you kill it. You mean you'd never had it before?"

Samantha glared daggers in her direction. The conversation came to an abrupt halt when Gev noticed a green Dralasite step through the airlock. Gev had seen many Dralasites, but never a green one. While Humans and Yazirians came in a variety of skin tones, all Dralasites were dull gray in color. Then she noticed that he was in a Spacefleet uniform.

The Dralasite was still out of earshot and Gev muttered, "Please don't tell me that's our replacement pilot."

Samantha was about to reply, when the blob shaped alien ambled over to them. The shape-changing alien currently had three legs, making his gait somewhat peculiar, but he stopped about two meters in front of them and gave them a proper salute with his third arm.

"Junior Lieutenant Gorlma reporting for duty, Commander."

Gev recovered quickly, returned his salute, and replied, "Welcome to Phoenix Squadron Lieutenant. I'm Commander Gev Braxal, and this is my executive

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officer, Lieutenant Rand. We'll introduce you to the rest of the squadron a little later."

Samantha jumped in when Gev paused and said, "Forgive me for asking, but why are you green?"

The Dralasite looked over at her and said, "Didn't my file show I was from Inner Reach?"

Samantha still looked puzzled and had undoubtedly not heard of the customs among Dralasites on that world. Gev explained, "On Inner Reach, Dralasites dye their skin each day to convey their general mood. If I remember correctly, green was... envy?"

"Very good commander, I take it you've visited my world before?"

"No, but I travelled through the system once, while I was a Lieutenant assigned to Strike Force Nova. That was ten years ago though. Tell me, why are you envious today?"

Gorlma hesitated as though weighing how much his new commanding officer would be offended by the truth. He apparently decided on honesty, and replied, "I got a subspace message from my old roommate at Gollwin Academy, and he said he'd been assigned to the battleship *Admiral Clinton*. Here I am assigned to fly a fighter."

Seeing the flash of anger on Gev's face, Samantha headed off her commander's reply, saying, "Don't be too harsh in judging the value of fighters, this squadron has fought a lot more Sathar than the *Admiral Clinton* has even seen. You'd better go get settled into your quarters. It's in section A-3 in the military ring. Report to the squadron briefing room at 15:00 in that same section. Dismissed Lieutenant."

The anger was still evident in Gev's eyes, so Samantha grabbed Gev by the elbow and pulled her down the corridor in the opposite direction. After they'd travelled twenty meters or so, Gev said testily, "The nerve of that little blob! He hasn't been in the Squadron five minutes and he's already looking to transfer out!"

"Now, Gev, you know his head is just filled with that garbage they teach at the academy about the ineffectiveness of fighters compared to assault scouts and capital ships. Give the little newbie a break."

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Having been in fighters from the beginning of her military career, Gev had an attachment to them that bordered on obsession. Ineffective? Hell, she'd seen Sathar heavy cruisers ripped apart by fighters in minutes. Just because the battles they took part in weren't as famous as other fleet engagements didn't diminish their worth. Besides, she took any slighting of her squadron very personally.

A few minutes passed. "Assign Gorlma to clean the hanger all next week." Her initial reaction had diminished somewhat, but hell, being commander still has its advantages. Someday, she vowed silently, she would prove the worth of her fighter squadron.

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Chapter Two: On the Edge

Planet Volturnus, Zebulon system F.Y. 2/5/156

It had been a long boring shift. Mark Perkins had lost track of the number of cups of coffee he'd drank in the last few hours. The radar display continued to track the inbound supply freighter, *Gorn's Dream*, but other than that it had been very quiet. The ship seemed barely to have moved during his whole shift. And to think, he had thought life on Volturnus would be exciting!

"Work in Space Control on the Fringes of the Frontier, where the land is still wild and unexplored", said the advertisement in the Triad Times newspaper. It hadn't mentioned that he would be cooped up in a darkened radar control room with two other radar controllers and a watch officer ten hours a day. He was startled out of his reverie by the chimes that indicated a new contact on the display.

It took him a moment before he recognized which one was the new blip on the screen. He sent a query signal to the ship's IFF, or Identify Friend or Foe, transponder. If the ship was a Federation vessel, the transponder would send back an encrypted data stream identifying the craft as civilian or military, and it's name and class. This information would then be displayed on the radar screen. Mark waited nervously for the signal to cross the sizable distance and the reply to arrive.

A minute later, the ship's name and affiliation popped up in the tag instead of the ominous 'Unknown'. It was the UPF heavy cruiser *Challenger*. Mark sighed in relief and motioned over the watch commander, Lieutenant Oorl. He walked up to Mark and peered at his display. "The *Challenger* made it" Oorl announced to the others in the control room, "Get Governor Bradley on the line. Then send a subspace message to Rear Admiral Bolchak on Fortress Pale. He'll be glad to hear this bit of news."

Lieutenant Oorl proceeded to another Subspace communications radio and keyed it to UPF tactical hailing frequency. "*UPFS Challenger*, this is Volturnus Deep Space control, respond please."

The *Challenger* had emerged from the Void at the fringes of the system, so the message would take a few moments to get there. In fact, there must have already been a message on it's way from the Challenger, because the radio crackled to life with, "Volturnus Control this is the UPFS Challenger, we are in system and calculating the next Void transit jump to the Truane's star system per our earlier message. Over."

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Oorl paused in confusion before transmitting, "*Challenger*, we received no 'earlier message'. The last message we received was during your outbound acceleration to jump coordinates over." If the Challenger sent a subspace message from system F.S.37, it had to have been intercepted, Oorl realized. Interception of subspace messages was possible only if the message was sent tight beam. A tight beam message was sent in only one narrow direction instead of radiating out centrally from the antenna. If the Sathar had managed to position a ship with specially made communications interception and jamming equipment directly in the path between the Challenger and the Zebulon system, it was conceivable that they had blocked the message.

Luckily, the message would have been sent out encrypted, which made it nearly impossible for the Sathar to read. Without the correct cipher, it would take years to decode the message, and by then, the data would be useless. Mark Perkins interrupted his thoughts saying, "Sir, Governor Bradley said he was on his way over here."

He looked at the starmap thoughtfully for a second, then asked, "Sir, What do you think they found out there?"

"I wish I knew, but I have a feeling it wasn't good."

Two miles away, Governor Thomas Bradley opened the door to his ground car to let his assistant governor in. He saw it as the chivalrous thing to do. She saw it as inefficient and senseless. The two beings were a study in contrasts. Thomas Bradley was an affable human. He called everyone in the colony "friend" and was genuinely fond of each and every one of them. Jenk'sik, the Vrusk Assistant Governor, seemed unreadable and unapproachable by comparison. Jenk'sik knew all of the colonists by name, but she thought of them only in terms of occupation and productivity.

Jenk'sik squeezed into the groundcar and settled uncomfortably into one of the seats. Bradley entered next, sat in the seat across from his Vrusk companion and smiled at her. He then gave quick instructions to their driver and closed the soundproof privacy curtain. The groundcar pulled away from the curb, then turned down one of the narrow streets toward the deep space radar control center.

"You look worried," Jenk'sik stated.

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"Only you could tell that. Is it just me you read with that uncanny ability of yours, or do you do that to everybody?" he asked, his tone light.

She ignored his question. "What are you worried about?"

He paused, choosing his words carefully, "Look at those people, just over four-hundred colonists on Volturnus, all dwelling in this one small compound. We're responsible for their safety and security, and I'm starting to feel what an awesome responsibility that is. When I applied for this position I thought running a colony at the edge of the Frontier would be fairly routine. Now I'm not so sure I can live up to my end of the bargain."

"What makes you so concerned about your abilities now?"

"Lieutenant Oorl believes that the *Challenger* must have met up with a Sathar force in system F.S. 37. He'll know by the time we get to the control center. The *Challenger* is sending us the system report, but the fact that the first report didn't make it here indicates that the Sathar blocked the signal. If the *Challenger* did meet up with the Sathar, that's only five days from Volturnus. That's too close for comfort, and not something I anticipated."

"I of course, share your concerns, but even if a new offensive is launched, they will undoubtedly just cut off planets by blockading them from orbit. They haven't landed on a UPF world in force for many years now."

Her words should have given him comfort, but as he looked out the window at the community they had both helped to build, he felt a very real sense of unease. It deepened when their groundcar pulled up in front of the Deep Space radar station and Thomas saw Lieutenant Oorl running out to meet them. In the four years they'd been on Volturnus, neither Thomas or Jenk'sik had ever seen the Dralasite officer run.

As Jenk'sik opened the door she heard Lieutenant Oorl shout, "This just came in from the *Challenger*". Oorl brandished a printout of the last communications report from the ship, and was so eager to give it to them that he was blocking the groundcar door. Jenk'sik, eager to get out of the cramped interior of the groundcar, shouldered her way through and Thomas followed quickly before Oorl could get back in the way. Thomas took the report and read it, with Jenk'sik peering over his shoulder. The report was brief and to the point. It began, "*UPFS Challenger* military survey. System F.S. 37. Sathar warfleet presence confirmed. Retreated from combat with heavy losses. Sathar manufacturing capabilities in

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system. Elimination of facilities requires additional forces. Captain Galvin, Commander *UPFS Challenger*. "

Oorl was already asking questions before they'd even finished reading the report. "Do you think they'll approve a strike? Would they use Volturnus as a staging area? Should we put our forces on alert?"

Thomas Bradley nearly laughed at that last one. Our *forces* on Volturnus consist of twenty-two Landfleet members and an armed Explorer all-terrain van, he thought miserably. Mostly they were there to keep Megasauruses out of the scientist's compound and escort survey teams to the wilder parts of the planet. While Thomas respected their dedication to duty, he regarded their chances of repelling an invasion as infinitesimally small.

Thomas wasn't surprised when Jenk'sik beat him to a reply, "It's far too early to tell." As usual, Thomas thought, she answered as efficiently as possible. All three questions at once too! No wonder the Vrusk were the first to develop interstellar travel.

He was initially a bit uneasy around Jenk'sik. She was the first Vrusk he'd had a chance to get to know personally. The insect-like race always struck him as impersonal and lacking in individuality. When he'd heard that the new assistant governor would be Vrusk he wasn't overly thrilled. After working with her, though, he'd found her courteous and efficient, and even likable. The last several months seemed to have melted the ice somewhat.

Now, with Sathar just a five-day trip from Volturnus, he could think of no one he'd rather have by his side. Whatever happened, saving the lives of these colonists was their first priority. If the UPF fleet and the Sathar armada wanted to go head to head, that was their business. The civilians, like the colonists, would simply leave for now, and come back when the shooting was over.

"Jenk'sik, please begin work on an evacuation plan for all colonists, begin with the families with children, then the rest. Lieutenant Oorl, get on the subspace radio and see if there are any starliners in the area that can transport us all out. Keep this quiet for now, there's no need to start people worrying." Besides, he thought, I'll do enough worrying for all of us.

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Chapter Three: Taking the Bait

Fortress Gollwin, Prenglar System F.Y. 2/12/156

The rest of the UPF Admiralty had already arrived by the time Admiral Hooruets entered the meeting room. Everywhere he looked in the room were Admirals, Rear Admirals, Commodores, and, finally, the Fleet Admiral herself. To the untrained eye, the room appeared to be in a state of chaos, with officers rushing in every direction and briefly congregating before rushing off again. Admiral Hooruets saw it as it really was. Each Admiral was receiving last minute updates on ship status, supplies, and system reports prior to the beginning of the meeting. There was nothing more embarrassing than to learn about a recent event that had occurred in your command from another Admiral.

Admiral Hooruets found the seat at the table reserved for him and settled in. He was accompanied by only one aide, and that was sufficient for him, but he noticed he was the only one without a sizable entourage. The meeting had been called for by Fleet Admiral Bralloff six days ago, when the *Challenger's* Subspace report from the Volturnus system had reached Fortress Gollwin. The results of this meeting would determine what was done about the report.

To Admiral Hooruets, it seemed just a little too lucky for the *Challenger* to have stumbled upon a Sathar controlled system just when the UPF was prepared to go on the offensive. The fleet had been completely rebuilt after the losses sustained in the Second Sathar War, and was trained and ready for action. The problem was, in Admiral Hooruets opinion, there was only one kind of luck, and that was the bad kind. It was all he had experienced in his life, why should it be different for Spacefleet?

He fervently hoped he wasn't alone in his misgivings about the proposed strike. He scanned the other Admirals in the room, seeking some sign of their moods. He hadn't gotten far when he heard Fleet Admiral Bralloff call the meeting to order.

"Admirals," she began, "thank you for coming on such short notice. You all know why I've called you here. The *Challenger* has finally managed to find a sizable Sathar target. It was too well defended for one heavy cruiser to eliminate, so Admiral Hendriks has proposed that Strike Force Nova take it out." \

Admiral Hooruets wasn't surprised to hear that Hendriks was the one who had first proposed an attack against the world. Admiral Hendriks, seated directly across from Hooruets, could only be described as an aggressive leader. Hendriks, a short balding human, had been promoted to Admiral after his effective but somewhat

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reckless tactics at the Battle of Clarion. In that minor skirmish with a small pirate fleet, he'd led his small warfleet to victory. Outnumbered by his foe, he had attacked with such vigor that the enemy scattered their fleet when Hendriks' force charged into their midst. This allowed Hendriks to tear his enemy apart piecemeal.

Some, Admiral Hooruets included, had argued that against a more experienced foe, Hendriks would have been annihilated by a force that wouldn't have run. It was hard to argue with success though, and the Council of Worlds had voted him in as commander of Strike Force Nova. He had served well since his promotion, but had been faced with few real foes.

"That would leave Task Force Cassadine and Task Force Prenglar to guard the Core worlds" Admiral Bralloff continued. "With half of our force still available for defense, we will still be able to react to any Sathar counterattacks. Comments?" Because most of those attending were nearly equal in rank, meetings like these were rather informal by military standards. Though she could order any strategy she chose, Fleet Admiral Bralloff tended to trust the opinions of her fleet commanders and valued their insights.

Admiral Gellane was the first to reply. "That sounds reasonable. Are there any plans to shift around our forces to cover the areas normally patrolled by Strike Force Nova?" Admiral Gellane was seated to Hooruets' right. In contrast to his race's reputation, the Yazirian admiral seemed to be the most sedate of the admirals in attendance. He was in command of Task Force Cassidine. As Cassidine was farther away from system F.S.37, he had probably already deduced that his fleet wouldn't be used in any offensive against the system before the meeting had even started. That's when an earlier comment's implication became clear to Admiral Hooruets. *If half of the fleet was going on the offensive against system F.S.37, and the two Task forces which were each about a quarter of the fleet were staying behind, that meant.....*

Before Admiral Bralloff could reply to the previous questions, Hooruets interjected, "You said 'half' our forces on the defensive, does that mean my unattached ships are to be pulled from their current duties to join Strike Force Nova?"

She hesitated only slightly before answering, "That's correct Admiral Hooruets. Most of your unattached warships are joining in the offensive. Tell your Captains to rendezvous with Strike Force Nova in the Truane's star system by the 12th of the next solar month. All but a few of your unattached ships should be able to join by then. Do you have word on how long the *Challenger's* repairs will take yet? We could sure use her in the strike."

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Still in disbelief, Hooruets only half heard her last question. "I must protest committing so many of our forces against this system. The Sathar undoubtedly know we're coming. If they manage to assemble a large enough fleet, we could be walking into a trap." Admiral Hooruets looked around the room for support, but saw only detached interest.

Admiral Goornev, seated further down the table, jumped into the conversation. "That's precisely why we're going to hit them with a larger strike force than they undoubtedly expect us to field. If we don't have the advantage of complete surprise, at least we can have the advantage of numerical superiority."

Admiral Goornev was a Dralasite who had been placed in charge of the UPF Landfleet transportation ships. Although the Landfleet itself was only nominally under the command of Fleet Admiral Bralloff, the assault transports and shuttlecraft used to get the troops of Landfleet from world to world were assigned to Spacefleet. *So, thought Hooruets, if you're for this plan too, then Landfleet must plan on joining the action. It also appears that I am the only one that didn't know the details about this strike plan before the meeting.*

Fleet Admiral Bralloff added, "Admiral Goornev is correct. The forces we're sending to that system are enough to overwhelm any forces the Sathar could hope to have there by the time of the strike."

"There are two other factors you may not have considered though." Hooruets looked around the room, fixing each admiral in attendance with his stern gaze. "Considering for a moment that this isn't a trap and this plan goes off without a hitch, there are still problems you've overlooked. One is that the Sathar could launch a major offensive from another direction while half our forces are in F.S. 37. With so much of our fleet out of position, we could be quite vulnerable. The second is that the pirates could be emboldened by our lack of fleet presence and go on a rampage against shipping. It could take years to hunt them down with so few forces as the Planetary Militias can muster."

Fleet Admiral Bralloff dismissed the validity of his concerns with a casual wave of her hand. "We've considered these possibilities but the odds of any of them occurring are slim. We have a very real chance here to destroy what could be a major Sathar production facility here, and I don't believe we should waste it due to being overcautious. Are there any other comments?"

The way she said the last question made it clear that no answer was expected. No one commented, as Admiral Hooruets could see her mind was set on her plan and everyone else seemed to be in agreement with it.

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"Meeting adjourned then. I want to see the latest fleet status reports from each of you by seventeen hundred hours. No word of the mobilization leaks to the press. Is that understood?" There were a few mumbles of assent as the admirals and their aides filed out of the meeting room. Admiral Hooruets had stayed in his seat until the room cleared of all but he and Bralloff.

"You're obviously not staying here to socialize", Bralloff said dryly.

"I would like an explanation of why I was left out of the initial planning stages when it involves ships in my command."

She paused for a moment, pondering, and then said, "Fair enough. You're the oldest admiral in Spacefleet and I respect all you've done for the Service in that time, but you're living in the past."

Admiral Hooruets could scarcely believe what he'd heard. "What do you mean by that?" he asked with just a hint of anger creeping into his voice.

"What I mean is that you're three months from retirement and you still see things as they were in your youth. Spacefleet is no longer running scared from a hint of Sathar presence. We've beaten them back twice already and have rebuilt faster than them each time. The balance of power in the universe has shifted in our favor, and the rest of us intend to take advantage of that. We needn't cower in our home systems from the worms any longer, yet you still think of yourself as some kind of knight bravely defending the Frontier against an overwhelming enemy. The rest of us have turned our attention to eliminating potential threats where we find them, not waiting for them to come to us."

"In truth Admiral Hooruets, your day passed a long time ago," she continued. "The Council of Worlds has noticed your reluctance to take risks. Why do you think you were passed over for promotion the last two times the Fleet Admiral position was vacant? Spacefleet needs aggressive leadership now, not complacency."

Admiral Hooruets stood in shock. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard someone speak to him like that. Yet part of him wondered if her words were true. Was he too old? Was it his memories of the previous wars that made him believe the Sathar were more of a threat than they actually were? Was it caution or fear of risk that kept him from supporting this plan? *No*, he thought fiercely, *even in my youth I wouldn't have backed a plan this foolhardy when the risks didn't outweigh the rewards.*

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"Admiral Bralloff, I sincerely hope you're right. When I get back perhaps we can laugh my concerns, but I still believe this plan is ill conceived. Nevertheless, I'll transfer command to the *Courageous* when it arrives in system and do my utmost to see that it succeeds."

"No Admiral, you've been reassigned starting today to procurement command. Command of your ships will lie with Admiral Hendriks during this mission, and by the time he gets back, your successor will be chosen. I'm truly sorry."

Hooruets laughed bitterly. "So my illustrious career ends not with a bang, but with a whimper. You'll have to find someone else for the Procurement desk job. Effective today, I'm tending my resignation. This old 'knight' is retiring. I wish you luck, because you'll need it." Before he was even out the door, Hooruets noticed Bralloff had returned to her fleet reports. He strolled into the hallway, a forgotten relic of a bygone era.

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Chapter Four: Left Behind

Fortress Pale, Truane's star system FY 3/14/156

There were few things Gev Braxal loved more than flying. When she was only five years old, she spent most of her time climbing trees so that she could glide to the ground. Even when riding updrafts, her glider membranes could only keep her airborne for a few seconds, too short a time. Gev had become a civilian pilot when she was only twelve years old just so she could remain in the air longer. Love of flight wasn't all that unusual for her race, nevertheless, her enthusiasm for soaring free was unrivaled by any being she'd ever met. Being a pilot wasn't a job for her, it was a need.

One glance at her fuel gauge informed her that this flight must soon end, or tomorrow's training flight would have to be cut short. The atomic fuel pellets that she and her executive officer, Samantha Rand, had managed to buy on the black market would only last so long. It had taken a sizable portion of her year's income to purchase those pellets, but if the extra flight time saved the life of just one person in her command, she considered it a small sacrifice.

She keyed her radio to Fortress Pale Flight Operations and regretfully transmitted, "Fortress Pale, this is Phoenix Lead, requesting approach vector to the fighter bay, over". It took some time for them to reply. Strike Force Nova had arrived at Fortress Pale three days ago, followed by a steady stream of single warships from the various provisional task forces throughout the Frontier. The arrival of these nineteen warships took a lot of coordination, as they were constantly taking turns at Fortress Pale's few docking rings. Finally, a reply from Flight Ops arrived.

"Phoenix Lead, vector 412 mark 18 and proceed to fighter bay. Alter course as needed to avoid the *UPFS Courageous*."

"Roger, Flight Ops: vector 412 mark 18. I have the other traffic on screen."

The reply was as automatic as breathing for Gev. At any space station, there were crew assigned to direct incoming and outgoing traffic who cleared dockings and tried to keep ships separated by at least two kilometers for safety's sake. This job was made considerably easier by the vastness of space, but collisions were known to happen in close proximity to space stations, where there was almost always a steady stream of shuttles, freighters, and other vessels constantly coming and going. Space stations were always a hub of activity due to the fact that most large starships couldn't land on planets, so they off loaded their cargo at space stations to be ferried to the surface by smaller atmospheric shuttlecraft. Space stations came in

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a variety of sizes and filled many diverse functions. Some were simply space based warehouses and commerce centers, while others were agricultural centers, shipyards, manufacturing facilities, research stations, or, like Fortress Pale, armed defensive installations. All were shaped like a wheel, and spun around the central hub. This spinning formed an artificial gravity that varied with the rate of spin..

The hub was ringed with docking ports for large spacecraft, while most smaller ships, like Gev's fighter squadron, landed in special airlock bays in the ring sections. This required intricate maneuvering to match spaceship speed and vector with the rotating ring

Because fighters lacked the firepower of capital ships, they relied on coordinated attacks to destroy enemy vessels through team tactics. One fighter was only mildly effective, but a small squadron could destroy any ship if each fighter worked together. Because of this, squadron leaders used radios on two different frequencies in battle, one on the Flight Ops channel, and one on their own. When coordinating attacks and receiving orders from Flight Ops in combat, Gev used the first. When coordinating with her own squadron, she used the second radio. She keyed the second radio now.

"Phoenix flight, this is Lead, we are cleared for landing, lets head home for now. Make sure you don't hit the light cruiser *Courageous* on your way in, flight ops says she's on our approach vector. See you in the briefing room in one hour. Lead out." Gev was satisfied to see the other three fighters immediately swing around to the new heading, and seconds later they'd left visual range. Her squadron was getting better by the day. Before, there may have been useless chatter over the squadron frequency, but now they followed orders quickly and efficiently, and never questioned them. Their flying skills had improved markedly as well, as the practice assault rocket run today had shown. They were now acting like a well-oiled machine.

Gev turned her fighter toward the station and, at last, the space station came in sight. The bay doors were already open and Gev fired a burst of her forward maneuvering thrusters to orient her ship in line with the rotating bay. She carefully matched her fighter's speed to that of the station's ring and pulled back gently on the control stick. When she'd matched her ship's gradual loop to the diameter of the space station and aligned her fighter twenty meters outside the bay and parallel too it, she fired one lateral burst of her maneuvering thrusters. This burst kicked the ship sideways and the ship slipped into the bay a mere two meters above the floor. Another burst from the thrusters on the opposite side killed her sideways movement until she seemed to hover over one point in the bay. She then eased the

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control stick slightly forward, increasing the diameter of the loop ever so slightly which settled her fighter on the deck with a slight bump.

She watched from her cockpit as fighters two and three of her flight maneuvered into the bay in the same fashion and settled to the bay floor as well. As Gev powered down her ship's atomic drive and completed post flight checks, the bay door slid closed with a clang that reverberated through the deck and into her fighter. As soon as she'd finished with her post flight checks, she became aware of a hissing sound outside her cockpit that indicated the bay had filled with atmosphere enough to transmit the sounds of the environmental control pumps which were pressurizing the bay.

At last, the air pressure equalized within safe, breathable levels, so Gev popped the seals on her helmet and removed her Fighter Inssuit. Inssuits were standard garb for fighter pilots. They were essentially armored spacesuits with radiation protection and survival packs attached. They weighed over sixty kilograms though, almost as much as Gev, so they tended to make walking somewhat laborious. Gev opened the cockpit canopy and stepped out of the cramped cockpit. Fighters weren't much for comfort, and removing anything more than gloves in the cockpit's confines was next to impossible.

Stepping down off her fighter's delta wing and onto the deck, she stretched briefly and stripped out of the heavy Inssuit. It felt good to be breathing air that didn't come directly from a can. The air in this station was still recycled, but the Hydroponics bay's live plants made the air a little better and the atmospheric scrubbers were more efficient in space stations.

Gev strolled out of the bay through one of the side airlocks as her chief tech was coming in. "Any problems, Commander?", the small human asked, his voice betraying the obvious pride he felt for his work. Since Maintenance Chief Brian Collins had taken over as lead fighter tech, Gev had yet to find any problems with her fighter. Collins delighted in tinkering and performed more frequent maintenance than the technical manuals required. His work paid off, and was infectious to the other maintenance crews. Because of this friendly rivalry, Gev's squadron had less unanticipated mechanical downtime than any in Spacefleet.

"You know better than to ask about problems on your ship, Chief Collins", Gev replied easily. "Great work on that starboard front thruster, she works great now."

The Chief beamed at the compliment and, after a hasty salute, continued through the airlock into the bay, calling out to his crew, "Let's get moving people, time's a wasting!" Gev smiled and shook her head as she turned down the corridor toward

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Rear Admiral Bolchak's office. She wanted one last update on the *UPFS Vengeance* before the squadron briefing began.

There was a nasty rumor circulating that the *Vengeance* wouldn't make the rendezvous with the rest of Strike Force Nova. If it didn't, Gev's squadron would have to remain behind while their fleet continued on to F.S. 37 to take on the Sathar. Gev definitely wanted in on that action. Forty minutes later, she strode into the squadron's small briefing room. To her satisfaction, her pilots were all assembled and talking about the latest scuttlebutt. The noise of their conversations died before Gev reached the briefing podium.

Aside from herself, there were seven pilots currently assigned to Phoenix Squadron, one for each fighter plus one extra in case of injury or illness among her primary pilots. It was as diverse a bunch as Spacefleet had ever placed in one small unit. All four races were represented among the eight pilots, and they hailed from all across the Frontier. They now waited expectantly for Gev to begin the briefing.

She knew what was foremost in all their thoughts. For thirteen months, they'd been stationed, or perhaps stranded would be a better word, at Fortress Pale when their assault carrier dropped them off here on it's way to the Prenglar Spaceyards for a complete overhaul and redesign. Since that time, they'd become a training squadron while awaiting their carrier to be operational again. Fighters based at a space station were useless for anything but defense due to their limited operational range, and since attacks against space fortresses like Pale only happened during major offensives, the likelihood of a fighter squadron based at one seeing action was slim indeed. Now Gev had to tell her squadron the unpleasant news she'd learned from Rear Admiral Bolchak.

Before dropping that bomb though, she'd handle the mundane part of the briefing. "Okay people, lets cover this morning's training flight before we move on to other things." Gev could read the disappointment from many of the pilots as they guessed the truth. Nevertheless, she continued on without pause, "Overall, it went well, Lieutenant Rand scored three simulated assault rocket hits, and our new pilot Junior Lieutenant Gorkma scored two. That's not bad considering your experience, but you did make some errors that highlight potential dangers for us all. In your attack run against the destroyer *Allison May*, you closed to only 25,000 Kilometers before launching. We should all avoid closing range to less than forty-thousand Kilometers if at all possible. The enemy vessel's return fire becomes much more effective as you get closer, but you gain no additional accuracy with the assault rockets. I need not remind you that the best way to continue the fight is...."

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"Not to get hit!", the pilots all said in unison, some rolling their eyes at the oft-repeated favorite phrase of their commander. Gev used that line in almost every briefing so her pilots had come to expect the line to crop up sooner or later.

"That's right, don't get hit!" Gev laughed, "I've trained you all well, haven't I? You've all seen the battle holograms of today's flight, does anyone have any more questions or comments?"

Lieutenant Doug Watson was the first to speak, "Commander Braxal, any news yet on when the *Vengeance* will arrive?"

Gev sighed heavily, "I meant about the training flight, Doug, but there's no point in putting this off any longer. The *Vengeance* is on its way, but the quickest estimate of its arrival will put it here the day after tomorrow. Strike Force Nova leaves in six hours for F.S. 37. With the stopover to load our fighters, the *Vengeance* will get to F.S. 37 two full days after the rest of the fleet. Sorry, but we're going to miss that fight." Everyone but Samantha looked surprised by the news. Samantha Rand, as executive officer, had been told about the *Vengeance* before the meeting.

One of the Dralasite pilots, Lieutenant Noorn, was the first to break the silence that followed Gev's announcement. "So, Strike Force Nova won't even wait two days for us to join up?", he asked from near the back of the room.

"No Lieutenant, they have enough assault scout class vessels assigned to their strike force now to handle our squadron's role in a battle, so Admiral Hendriks wants to press the attack before the *Vengeance* can get here. He doesn't think he needs more forces to take the system. I know this probably won't make you feel much better, but the heavy cruiser *Challenger* is still being repaired in the Pale Shipyards and will miss this fight too."

Fleet Lieutenant Rand's eyebrows shot up at that comment. "You mean Admiral Hendriks isn't even waiting for one of his largest capital ships?" she asked incredulously.

"That's what I heard from Admiral Bolchak. Now lets get back to work. I've scheduled another flight tomorrow consisting of Lieutenants Lanar, Watson, and Sanders. Until then, continue to pack, because whether we miss this fight or not, I want to get us back on the *Vengeance* as soon as possible. See you at 0630 tomorrow. Dismissed."

Everyone but Lieutenant Rand filed out of the briefing room, most grumbling good naturedly at the early hour of tomorrow's briefing, and some chattering about what

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would be the best location to watch the fleet leave for F.S. 37, later that evening. After they'd left, Samantha asked brightly, "Hey Gev, what are you doing for dinner tonight?"

"Are you ready to give Vrusk cuisine another try?" Gev joked.

"That's not very funny", Samantha replied, her expression making it clear that she'd dredged up bad memories.

"Sorry Samantha, you're right, but I had you going for a minute didn't I?"

"If you say so. This'll probably be our last night of peace and quiet for some time. Transferring our squadron to the *Vengeance* will take some doing."

"You have no idea. At least we won't be getting so many new recruits from the Academy now that we'll be back on combat status. Did you see Gorkma's colored skin dye today?"

"Oh, yeah, what the hell color was that, lavender? I hope he runs out of dye soon. Where did the Dralasites of Inner Reach ever come up with that awful custom?"

"You've got to keep in mind that Dralasites are color blind. What looks very garish to us is hardly noticeable to them. It's all just different shades of gray. Still rumor has it was all your race's fault."

"Really, how so?" Samantha had let suspicion creep into her voice, as Gev had a tendency to tell stories of dubious origin at times. Gev had once nearly convinced her that the oceans on Pale had a parasite that could suck all the blood from a human in two hours. Samantha didn't go swimming in the water again until after a trip to the computer library where she learned that no such parasites existed in this system.

Gev continued with her story anyway. "When human ambassadors talked to the dralasites there, they used such terms as 'green with envy' and 'purple with rage' and the dralasites thought that was a unique concept, and even noticed the changes your skin can go through, so they adopted that custom." Samantha tried to gauge whether Gev was pulling her leg again, but Gev showed precious few clues. She finally gave up and decided another trip to the library was in order.

"Do you plan to watch the fleet leave tonight Gev?"

"I wouldn't miss it, but I wish we were leaving with it. I don't like being left out when we could be doing some good for the Federation. As you know, I owe the

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Sathar a little payback and the interest on that debt has been building for too long now."

Samantha looked thoughtful for a minute before saying, "Gev, I'm not sure I'm sorry to be staying here longer. Although it sounds like a cliché, I've got a bad feeling about this fight. Everyone has been treating this like some sort of cake walk, but we don't really know what's in that system. It's been over a month since the *Challenger* was in that system, and we don't know what the Sathar have been up to in the meantime."

"Let's let Admiral Hendriks worry about that, shall we? I'm hungry, let's get some food."

For the next few hours, they didn't talk about the impending fight at all, but at nineteen hundred hours, they were standing by one of Fortress Pale's many viewports watching the battle fleet accelerate away from the station and into the unknown. It would take two and a half days for the fleet to reach velocity for the jump through the Void, and two and a half days after that, they would arrive at the Zebulon system. Then they would calculate another Void jump to the Sathar-held planet in F.S. 37. The *Vengeance* would be following their route in two days, but in the meantime there was plenty of work to be done. When the fleet was completely out of sight, they reluctantly turned away from the viewport and resumed their duties. The fleet was out of sight, but never out of mind.

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Chapter Five: The Trap is Sprung

UPFS Admiral Clinton, Inbound, system F.S 37 - FY 3/19/156

Broonal was seated at the communications console on the bridge of the flagship of Strike Force Nova. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Six weeks ago he was graduating with his Gollwin Academy class alongside his roommate Gorlma. When the orders came in, Gorlma had been disappointed to find he'd been assigned to a fighter group, the Phoenix Squadron. Broonal had no assignment when he watched his friend and fellow Dralasite ship out for Fortress Pale, but days later, his orders had come through. Fresh out of the academy, he was assigned as Senior Communications Officer on the *Admiral Clinton* itself!

He'd barely unpacked his duffel bag when Admiral Hendriks boarded the battleship *Admiral Clinton* and transferred his command there. Since that time, Broonal had been working sixteen hours a day relaying messages to various ships and stations and helping coordinate the organization of the strike against system F.S. 37. This was the first major engagement with the Sathar in years, and Broonal was fortunate enough to be in the middle of it all. Now, the tension flowed through his body as they neared visual range on the Sathar held world in this system.

All crew were suited up in their spacesuits, and final depressurization was underway. Commodore K'tick'k, Captain of the *Admiral Clinton*, and Admiral Hendriks, who was in command of the overall strike force, were on the bridge. Now, all eyes were on the Sensor Officer, as the results of the last sensor sweep came in.

"Still no Sathar vessels detected, but they may be on the far side of the planet, or behind any one of the seven moons. Radio emissions from the planet indicate they have a deep space tracking facility which is aware of our fleet," the sensor officer reported calmly.

"Have the assault scout *Sparrowhawk* do a flyby of the planet at a distance of 80,000 kilometers," Admiral Hendriks ordered. "Along the way, we should be able to get some idea of forces behind the moons as well."

Broonal wasted no time relaying that order and heard a prompt acknowledgment from the *Sparrowhawk*, as the small ship's twin atomic engines accelerated it toward the planet. "Keep a visual on that ship during it's flyby, and maintain full sensor sweeps." The bridge lapsed into silence once again, as all eyes turned toward one of the bridge display screens. Variable power astrogation telescopes magnified the *Sparrowhawk* continually so that it didn't appear to be moving away

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from the *Admiral Clinton*. Three minutes went by, then four, and nothing changed. Then a radio message came in.

"We have detected one Sathar Heavy Cruiser, *Echo*-class, behind the sixth moon. He's using it to hide from the fleet, we'll have a view behind the next moon in approxima---" A bright flash from the monitor lit up the bridge momentarily.

When Broonal's vision returned, he assumed that the telescope must have shifted out of alignment with the *Sparrowhawk*, because it wasn't on the screen anymore. Then he noticed the wreckage. Small hull sections drifted away from each other at a leisurely rate, spinning end over end into space. The calm of the bridge was shattered as orders were barked out, and G-forces from the sharp turn to port slammed the crew into their seats. Broonal gradually became aware of the Admiral's orders.

"Inform all other vessels, there are mine patterns spread around sector 14. There are probably more, but that's the only sector we can identify now. Have the *Z'gata* and the *Rebecca Sanchez* swing around on heading two-four-five to do a distant flyby. Tell them not to close range on the planet yet, just do a long range sensor sweep."

As Broonal relayed the orders to the frigate and destroyer, he heard the sensor officer report, "The heavy cruiser is swinging around the moon and moving to cut off our ships' flyby. No other contacts yet."

Captain K'tick'k swung his seat toward the helm officer, "Plot an intercept course, best acceleration, ready all weapons and fire when ready." Admiral Hendriks stared at a tactical plot and began to personally relay orders to the rest of the fleet. Broonal was too busy relaying incoming messages to hear what was said, but glanced once at the tactical plot screen. All available ships were rushing the enemy heavy cruiser and would destroy it as soon as they drew within weapons range.

That's when another bright flash lit up the bridge, this time accompanied by a sharp lurch to port. *We've just struck a mine field*, thought Broonal. Damage reports started pouring into his station. He read them, disregarded the minor damage reports, and yelled to Captain K'tick'k, "Sir, the forward maneuvering thrusters are out, and deck three reports heavy damage."

"Helm, steer us away from the planet, Comm, get Damage Control Teams two and three working on that thruster now."

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Just as Broonal began to relay orders to the damage control center, he heard the Sensor Officer report, "Captain! Two Seeker missiles are active, six thousand kilometers aft and to the port side!"

Seeker missiles, Broonal thought, *as if the minefield wasn't bad enough!* Seeker missiles were dropped off in a region of space like a spread of mines. When activated by the launching vessel, it closed on the largest ship nearby. When it's sensors indicated the range to its target was less than two kilometers, the powerful nuclear warhead would detonate. Even in the vacuum of space, such an explosion nearby can destroy a small starship in a single blast. Now, two of these were active nearby, and accelerating toward the nearest Federation vessel.

"What are their targets?" the Captain asked, more to himself than to the Sensor Officer.

"Working on plot now, Captain" the Sensor Officer replied automatically. His fingers flew across the keyboard at his console until the two seekers appeared on the Captain's tactical plot. The Captain studied the plot for a few seconds. When it became clear that the Seekers were indeed homing on the *Admiral Clinton*, he turned to his Defensive Systems Officer.

"Defensive Systems, launch six ICMs in defense, three per incoming Seeker."

"Aye, sir, plotting interception range and course", the young Dralasite replied nervously. There was no way a ship as ponderous as the *Admiral Clinton* could outrun or outmaneuver a Seeker missile, so the Interceptor Missiles, or ICMs, were the only hope for the ship to avoid damage. The odds of the interceptor missiles actually detonating close enough to disable or destroy the incoming Seekers were slim individually, but by firing more than one at each incoming Seeker, they were more likely to score a hit or make the Seekers dodge so far that they couldn't reacquire their target. Broonal just hoped they would be sufficient for the task. Broonal twisted around in his seat to try to see if the ICMs were still on course, but an incoming message distracted him before he could make out anything.

The message was extremely broken and barely intelligible. Had he not put his hands around his helmet speakers to hear better, he would not have been able to make out anything at all. Fortunately, his species "felt" sound vibrations across their entire body, so when he surrounded the speakers with his fingers, the transmission came through clearer. "---is the *Rebecca Sanchez*, we have ident--- repeat six light cruis--- under heavy fire and requesting supp--- accelerating away from---"

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"Captain!", Broonal yelled, "The *Rebecca Sanchez* just reported, she's being jammed, but I heard them say something about identifying six light cruisers."

Admiral Hendriks unbuckled his seat harness and walked over to Broonal's station. He grabbed his suit's connector jack and plugged it into Broonal's Comm station. "*Rebecca Sanchez*, this is Admiral Hendriks, we couldn't copy your last transmission. Say again, over." Silence filled the channel. "*Z'gata*, Admiral Hendriks, do you have the *Rebecca Sanchez* on radar over."

"This is the *Z'gata*, negative, but we're just coming around the third moon now. We'll let you know when we have her on radar."

A bright flash on the main viewscreen in the direction of the Seeker missiles signaled that an ICM had found its target. The bridge crew waited impatiently for another flash, as both Seekers were of nearly the same range from the *Admiral Clinton*, and if one ICM had hit the first seeker, the second couldn't be far behind. The next radar sweep showed the ICMs to have overshot their target. The second Seeker had gotten through.

The Captain shouted, "Is there time enough to launch another spread of ICMs?"

The Defensive Systems Officer was busy with the calculations, but shook his head 'no'. Captain K'tick'k keyed the shipwide intercom, and announced, "All hands, brace for impact. Damage Control Teams one and four, standby." The crew waited nervously as the seconds counted down. Admiral Hendriks hurried back to the command platform to strap into his seat.

Maybe it missed us, Broonal thought hopefully, as by his reckoning, the Seeker should have detonated several seconds ago. He felt the impact, rather than heard it, as he was tossed so violently against the restraining straps of his seat, he nearly passed out. When he recovered his senses, he felt as though the ship was spinning end-over-end. Once again, damage reports flooded his station. Conspicuous by its absence was the report from Engineering.

"Captain, Engineering hasn't reported in."

The Helm Officer turned toward the Captain, "Sir, engines are offline. The only engines working are the aft maneuvering thrusters."

Captain K'tick'k shouted into his intercom unit, "Damage Control Teams one and four, get down to Engineering and report back immediately. Helm, get us out of here, best possible speed."

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Admiral Hendriks looked up from the Tactical display. "Retreat? You must be joking! We've only taken minor damage, and the weapons are all still ready. If we retreat now, there will be a large gap in our line." Captain K'tick'k glared at him, and must have switched to a private intercom channel, because Broonal couldn't hear what the Captain was saying to Admiral Hendriks. Their obviously heated discussion continued for a while, punctuated by sharp gestures. Finally, the Captain turned back toward Broonal and patched back into the general bridge intercom.

"Comm, get an update on the Damage Control teams heading for Engineering. Helm, maintain this course, continue to close with that heavy cruiser."

"Sir!", the sensor officer called out urgently, "New radar contacts emerging from behind the planet, as well as the moons. I count thirty three unidentified contacts sir, various sizes."

"I need more information on what we're facing. Comm, coordinate the incoming sensor reports from the other ships, one of them must have a better idea of the size of the new Sathar vessels. Helm, what's the range to the planet?"

"90K kilometers, that *Echo*-class heavy cruiser is in weapon's range now at 110K kilometers."

"Gunnery stations," the Captain ordered, "fire when ready at the *Echo*-class heavy cruiser."

The seconds ticked by as the fleets continued to close. Captain K'tick'k and Admiral Hendriks watched as the tactical display was continually updated by new sensor information. The data showed a real fight shaping up. Sixteen Sathar warships had been identified, none smaller than a destroyer. There were seven light cruisers and four heavy cruisers.

Three of the heavy cruisers identified were the new *Lima*-class vessels. These warships were among the most modern and deadly of the Sathar warships yet encountered. They were beyond firing range, but that would change soon as they continued to accelerate toward the UPF fleet. The old *Echo*-class cruiser was still over twenty thousand kilometers closer to the UPF fleet and was the only logical target.

Broonal felt a thrumming sensation in the deckplates beneath his feet that signaled the firing of the *Admiral Clinton's* powerful Proton battery. The main screen showed the *Echo*-class heavy cruiser as the beam sliced into the hull just aft of it's

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bulbous command center. Portions of the hull spun away into space, but the damage seemed fairly minor. The range to the enemy cruiser clicked down to less than 70K kilometers as more and more weapons from the UPF fleet found their mark. The enemy cruiser's return fire scored two laser hits against their ship, but other than minor damage to the hull, it had no effect.

One last salvo from the *Admiral Clinton*, and the Sathar cruiser would be nothing but a drifting hulk. Then Broonal noticed the bow of the heavy cruiser slowly align itself with his ship. The bore of the massive disruptor beam cannon fixed in the nose of the cruiser pointed directly at the *Admiral Clinton*.

Captain K'tick'k barked out, "Activate the Stasis Screen now!" Before the Defensive Systems Officer could respond, wave after wave of energy pummeled the ship, as the beam of alternating protons and electrons crossed the distance in a microsecond. Sparks flew from Broonal's console, and the bridge lights flashed brightly before burning out as millions of volts flooded the electrical system of the ship. The computer's circuit breakers insulated that critically vulnerable component of the ship, the massive computer that controlled everything from weapons to reactors, but it would be a few seconds before the monitors and consoles came back on line.

Broonal waited for the bridge emergency lights and viewscreens to cycle back on. The intercom had gone into unpowered mode, which severely limited range, but it was still possible to communicate. While waiting for his console to finish its reinitialization, he surveyed the rest of the bridge and was shocked to see the wiring glowing white hot near the tactical display. It had melted the wall near the display, and, to Broonal's horror, the Vrusk lying on the floor near it.

Then Broonal noticed the rank emblem on what was left of the Vrusk's chest. *Captain K'tick'k is dead!*

Admiral Hendriks stood over him, and called into the intercom, "Get a medic to the bridge NOW!" Turning toward Broonal, he said, "Get me a damage report as soon as you can, also check on the progress of the damage control teams, we may need to shift teams two and three to repair the new damage."

Almost a minute after the disruptor cannon hit, the viewscreens remained dark. Admiral Hendriks paced restlessly around the bridge, as though willing the consoles to come back to life. "Get a team up here now! These systems should have been back on-line thirty seconds ago. I need to know what's happening out there." Hendriks gestured vaguely toward the planet.

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As if by his command, the viewscreens and consoles crackled back to life. What it showed made Broonal wish they hadn't. The UPF fleet was being encircled by the Sathar armada which continued to swarm out from behind the planet and moons. Broonal had difficulty counting how many Sathar ships there were, distracted by his efforts to contact the damage control teams, but it looked like the Sathar fleet had doubled in size.

"Bridge, this is damage control team three", and urgent voice yelled over Broonal's intercom system, "We've got a massive electrical fire on decks four, five, and six. We need more help to get this thing under control."

Broonal relayed the information to Admiral Hendriks, who denied the request for more manpower. Getting the engines back on line was his top priority, without them the ship was a floating target. The battle was not going as planned. On his videocom radio, he saw message after message of requests for assistance, damage reports, new Sathar ships identified, and mine patterns that had been stumbled upon by UPF ships, always with disastrous results.

The *Admiral Clinton* was rocked by several more hits. Four Sathar warships had drawn into firing range, and battered the flagship mercilessly with salvo after salvo of energy weapons and lasers. To make matters worse, the electrical fire just four decks below the bridge continued to melt its way through systems and wiring. As system after system failed, Admiral Hendriks gave his final orders.

"Lieutenant Broonal, send a subspace message to Fortress Gollwin. Tell them our status and tell them we've failed. I'll try to get as many ships out of here as I can."

Hendriks turned to one of the last working viewscreens and opened a videocom radio channel to Commodore Plandral on the *Destiny*-class light cruiser *Vanguard*. After a few seconds the Yazirian appeared on the monitor. "Commodore, I'm transferring fleet command to you. The *Admiral Clinton* is too severely damaged. Gather as much of the fleet out as you can. Regroup in the Zebulon system. We'll try to cover the withdrawal as long as we can. Good luck, Commodore Plandral."

His tone was so calm, it hardly registered with Broonal that he'd heard an admission that everyone on the ship was going to die soon. *The Sathar do not take prisoners unless it suits them, and surrendering the Admiral Clinton would never happen anyway. We'll fight until the bitter end, and if our lives can buy the escape of one ship, I'll die a little bit happier. Not a bad way to go, besides, I've always dreamed of dying a hero.*

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Broonal stayed at his post until a nearby explosion killed the Disruptor cannon gunner. Without a second thought, Broonal unstrapped himself from his now useless console. He unbuckled the corpse, and after dragging it out of the seat, he buckled himself into the new station. Quickly learning the new controls, he targeted the nearest enemy vessel in his weapon's firing arc and pressed the trigger. By the time the weapon had recharged its energy coils, the electrical fire had burned its way to the bridge. Broonal and the rest of the crew of the *Admiral Clinton* died at their posts, fighting a hopeless battle not for the Frontier, but to try to buy time for their comrades on other ships. For the valiant crew of the flagship of the ill-fated expedition, the war was over.

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Chapter six: Losses

UPFS Vengeance, Inbound, System F.S. 37 FY 3/19/156

Commander Gev Braxal stood on the bridge on the assault carrier *Vengeance* along with Samantha Rand, her Executive Officer, and Captain Morgan, the *Vengeance's* new captain. The carrier had rushed here straight from spacedock, stopping only long enough to load Gev's fighter squadron from Fortress Pale. Captain Morgan assumed command two days before it left Rand Interstellar Spacedock .

They had arrived in system F.S. 37 just ten hours ago, and the bridge monitors were filled with images of destruction. Telemetry from the few remaining UPF warships painted a grim picture indeed. Of the nineteen UPF warships sent to F.S. 37, ten remained, with perhaps half that number still effective in combat.

The Captain and crew of the *Vengeance* had just witnessed the destruction of the battleship *Admiral Clinton*. Its attempt to cover an orderly withdrawal had been unsuccessful. When the other UPF ships attempted to join up in a formation around the *Vanguard*, the Sathar warships closed range and sent volley after volley of firepower into the UPF command ship. After the *Vanguard's* fission engines exploded in a white-hot fireball, the fight went out of the remaining UPF ships, and any semblance of order vanished. Now, the individual ships' captains were concentrating on escaping any way they could.

The Sathar had planned this ambush well. Even as the larger Sathar cruisers pummeled the UPF fleet from short range, the smaller Sathar vessels darted out from behind the planet, and completely encircled the remaining warships, carefully remaining out of weapon range.

The crew of the *Vengeance* could only watch in horror as their fellow spacers died. The *Vengeance*, having left Fortress Pale forty hours later than the rest of the fleet, was still about one half of a Standard Astronomical Unit away. The video and telemetry feeds that they were watching were actually two minutes old, as it took that long for the radio waves to reach the *Vengeance*.

Gev heard Samantha mutter, "We have to do something!"

Gev looked over at her friend. Samantha's expression betrayed the stress she was under as she watched the battle, helpless to do anything to assist. Gev knew quite well how she felt. As fighter pilots, they were accustomed to being able to influence the course of a battle. Now, they were as helpless as civilians.

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"Samantha, even if we closed range as fast as possible, we wouldn't arrive until long after this battle is over."

"Logically, I know that, but that doesn't help the frustration I feel now."

Gev shifted her attention back to the monitors. As much as she wished she could comfort her friend, not watching the desperate battle seemed like a betrayal to those Spacefleet crew who were, even now, fighting and dying for the Federation.

The UPF ships were enclosed in an ever tightening sphere of enemy warships, which continued to pound the fleet mercilessly. A Sathar heavy cruiser's fusillade of laser fire left the destroyer a burning wreck, but the other UPF ships fled through the gap unscathed. A frigate and two assault scouts had broken out of the Sathar trap and were accelerating away from the Sathar armada.

Just as it appeared that the three UPF ships would get away, six Sathar fighters accelerated in pursuit of the fleeing vessels. The speedy fighters quickly overtook the frigate *Glanrek* and launched a volley of assault rockets. Five of the six rockets launched struck the frigate amidships and the telemetry feeds from the frigate went ominously dead. The Communications Officer on the bridge of the *Vengeance* switched to the camera feeds from one of the assault scouts, which showed the frigate spinning in space completely out of control. A few flares of light signaled the launch of several escape pods before the frigate's fission drives failed completely. The unarmed pods were quickly dispatched with laser bursts from the Sathar fighters as they continued accelerating after the assault scouts.

Gev felt her anger growing out of control as she watched that senseless act of destruction. The Sathar weren't known for being merciful, taking prisoners only when it suited them, but destroying escape pods that would be trapped in their system made no sense. *Unless your goal is to annihilate all other races in the galaxy*, Gev thought bitterly.

The Sathar had always made their goal perfectly clear to any races they encountered, but seeing their actions with her own eyes still shocked Gev even after all of her years of service.

Gev and Samantha studied a nearby tactical display as it was updated by the navigational telemetry from the assault scout *Raven*.

The *Raven* and it's sister ship were still beyond the pursuing Sathar fighters' assault rocket range, but it was difficult to judge the relative velocities of predators and prey in the vastness of the solar system.

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"Do you think they'll outrun the fighters and escape?" Samantha asked Gev, her voice betraying how worried she was.

Gev waited while the *Vengeance's* computer calculated the acceleration differences and initial velocity before replying. If Gev's first guess turned out to be right, the fighters would close to weapons range with the two assault scouts in twenty minutes. The assault scouts were far from defenseless against the fighters, each armed with a laser battery as well as four assault rockets like those carried on fighters. The laser battery could strike at the enemy fighters at up to ninety-thousand kilometers, while the fighters would have to close to within forty thousand kilometers to get a target lock with their rockets. However, there were six fighters, and only two assault scouts, so the odds of the escape were still slim.

The bridge crew's attention was riveted to the camera view of the Sathar fighters as they steadily drew within weapon's range of the laser batteries. The assault scouts fired in unison at the pursuing fighters, one ship's amber colored beam going wide of its target, the second striking the nose of a fighter just aft of its disk shaped canard. The laser sliced the fuselage in two like a surgeon's scalpel and bored into its powerful engine. The small craft exploded in a bright flash of light as its containment field broke down.

A brief cheer rose from the *Vengeance* bridge crew as the Sathar fighter was destroyed, but Gev knew the battle was far from over. The other five fighters continued to close and would probably be able to lock on to the trailing assault scout before its power coils could recharge.

After the destruction of their comrade, the Sathar fighters performed small evasive maneuvers as they closed range, darting side to side to throw off the assault scouts' aim. Minutes clicked by until the Sathar fighters had at last closed to forty thousand kilometers from the assault scout *Dragonfly*. Five bright flashes marked the launch of each assault rocket.

Two of the rockets struck the *Dragonfly* at the rear of the fuselage, penetrating ten meters before detonating. A bright flame shot out into space from the stern of what was left of the ship, indicating that the vessels oxygen tanks had ruptured in the blast. The crew, if not already dead, would have little hope of escaping in the ship's lifeboat. *Even if they did*, Gev thought, *the Sathar would kill them by destroying the lifeboat long before it reached the planet.*

The *Raven's* laser battery had finally recharged, and would have time for perhaps two more shots before the fighters caught up. The amber beam shot through space and found its mark, slicing the portside wing from the lead fighter. With the

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sudden reduction of mass, the fighter's engine thrust pushed the ship into a flat spin in the direction of the remaining wing. Gev could see maneuvering thrusters firing in the nose and tail of the fighter as the pilot fought to regain control, and knew that he would eventually succeed, but at least that would keep him occupied for awhile.

The *Vengeance's* Communications Officer motioned the Captain over to his console. Gev followed Captain Morgan across the bridge to see what was so important. The Communications Officer, a human who looked far too young to be in Spacefleet said, "Sir, Captain K'teck'ck of the *Raven* is on Videocomm frequency Two."

Captain Morgan turned to the screen and addressed Captain K'teck'ck.

"Captain K'teck'ck, what can I do for you?"

The Vrusk captain looked at Gev and Captain Morgan before joking, "Sending a squadron of fighters would be nice" Her expression became more somber before she continued, "but given your distance, I know that's not possible. I wanted to tell you that the *Raven*, well, we're not going to make it out of this system, but I need to make sure you get our sensor logs to Fleet Admiral Bralloff. We've recorded a lot of data about the Sathar fleet, and it could prove useful. Listen, we've got about two minutes before we're in the fighters' weapon range. We're not going to keep running from them. The crew took a vote, and when we die, we want to die fighting these worms for all we're worth, so we're going to turn and face them with our full firepower. If we're lucky, we can take some of them with us."

Captain K'teck'ck touched a few buttons on her console. "I'm sending the logs now, as well as some personal messages from the crew to their families. Please ensure that they make it to the right places. Our fight is nearly over, but I have a feeling yours has just begun."

Just before the channel went dead, Captain Morgan replied, with some difficulty because of the lump in his throat, "Give 'em hell, Captain."

The fight between the *Raven* and the four Sathar fighters was short, but the *Raven* did manage to destroy one enemy fighter with a well-placed assault rocket. The remaining fighters turned for home after demolishing the *Raven*, but Gev knew it wouldn't be the last time she saw them. It was, after all, a small galaxy.

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After a final radar sweep for UPF warships detected only wreckage, Captain Morgan turned to the Helmsman.

"Helm, put us on a parabolic course back toward the Zebulon system, and accelerate back up to Void entry velocity for the jump. Coordinate with Astrogations for the fastest jump. There's nothing more we can do here."

Gev looked one last time at the radar display. The Sathar warships were returning to the planet, leaving behind nothing but hull fragments of the UPF fleet. Nineteen UPF ships had been annihilated in this system, fully half of the total UPF Spacefleet. The losses included a battleship, four light cruisers, three destroyers, six frigates, and five assault scouts. Even more appalling, over twelve hundred Spacefleet crew had lost their lives. The Sathar armada had only lost six ships, including fighters. Never in the history of Spacefleet had a battle turned so horribly against the Federation.

The bridge was eerily silent as Gev and Samantha walked out. Before they'd gone more than twenty meters, Samantha turned to Gev.

"A fleet of that size wasn't assembled just to guard a minor manufacturing world, that's a strike force Gev!"

"You're right, and its next stop is the Zebulon system. Task Force Prenglar is fifteen days away from the Zebulon system. The only UPF warships that are close enough to engage the armada are us and the *Challenger*. With those odds, it'll be a very short fight. If we don't fight though, the colonists in the Zebulon system will die, then the Truane's Star system is next. It can't get much worse than this."

What Gev didn't know was that the worst was yet to come.

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Chapter Seven: Much Worse

Fortress Gollwin, Prenglar System, F.Y. 3/20/156

"I said I'm trying to reach Chief Council Member V'rick'krck, and don't you DARE put me on hold, I've been holding for most of the morning!"

Exasperated was the word that best described Commodore Kranur's mood. The Dralasite aide to Fleet Admiral Bralloff had been on duty now for thirty-two hours straight, ever since Strike Force Nova was on close approach to the planet in F.S. 37.

The subspace messages coming in were delayed by fourteen hours because of the distance they had to travel. Word had come in two hours ago of the disaster at F.S. 37. The *Vengeance*, which had made the final report of the battle, was proceeding toward the Zebulon system. The rest of the attack force was gone.

It was still hard for Kranur to imagine that the largest UPF fleet assembled since the siege of Outpost One had been eliminated so easily by the Sathar. With fleet strength cut in half, the UPF admiralty was scrambling to come up with a plan to protect the Frontier from the anticipated Sathar counterattack.

Kranur had been assigned to contact Chief Council member V'rick'krck of the UPF Council of Worlds. It had been a very frustrating task as one secretary after another had placed him on hold leaving him staring at the Videocom screen. Finally, he'd reached V'rick'krck's personal secretary at his main office on Gran Quivera only to be told that he was "indisposed" right now but the secretary would be happy to help him. That comment put him over the edge.

"Look here Secretary T'tresk'xt, I'm calling on behalf of Fleet Admiral Bralloff on critical Spacefleet business, and if you don't have Chief Council Member V'rick'krck on this videocom screen in two minutes, I'll see to it that the only job you'll be able to get is as a communications officer on a garbage hauler!"

Kranur was proud of that remark, having seen a similar one in a comedy holovid just last week, but the Vrusk secretary looked bored by Kranur's impromptu threat. Nevertheless, the secretary got up from his seat and walked out of the room.

At least he didn't put me on hold, Kranur noted with satisfaction.

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Before the two minute time limit was up, the secretary reentered the room accompanied by another Vrusk which everyone in the UPF would recognize as Chief Council Member V'rick'krck.

The leader of the UPF carried himself with an air of authority and calm that reassured everyone who saw him that V'rick'krck was in charge at all times and nothing could surprise him.

Kranur wondered if that would hold true once V'rick'krck heard *this* news.

"Sir, thank you for coming so quickly. I'm Commodore Kranur and I was asked to contact you by Fleet Admiral Bralloff. If you could wait a moment sir, she'll be right with you."

V'rick'krck looked mildly annoyed by being put on hold. That made Kranur feel very good for the first time that morning. Nevertheless, Kranur hurried over to Fleet Admiral Bralloff and informed her that V'rick'krck was finally on the videocom.

Admiral Bralloff joined Kranur at the videocom and addressed V'rick'krck.

"Chief V'rick'krck, please turn your encryption equipment to setting Gamma twelve."

V'rick'krck nodded once and the videocom screen grew hazy as both units switched their encryption setting to a more secure method which allowed them to talk with complete certainty that their communications couldn't be monitored by any other beings.

When the lights verified that full encryption was activated, Bralloff began, "V'rick'krck, we have had a serious defeat in system F.S. 37."

V'rick'krck's eyes narrowed and he peered intensely at Bralloff.

"How 'serious' is the defeat Admiral?"

"We lost all ships sent to F.S. 37 except the *Vengeance*, which was too far out for the Sathar to engage. There were no known survivors on the other ships. I've sent out orders that all remaining UPF ships be placed on the highest alert status. We expect a Sathar counterattack from F.S. 37 any day now. Our intelligence report relayed by the *Vengeance* shows that the Sathar fleet at that system is now of about equal strength to the rest of our combined warfleet."

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V'rick'krck remained silent for almost a minute staring off to the right of the screen. He finally replied, "I suppose you want this kept secret from the news media and you'd like me to quietly alert the other council members. Having them put their planets' militia fleets on full alert might help also."

"Yes sir, that's exactly what we I had in mind. Thank you, Chief V'rick'krck."

V'rick'krck fixed Bralloff with an icy stare that seemed to reach out through the videocom screen. "I'll want a full report from you personally about what went wrong. You assured me that the reservations I had about this plan of yours were unfounded. I'll be on the next shuttle to Fortress Gollwin. Until then, Admiral, you had best work on a plan to stop the Sathar."

"Yes sir. I'll see you soon. Bralloff out."

With that, Admiral Bralloff killed the videocom channel and let out a long sigh. Kranur watched her walk back to the system strategic display in a particularly foul mood. He knew from past experience that Bralloff's days as Fleet Admiral were numbered, and wasn't particularly saddened by that. Admiral Bralloff was not known for being an easy person to work for.

With his last duty task completed, Kranur logged off his videocom unit and got up. He was really starting to look forward to a good sleep. He looked toward where Bralloff stood and briefly contemplated asking if there were any other tasks she absolutely needed done right now, but fatigue got the better of him, so he slipped out, knowing he wouldn't be missed.

Kranur was but one of the Admiral's aides, and he felt it was time the rest of them pulled their fair share of the load. Besides, the events of the morning had left him so surly, he was likely to punch the next admiral who looked at him funny. An insubordination charge on his record would put a crimp in his career plans by ending any shot he had at every making Rear Admiral.

Without another thought he strode toward the exit of the Strategic Command Center. He noted that he wasn't the only admiral's aide who looked to be at the end of his rope. Spacefleet disasters had a way of disrupting regular work schedules and this one had been particularly bad.

He finally reached the exit and noticed another Dralasite standing in the doorway and scanning the room as if he were searching for something. Looking carefully at the pattern of veins over his skin and catching his scent, Kranur noticed that the Dralasite was both new to the Command Center and quite nervous.

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Kranur's curiosity got the better of him in spite of his tired state. He approached the stranger and commented, "Excuse me friend, you look lost. Don't be so nervous, it's just a bunch of admirals who can have you on KP duty for the rest of your military career if you make a mistake."

The other Dralasite didn't take the joke the right way, and if anything, became more nervous than ever. He fumbled for a reply but finally just gestured weakly toward the portable data storage unit in his other pseudopod.

"Ah, yet another report coming in, huh? I'll help you figure out who it goes to", Kranur said, reaching out for the unit in his hand.

The other Dralasite seemed to find his voice at last, "Oh, there's Admiral Gellane. Excuse me." With that, he turned away and strode into the bustling command center.

Kranur had detected a faint odor when his hand was near to the Data Storage unit. For some reason, it reminded him of earlier training. In his sleep deprived state, his mind fixated on that scent as he turned down the corridor toward the elevator.

It had been a while since he'd smelled that particular odor. It had a sharp, chemical smell that wasn't at all like circuit boards or electrolytic capacitors. It brought to mind the firing range where he learned to fire automatic pistols and gyrojet rifles, but that wasn't quite it either.

Kranur finally reached the elevator to the hub of the station. The doors whooshed open and Kranur entered, absentmindedly punching the button for the floor three levels above him where his quarters were located. He felt the elevator start its ascent and then it hit him.

Not the firing range, the demolition range! It's a Tornadium D-19 explosive charge! I have to warn them!

Kranur stabbed the emergency intercom button in the elevator just as a massive blast jolted the elevator upward. The sound was deafening and was quickly followed by depressurization alarms.

The elevator shaft and each section of the hull were equipped with airtight bulkheads that sealed off the section with atmospheric loss, but Kranur had no idea how extensive the damage would be. If his section was damaged, the air would leak out, and he would die.

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How many have already died where the bomb went off? I should have been more alert and remembered it earlier! I should have questioned that Dralasite more.

Those thoughts didn't help matters, but he couldn't help but feel guilty. The elevator seemed to be stuck in place between floors and showed no signs of moving any time soon. Kranur pressed the open door button and crossed his finger pseudopods. Fortunately, the door lurched open, showing the next floor to be only three feet above the level of the elevator.

With some effort, he pulled himself up to that floor and found a wall intercom unit that still worked just ten meters down the corridor. Because the command center was gone, Kranur tried other locations on the intercom until he reached one that was still manned and functional. It was only the space traffic control center, but it would have to do. The officer answering sounded a bit shook up, so Kranur took charge.

"This is Commodore Kranur, aide to Admiral Bralloff. There's been a major explosion in Strategic command that has probably killed most of the command officers. I'm assuming command of the station until replaced by a higher ranking officer. Your post has the best communications gear, so it's now the command center. I'm on my way there, start organizing rescue teams and a comprehensive list of damage. Rescue teams should have spacesuits and anchors. The spacedock in the hub should have extra suits. Also, contact Star Law and fill them in. We need a forensic investigative team here ASAP."

The officer sounded more in control now that he had tasks to keep him busy.

"I'll get right on it, Commodore!"

Kranur hit the disconnect switch and hurried on his way. Space traffic control was in the hub section, and with the elevator out, it would be a long climb. At least the artificial gravity created by the spinning station would get weaker as he ascended the ladder.

All thoughts of getting sleep soon were gone now. He briefly wondered if he was close to breaking the Dralasite record for sleep deprivation and tried to remember how long ago he'd risen from his bunk.

Memory wasn't his strong point today, besides, it didn't matter much anymore.

After he'd climbed for three or four minutes, he reached a porthole built into the spoke of the station. Kranur looked out and down toward the ring section. The top

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of the ring looked relatively undamaged where he was when the blast occurred, but it was backlit from fires still burning several levels below where the Strategic Command center used to be. Kranur scanned the ring to both sides of the blast area and discovered that a large section, almost one quarter of the ring, was missing on the opposite side of the hub. The hub itself looked intact, so he continued to climb.

It took him ten minutes to finally reach the space traffic control center. The ranking officer on duty introduced himself as Fleet Lieutenant Wilkins. Wilkins was short for a human, barely taller than Kranur was in his current form. Wilkins had done a good job setting up the temporary command center. The largest monitor, formerly a space traffic display screen, now showed a diagram of the station with different colors representing levels of known damage. Green indicated undamaged sections, which was confined to the hub, three of the spokes, and the innermost parts of the ring on the A and B sections. Yellow showed some damage and possible hull depressurization, which covered most of section C and a small portion of one of the spokes.

Red color highlighted the sections which were known to have severe structural damage or missing entirely. Sections D, E and large portions of F section were solid red. The remaining sections' outermost edge of the ring was also red, with yellow along the inner borders.

Wilkins narrated what he'd discovered, "You were right about the blast occurring in Strategic Command, but that wasn't the only explosion, as you can see. Simultaneous explosions all around the ring's lower decks have destroyed large portions of the station."

Wilkins pointed to the damaged spoke above the completely destroyed section, "The largest charge was planted right about here, and when it went off, sections D, E, and F broke away from the station. I don't have any hard casualty figures yet, but the sections that broke away were quarters for military personnel and the fighter bays so it's likely to be high."

"The station's military assets were apparently the main target", Wilkins continued, pointing to different parts of the outer ring. "You can see that every Laser Battery, Rocket Battery, and ICM launcher was destroyed in the attack. Masking screens still work, because they're located with us in the hub, but other than that, we have no offensive or defensive capabilities."

Kranur glanced at the other monitors, which were displaying live camera views of the damaged areas from work pod or rescue team cameras. Twisted fire charred metal and melted plastic filled the screen along with the more grisly scenes of dead

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beings who had died of sudden decompression. The enormity of the disaster was just starting to hit him.

"Lieutenant, is there any word from Morgain's World or Gran Quivera about when assistance will arrive?"

Wilkins shook his head and elaborated after a questioning look from Kranur.

"We've had some difficulty reaching any of the other bases. Our radios check out with self-diagnostics, but there has been no response to our message thus far."

It would be twenty-three hours before help finally arrived at Fortress Gollwin because, unbeknownst to them, the rest of the UPF bases had problems of their own to deal with.

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Chapter Eight: 'Gone Fishing'

Bluervael Game Preserve, Gran Quivera, Prenglar system. F.Y. 3/21/156

There were few things Hooruets loved more than Plum Moth hunting. The Bluervael wild game preserve was beautiful this time of year. The Grandalas trees were in full bloom and everywhere Hooruets looked, small tufts of furry looking petals waved gently in the breeze. Humans and Yazirians tended to prefer more colorful flowers, but to the colorblind Dralasites, texture and shadows were the most important attributes. Grandalas trees created the most interesting play of shadows and light because of the many stamen growing out of their unusual flowers.

This is the life, Hooruets thought, as he waited for his prey at the top of a narrow ravine. He glanced again at his right hand. He had changed its shape into a large net, his fingers now joined at the tips so that his whole hand formed a bowl shaped catching glove just as he was taught by his parent. It was still in perfect form, so he settled in again for the wait. Ever since he was a small bud on his parent, Hooruets loved the taste of Plum Moths. They were fairly large and difficult to catch, but worth the effort. Hooruets found that he really enjoyed this free time, and the thought of his slightly early retirement from Spacefleet didn't trouble him one bit today.

It had been over a month since his confrontation with Fleet Admiral Bralloff, and it rarely crossed his mind. He was at peace, after having served the Federation for some one hundred ninety years. The way he saw the universe, he was due for a little reward.

Then he saw it, flying toward him from across the ravine was the biggest Plum Moth he had ever seen! Its thorax was fat with the nectar of the flowers and it had a wingspan of at least fourteen centimeters. In his mind, he could taste the moth as he absorbed it into his torso! He felt a small rumble as his digestive juices began to move toward the surface of his body. Hooruets drew back his arm ever so slowly and waited for the moth to draw within range. He mentally counted down the meters and willed the moth not to change course.

Seven, six, five, almost.... there.....

"Admiral Hooruets?"

The voice startled Hooruets and disturbed the moth, which veered off from its course. Now the moth would pass about twenty centimeters beyond his grasp.

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Hooruets jumped up and made a desperate dive for the moth, but it darted away so fast that his hand swept through empty air several centimeters short of his prey. Caught off balance by his sudden lunge, and futile efforts to catch the moth, Hooruets felt himself falling head over heels as he began to tumble down the ravine. The slope was fairly steep and covered with thorny vegetation that scratched his skin as he rolled and bounced downhill.

He finally stopped his sliding descent by stretching out his arms and legs and grasping the passing branches. He came to rest with his head laying downhill. Hooruets cursed aloud and began to untangle himself from the bushes by retracting his fingers and arms. This took a good bit of time, during which he continued to curse, soon exhausting the list of swear words that were commonly and uncommonly used in the Pan-Galactic language. Finally, he had freed himself and rolled to his feet. He began to trudge back up the steep incline, prepared to kill whoever had interrupted his hunt. By the time he'd reached the halfway point from the top, he'd run out of swear words in Pan Galactic, and was forced to switch to Yazirian. *Now there was a race that knew how to swear!* Confident that he had several hour's worth of invectives remaining, his mind turned to the question of who could have interrupted him.

At last, Hooruets crested the hill and tried unsuccessfully to hide his surprise as he came face to face with Chief Council Member V'rick'krck. The Vrusk leader of the Federation was flanked by Star Law Rangers wearing power armor suits. While it was normal for the Chief of the Federation of Planets to be accompanied by Star Law Ranger guards, they normally dressed inconspicuously and weren't so heavily armed. The distinctive silvery sheen surrounding V'rick'krck told Hooruets that the Vrusk was expecting trouble, or else he wouldn't be wearing an active laser defense device.

Hooruets fervently hoped that V'rick'krck hadn't heard the words he'd uttered during his climb, and felt quite embarrassed about it now. It was hardly proper language to use around the leader of the Federation. Fortunately, if the Vrusk had heard anything untoward, he gave no sign, instead addressing Hooruets in a pleasant tone of voice.

"Admiral Hooruets, I trust this day finds you well."

Hooruets fumbled for the proper formal Vrusk reply, but in his surprised and distracted state, all he could think of was, "I'm fine, uh, how are you?"

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V'rick'krck studied the admiral's roughed up and scratched appearance, but chose not to make any remarks about it. Instead, he replied, "I have been better, Admiral. I have come with a request from the Council of Worlds."

Admiral Hooruets was wise enough to know that meant there was serious trouble, and suspected it had something to do with the F.S. 37 strike, but now that he was retired from active duty, he knew little more about it than the general public. The general populous had not been told of the impending strike due to fears that Sathar agents would catch wind of the plans and alert their masters. Hooruets had been camped in the game preserve without a radio, so he was even less informed about recent events than the public. Now he was wondering what news he'd missed.

"A request from the Council of Worlds to an old retired admiral? I must admit to being most curious."

V'rick'krck gave Hooruets an appraising look before he continued. "The situation is far more grave than you might imagine Admiral. As you may have guessed by now, the Sathar have destroyed the fleet sent to F.S. 37 with few losses among their own fleet. Then, at 0400 Galactic Standard Time today, Sathar agents made a concerted attack against military targets all across the Frontier. Reports are still coming in from the farthest worlds and outposts, but so far we have received reports of over three hundred strikes. Targets of these attacks have been Spacefleet and Landfleet barracks, Orbital Defense stations, ground based laser batteries, Star Law bases, military production facilities, and interplanetary communications facilities. They've also destroyed most civilian government buildings in order to make it more difficult to organize relief efforts. The Capital building here was also hit. Most of the council members are dead. Several Sathar agents drove hovertrucks loaded with explosives into the building. If I hadn't been on an unscheduled shuttle flight to Fortress Gollwin at the time, I too would have perished."

V'rick'krck paused for a moment and seemed to consider his next words carefully. "We are still assessing the total effect of these attacks, but if we were in jeopardy of total defeat before, we are in much deeper trouble now. Fleet Admiral Bralloff and most of the other admirals died when a series of bombs exploded in Fortress Gollwin."

"Before the explosion," V'rick'krck continued, "she said that she expected a major Sathar counterattack within the week. We need you back in order to prepare a defense. Admiral Hooruets, I'm offering you the position of Fleet Admiral"

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Admiral Hooruets' thoughts were in turmoil. Just a few months ago, he was looking forward to a peaceful retirement after a long and faithful service in Spacefleet. Then things were shaken up by the scouting report that revealed the presence of the Sathar just five days from the Zebulon system, his confrontation with Admiral Bralloff, and subsequent earlier than anticipated retirement. Now, just as he'd grown accustomed to the idea that his career was behind him, the leader of the Council of Worlds was standing in front of him, asking him to return to Spacefleet as leader of the entire war effort. He briefly considered telling V'rick'krck that it wasn't his mess. He'd been passed over for promotion to Fleet Admiral by V'rick'krck's Council for not being aggressive enough. His arguments for caution had fallen on deaf ears. Now that the results of aggression against the Sathar were known, V'rick'krck wanted someone to rescue the Federation from the counterattack.

Hooruets found that he was equal parts annoyed and flattered at the request. If he had been put in charge to begin with, this never would have happened. On the other hand, in the Frontier's darkest hour since the First Sathar War, V'rick'krck went to him of all beings for help.

Then, another thought hit him. *I've served Spacefleet for most of my life, not for beaureocrats and commanders, but because our way of life had to be protected. It's the civilians who will suffer most if the Sathar win this war. It is they I have pledged to serve and protect. I may have retired from active duty, but duty always remains. I can't turn my back on them just because of a grudge against the Council of Worlds.*

Admiral Hooruets straightened up to his full height and solemnly said, "I accept the position of Fleet Admiral. It is my honor to serve the United Planetary Federation."

V'rick'krck motioned one of the Star Law guards over and opened a compartment in the man's power armor suit. He then withdrew a large datapad and handed it to Hooruets.

"This is the latest estimate of damage, casualties, fleet strength, and status reports. Take my shuttlecraft and proceed to Fortress Gollwin. It's been secured and a temporary command center has been set up in the hub. Some of the remaining command staff are already enroute, but you'll have to promote other officers to fill the gaps in the command structure. I've already invoked the Executive War Powers Act and will assist you in any way I can. You have complete military authority in all matters. Good luck Admiral."

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Admiral Hooruets threw V'rick'krck a salute and was escorted by two Star Law troops toward the waiting shuttlecraft. Hooruets learned why he hadn't heard the shuttle land when it took ten minutes at a brisk pace before the shuttle came in sight. It was a standard *Cricket*-class military shuttle marked, "Council of Worlds System Transport One". Flanked by the power armor-equipped Rangers, Hooruets boarded the shuttlecraft and quickly strapped into the copilot's seat.

Soon after, they were underway. Hooruets peered through the lower porthole as the sleek shuttle lifted above the tops of the Grandalas trees. He noticed a procession of Star Law transport hovercars nearing the location of Chief Council Member V'rick'krck and knew the Council leader was in safe hands. The shuttle passed over V'rick'krck at an altitude of only two hundred meters, and Hooruets was able to see V'rick'krck wave at his shuttle. The shuttle continued to ascend as it roared away from the game preserve. On the horizon, Hooruets saw several columns of smoke. Seeing Hooruets' quizzical look, the pilot of the shuttle pointed at the one on the left and said, "That was the Council building. The fire crews said they'd have it out in a few hours. The other column of smoke you see is from the Star Law Rangers' local station. Two Sathar agents walked into it wearing vests made out of Tornadium D-19. Fortunately casualties there were pretty light."

Hooruets wanted to know more, but the pilot had turned back to his radar display and was requesting a flight vector from Space Traffic control. Hooruets settled on studying the information on the Datapad V'rick'krck had given him.

After reading for awhile, Hooruets decided the Sathar had been very thorough in destroying UPF defenses. By striking at military barracks, the Sathar had eliminated more than three quarters of the trained Spacefleet crews. The ships not sent to F.S. 37 were mostly undamaged, but without trained crew to man them, they would do little against the Sathar armada.

Only two ships had a full complement of Spacefleet crew, both of which were not at a space station at the time. The assault carrier *Vengeance* was still on it's way to the Zebulon system, and the heavy cruiser *Challenger* had just left the Pale Shipyards when the attacks occurred. Spacefleet security procedures for ships were strict enough that Sathar agents had only been able to successfully attack one ship. The Spacefleet frigate *UPFS Shimmer* was damaged by a shuttlecraft that rammed it. The shuttlecraft was totally destroyed but the damage to the *Shimmer* could be repaired within three hours.

That repair estimate was the only good news in the whole report. Everywhere else, demand for replacement parts far outstripped the supply. To make matters worse, Spacefleet and civilian repair depots were among the sites hit. The lack of repair

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parts would be felt soon as the damage to UPF facilities that would be able to be repaired in a matter of days normally were instead impossible due to lack of replacement parts.

Admiral Hooruets was astonished by the sheer numbers of Sathar agents that had been in place prior to these attacks. Prior to today, the best Star Law Ranger estimates of Sathar agents placed their numbers at between four-hundred to one-thousand members. In order for these attacks to succeed against all of these heavily defended facilities simultaneously, the actual number of agents had to be much higher than expected. They also were probably much higher placed than expected, some obviously having been Spacefleet or Landfleet members with security clearances giving them unquestioned access to the facilities hit by the attacks.

Hooruets glanced up from the datapad and noticed that the shuttle had made the transition to space. It would still be several minutes before the shuttle docked with the *Belvedere*-class spaceyacht Star Transport One. After that, it would take almost a day before they arrived at Fortress Gollwin. Fleet Admiral Hooruets had that long to come up with a plan to save the United Planetary Federation during it's darkest hour.

He thought back about his last talk with Fleet Admiral Bralloff. She had said in their final talk that Hooruets thought of himself as some sort of knight defending the Frontier against overwhelming odds. *Well Bralloff, Hooruets thought, this knight now has to draw his sword against all odds one last time. I just hope I can hold the enemy at bay.*

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Chapter Nine: The Mind of the Enemy

Sathar Attack Vessel Deathstrike, Outbound, system F.S. 37 F.Y. 3/21/156

Xenss waited as the technician completed his diagnostic test of the Command Videocom System. The test confirmed the unit to be functioning in optimal condition and free of monitoring devices, as Xenss expected it would. With a casual wave of his fore tentacle, Xenss dismissed the technician, who gathered up his tech kit and scurried from the room.

The test was just a routine check that was always performed before the Pronouncement. Nothing was ever allowed to go wrong with the Pronouncement, which was revered to the point that it was sacred to the Sathar.

The Sathar worshipped no Gods, respected no philosophers, tolerated no weakness.

To each and every Sathar, War and battle in all forms were the only things of true interest. Each and every living member of the race worked for the war machine. The Sathar had no concept or word for "civilian". Each Sathar learned to fight from the time it was born. Every moment of their lives were strictly regulated to increase their chances of becoming a successful warrior.

To the races of the Federation, Sathar lifestyle would be considered appalling. Sathar birthrates are extremely high by human standards. Thousands of young are born every day. All young born on that solar day on each world are placed in an enclosure together. Food and water are dispensed sparingly by the adults. Tales of great war heroes of the past and basic language and technical skills are taught by large monitors that surround the enclosure. By the time a Sathar young reached adolescence, it would probably have killed many of its siblings or other children of its age group over food or water squabbles. This violence is not discouraged by adults, but rather rewarded, as the children that died were destined to make poor warriors, or else they would not have died so easily.

Of the thousands born on a particular day, perhaps a hundred will have survived to reach adolescence. The Sathar do not consider this a waste, as individual lives mean little to the Sathar. What is important is that the young that reach adolescence are strong, smart, and healthy. They already know a great deal about unarmed combat and survival under difficult conditions. This already makes them good candidates for being soldiers. Not every Sathar can be a front line fighter though.

On their Day of Trials, or twelfth anniversary of their birth, all of the surviving Sathar from the enclosure are escorted into the Testing Facility by adult warriors.

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There, they are subjected to a battery of tests that determine if they've learned the language, hierarchy, and technical skills shown to them on the monitors. Those that lack proficiency in

any area are used as targets for marksmanship and sword fighting, or summarily executed. The others go on to further testing involving weapons and marksmanship. The Sathar that do adequate in these tests, but rank below the average learning curve are removed from the group to become combat support personnel. They are then trained to be farmers, engineers, transportation specialists, medical personnel, and equipment operators. This is considered to be a sad fate, but all Sathar are indoctrinated enough to know they are expected to do their new duties to the best of their abilities.

The top scoring adolescents go on to become the elite of Sathar society, front line warriors. They receive another year of training in marksmanship, combat, and most importantly, following orders from the upper hierarchy unquestioningly.

When the year of training is over, they are divided into two equal sized groups. On graduation day, they are used for testing new commanders. Each group is assigned to a potential commander chosen by the higher ranking hierarchy. The two groups then fight to the death on a battlefield. The surviving side's commander is promoted and given an actual rank in the Hierarchy.

This gives the surviving group, both soldiers and new leader, valuable real combat experience. This too, is not considered a waste, but merely another step in eliminating the unfit. At this point, the surviving soldiers are given the "rank" of Warrior. Most Sathar will never attain a higher rank, as Sathar do not value length of service, only combat success. All Sathar dream of battle, but few see much active combat after this point due to the relative rarity of armed conflicts compared to the number of warriors.

Those few soldiers that see combat have the opportunity to become combat leaders, if they are on the surviving side in their test. Because this method means half of those that apply for a higher rank will die in the attempt, other races would be surprised to know that the opportunity is almost never turned down. As in most things for Sathar, the privileges of rank also have their disadvantages. Should a commander who is given orders by his superior officer fail to carry out those orders successfully, he is executed. Failure to take a military objective is simply not tolerated. The soldiers in that battle are thought to be too valuable to waste, but their commander obviously is inadequate. His replacement is chosen from the troops that did the best in that fight to temporarily take command of his surviving troops. This field replacement will later be given the chance to test to make his

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position permanent but the rest of the unit will not get the chance to test for a higher post, because the unit failed to achieve it's objective.

Those that attain the higher rank are then able to test for spaceship combat crew positions. These positions are the most coveted of all, because the leader of the Sathar forces is always from this select group. They are also considered to be higher in rank than the common ground forces commanders. Perhaps most important, Sathar Warships see enough combat to make the possibility of advancement much greater. Sathar who see the most combat get the most chances for advancement to ship's captains and, later, fleet admirals. The Sathar had no such names for these positions, simply calling all higher ranking Sathar, Commander. The chain of command was a highly flexible thing among Sathar. Instead of the UPF's rigidly structured chain of command, Sathar use a highly fluid system where units and crews were restructured at will, and all soldiers obey every superior officer unless those duties contradict that soldier's current orders.

The highest member of Sathar hierarchy in this region of space was Ssrannqs. Xenss had worked his way through the hierarchy to rank just below him. Now he was in a position to assume Ssrannq's place if he every falters in his role.

Ssrannqs faltering in his role was not likely. Ssrannqs performed exceptionally in every military role he'd ever assumed. As a leader, he was second to none. At the staging area, he had smashed the UPF fleet sent to destroy the facilities, just as he said he would. Intelligence reports that Xenss had access too, which weren't many in spite of his position as second in command, seemed to indicate that some plot of Ssrannqs was successful at disabling more spacefleet vessels, as well as ground based defenses.

Now Ssrannqs had called for a Pronouncement, and the fleet was abuzz with rumors about the subject of the Pronouncement, and just how far Ssrannqs would go. Xenss noticed Ssrannqs walk onto the bridge and knew that the answer to all their questions would come very soon.

Ssrannqs acknowledged Xenss with a nod of his elongated head. Xenss guessed that it was a signal to report. "The technician caste has checked out the radios and they are unmonitored and functioning in optimal condition for the Pronouncement.

Ssrannqs didn't even nod at that data, as it was expected. "Open the fleetwide channel on my mark."

Ssrannqs slithered up to the command couch of the *Deathstrike* and held up a fore tentacle. When his fore tentacle dropped, Xenss keyed the radio's transmit button

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and verified signal strength. All was in working order, so he settled in to watch and listen to his commander.

"The Pronouncement begins! In eons past, we Sathar learned to follow The Way and subjugate or destroy all other sentient races we encountered. We have been following the Way for twelve thousand Pargs. We will walk The Way until the end of our time. This we know."

"Bolarsss", the crews spoke as one, and Xenss knew that word was echoed across known Sathar space at that moment. That word was a word of confirmation and a reminder of what happened in the ages when the Sathar did not follow The Way.

Ssrannqs continued. "At the start of every major military campaign all warriors are told what is expected of them. It is for that reason we created the Pronouncement"

Again the crew confirmed his words with a hissed word, "Bolarsss."

"We stand on the eve of our first major campaign against the races that call themselves the United Planetary Federation. We have fought them twice before with limited goals. Now, thanks to the power of our race, they stand defenseless before our might. This time I invoke The Way to begin a campaign of annihilation."

Xenss was stunned. He expected a major campaign this time, but a campaign of annihilation was rarely done in Sathar History. It had been invoked once against the Eorna, but since that time, it hadn't been used at all. In a campaign of annihilation, the goal was simply to slaughter every sentient member of that race in one ceaseless battle using every means at their disposal.

That campaign had proven nearly successful, but that was one isolated planet they'd attacked. Ssrannqs had locked them into a battle to the finish with four races spread out across over a dozen worlds! Even on that one world where the last Pronouncement of Annihilation had occurred, Volturnus, a few of the Eorna had survived to this day. The sheer audacity of attacking that many heavily populated worlds made Xenss tremble with anticipation but, respecting the Pronouncement, he remained silent.

Xenss surveyed the rest of the Bridge Crew of the *Deathstrike* as Ssrannqs continued. They wore the same expressions of startled anticipation as Xenss wore.

"The planetary defenses across the Frontier are down, and half of the fleet lies smashed and adrift around our staging planet. The other half is now crewless. Their

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emphasis on recreation instead of duty made it easy to kill them by the hundreds. The weakest members of their race who worked with us have performed their tasks well. The Way is clear to destroy them all completely. We will destroy their ships in the sky, and kill everyone we find on the ground, planet by planet. Our first target will be Volturnus, where we will once and for all kill all Federation beings found there, then we will finish killing the remaining Eorna."

"I expect each and every one of you to see combat. This will be our greatest victory and we will all be remembered long after our eventual deaths as achieving more than any of our forebearers. We jump to the Zebulon System to strike at Volturnus in two days. Make your final preparations for Glory. Orders of battle will be transmitted shortly. Ssrannqs out."

Xenss shut down the transmitter and studied Ssrannqs. The leader looked supremely confident and in control.

This will either be our moment of triumph, or our greatest defeat, Xenss thought. But with the size of the force Ssrannqs had gathered, it was obvious to Xenss that little the Federation had left could oppose them, if what Ssrannqs said was true. The thought of the Federation falling to the Sathar Armada filled Xenss with peace. At last, the most frustrating group to ever oppose Sathar goals would be gone. It was truly and excellent time to be a Warrior.

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Chapter Ten: In the Path of the Juggernaut

UPFS Challenger, Inbound, Zebulon system. F.Y. 3/22/156

Kev'cect warily opened his eyes and looked around the darkened room. It took him several seconds before he identified the sound that woke him as the computer terminal's alarm clock program. Kev'cect's hand slammed down on the off button, and he lifted his torso off the sleeping mat and into the vertical position. Although a glance at his clock told him his duty shift started in ten minutes, he felt like he'd been jogging all night instead of sleeping. He stretched both hands behind him, joined his ten fingers, and stretched. Sleep was something he usually hated being interrupted from, but during this particular night, it had not been restful. Stumbling to his locker, Kev'cect's mind wandered to the events of the last few days.

The *Challenger* had no sooner been repaired when the orders had come through from Admiral Hooruets. Now Fleet Admiral Hooruets, Kev'cect reminded himself. The *Challenger* was to join the Carrier *UPFS Vengeance* in the Zebulon system. A scientific colony was due to be evacuated from Volturnus within the day, but the Sathar were expected there at the same time.

The *Challenger* and the *Vengeance* were ordered to cover the withdrawal as long as possible, then retreat back to the Truane's Star system. Dressing himself in his military skeinsuit took time, with eight legs and two arms, but at last, he was almost ready for duty. He pulled his sidearm, a Gyrojet Rifle, out of his locker and checked his ammunition automatically. His extra Gyrojet clips were all where he left them in a compartment in his locker. The computerized readout on the top of his rifle showed ten rounds in the clip that was already inserted in the spherical rear grip. He flipped the rifle over to check the grenade status screen in the launcher slung under the rifle's long barrel. It read, "AP Safe", which Kev'cect knew meant that a high explosive anti-personnel grenade was loaded and the safety was on.

Kev'cect rotated his torso to face almost backward and shoved the rifle into its holster slung across the top of his thorax. The extra clips of gyrojet ammunition from the locker compartment were slipped into the pockets on the side of the rifle sheath, as were his extra grenades. He also took his Vibroknife and slipped it into a sheath on his right front leg.

Lastly, he attached the power backpack to his Albedo Screen active laser defense and plugged the other cord into an electrostunner. The stunner was shoved into a holster attached to the backpack. Taking a look in the mirror, he straightened his clothes and antennae and hit the button to open the door to his quarters.

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The halls were hardly bustling with people, as the *Challenger* had far fewer crew members than most military ships of its size. Because of the automation of various subsystems, crew requirements on the *Challenger* were almost halved. Kev'cect strolled through the corridor toward the ladder shafts and elevator. There were two crew shifts during the twenty hour solar days and Kev'cect was assigned to the day shift.

Not that day or night made a bit of difference on a starship, but all times throughout the Frontier were referenced against an agreed upon twenty hour day. It seemed as though twenty hours was the best compromise between the four races as some were accustomed to sleeping once every sixteen to twenty-four hours, depending on race. It was later found that all races were able to adjust their sleep schedules so that they could function well with a twenty hour day as the standard. This day length was adopted partly because the planet Gran Quivera had a forty hour day-night cycle, and as it was populated equally by all four races. Usually, crew schedules were split fairly evenly between the two shifts, but today, the day shift consisted of ninety percent of the crew. The reason for the skeleton night shift was that Captain Galvin wanted his crew to be well rested for these critical hours to come. Given the nervousness of the crew most of them probably spent the night tossing and turning in their bunks.

The *Challenger* was only a few hours out from Volturnus and the Sathar were coming soon.

Kev'cect reached the ladder well on deck seven and began to climb the sturdy rungs toward Security on deck six. A short while later, he arrived at the door and went inside. Sixteen other security men and women were already inside, waiting for the morning briefing with duty assignments and news of the latest developments. Surveying the room quickly, Kev'cect had to admit that his fellow Landfleet security members looked as ill at ease and poorly rested as he felt.

The leader of the security detachment, Lieutenant Henin, had dark circles under his eyes and paced the front of the room nervously. One last security team member, a Dralasite, walked into the room and as Henin realized everyone was present, he began to address the team.

"I'll dispense with the preliminaries and get right to it. As you know, we're here to evacuate Volturnus Colony. The good news is that someone at Volturnus Colony had already ordered transport out before our defeat at F.S. 37. The bad news is that the only ship they could get to do the job is a mid-sized bulk cargo freighter. It doesn't have a shuttlecraft capable of entering the atmosphere, so we're going to have to provide the transport up from the planet. The *Challenger's* shuttle can only

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hold forty people, and that's pushing it, so this will take at least ten trips. In the meantime, Volturnus Colony has requested land reinforcements to hold the base perimeter if the Sathar land during evacuation. We're the only crew members that the *Challenger* can spare."

Lieutenant Henin let his eyes rove over his assembled men.

"I don't need to tell you that there are many risks involved in this job. Captain Galvin has assured me that he will do what he can to cover the evacuation, but the *Challenger* is the only big cruiser our forces have left, so he's under strict orders not to risk its destruction over Volturnus Colony. If the Sathar force arrives soon and it's larger than the *Challenger* and *Vengeance* can handle, they are under orders to accelerate to Void speed and jump out rather than make a stand here. I don't have to tell you what kind of odds an unarmed freighter and a shuttle will have against the Sathar Armada. There is a chance that everyone who accompanies the shuttle to the surface will be stranded there along with the colonists. The way the Sathar wage war, that's as good as a death sentence.

"Because of the risks, I've asked Captain Galvin, and he's agreed, that this should be an all-volunteer mission. I'll be commanding the ground forces once we reach planetside. Who's going with me?"

Kev'cect stepped forward without a moment's hesitation. This was a mission where he could make a difference. He saw Lieutenant Henin's eyes meet his and as look of admiration filled them.

"That's one"

Corporal Brallsus, a Dralasite, stepped forward also, muttering, "This tub's getting boring anyway."

The laughter that ensued seemed to ease the tension in the room, and one by one, every member of the security detachment stepped forward.

For once, Lieutenant Henin appeared to be at a loss for words. He regained his composure and continued, "Well, we launch in fifty-five minutes. If you have any messages to record for back home, Captain Galvin has given us priority use of the Videocom units. After that, gather up full combat loads of ammo, and meet me in the Landing Party Briefing room for final instructions in twenty minutes. That's all"

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The nervousness in the room at the start of the briefing was replaced by a well-trained crew hurrying about their business. The last restless night before combat was, for them, finished. They had a plan, a goal, and duties to occupy them.

The wait was almost over.

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Chapter Twelve: Phoenix Fight

UPFS Vengeance, Zebulon System. F.Y. 3/24/156

Gev Braxal made one final check of her suit seals before her hand punched the "clear to depressurize" button on the fighter's left control panel. Her head craned around to look over her left shoulder as she finished her preflight check of the fighter's atmospheric control surfaces.

The skin of the left wing distorted visually when she pushed the control stick hard toward that side. A quick glance over her right shoulder showed that curving delta wing to have reshaped itself to increase lift. Looking back toward the tail, she confirmed that the thrust vector vanes on the ship's small but powerful Fission drive were functioning. The indicator panel to her right showed all green status on weapons, armor, maneuvering thrusters, radar, targeting systems, life support, damage control systems, and main engine. Given the dedication of her Chief Maintenance technician, Gev wasn't surprised. She turned her attention to the rest of her squadron.

"Phoenix Squadron, this is Phoenix Lead. Report in."

She waited several seconds before the first fighter reported in. The others followed in quick succession.

"Phoenix two, all systems go."

"Phoenix three, Radar status yellow. All other systems go."

Gev keyed her radio again. "Phoenix three, report on problem"

A yellow status meant operational, but that there was an observed or reported problem with the system. A yellow status to a key system was enough to ground most vessels. In combat though, it was the commander and the pilot's call as to whether the problem was critical enough to cause a mission abort.

A moment later, she again heard Che'kek's distinct buzzing voice over her radio.

"Phoenix lead, the anomalous radar glitch wasn't corrected last night despite the techs' best efforts. My technician assures me that the unit would require replacement before the problem can be eliminated. He ordered the unit six months ago, but it never arrived at Fortress Pale. Radar test shows duplicate returns for a moment, but the echo target is less distinct. By adjusting the radar gain, I believe I can compensate for the problem."

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"Understood three. Do your best. Four, report"

"Phoenix four, all systems go."

"Uh, Phoenix five here... standby Lead."

Gev knew Phoenix Five was Junior Lieutenant Gormla's ship. He had been doing well in training, but the young Dralasite was still the newest member of the squadron and was still adjusting to fighters. She would never have assigned him to this mission had her back up pilot Lieutenant Sanders not been stricken with the viral infection called the New Pale Shakes. It was a virus easily treated with Biocort, but the treatment would take time.

Traditionally, one of the more experienced pilots in the squadron was assigned as the back up pilot because each ship, though of the same design, had slightly different handling characteristics. A more experienced pilot had a greater ability to compensate for those changes. Gormla was so new in the squadron though, that Gev was originally planning to reassign Sanders to be the primary pilot of the number five fighter for the duration of the conflict. The virus disrupted her plans, at least for this combat mission. After another five seconds though, Gormla reported in, interrupting Gev's thoughts.

"Phoenix Five reports all go."

Noorn and Watson reported in soon after in ships Six and Seven. All fighters were ready for combat.

"Phoenix flight, Phoenix lead. Prepare for launch."

Gev keyed her Flight Operations radio and reported to the Flight Controller.

"Flight Ops, Phoenix lead. We are ready for launch. Seven birds report combat ready."

"Roger Lead. Launch when ready. Sathar fleet is inbound on vector 128 mark 324. Radar profile analysis indicates four heavy cruisers, two assault carriers, seven light cruisers, twenty-six assault transports, thirteen destroyers, and four frigates. Our orders are not to engage the enemy fleet. The shuttlecraft from the *Challenger* is already inbound to the planet. Captain Galvin has authorized the use of your squadron to protect the shuttle until it lands. The freighter sent here to evacuate the colony has arrived too late. It's still half a day out from Volturnus and has been ordered to turn around. Secondary objectives are to cripple any Sathar

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warships which pursue the *Vengeance* and *Challenger* as we prepare to jump out. Over."

"I copy Flight Ops. Phoenix squadron out."

Gev hit the transmit button on her squadron frequency radio.

"Phoenix Flight, you heard the man. That shuttle is no match for a fighter. Let's keep the enemy ships off her until she can make planetfall. Two, take Three and Seven, guard our ride home. Four through six, you're with me. All fighters launch now."

Gev's shoved the throttle handle forward and felt the G forces shove her back into the seat as the atomic drive pushed her sleek fighter out of the bay and into the emptiness of space.

To her left, she saw several other fighters accelerating alongside her.

Her radar display lit up with bogies inbound to the planet. The computer quickly tagged the type and range to each vessel and designated a color to indicate friendly or enemy vessels. Each fighter's computer and radar also interfaced with the computer and radar on the *Vengeance*, which were far more powerful than that carried by the fighters.

Gev pointed the nose of her fighter toward the gap between the Sathar Fleet and the lone shuttlecraft lumbering toward the planet Volturnus.

"Phoenix Lead to all fighters, go to weapons hot status. Minimum ten K separation between fighters. Phoenix Two, You're in charge back here. You and your flight go to communications channel Tactical Three, we'll be on Tactical One. See you shortly. Good hunting Rand."

"Roger Lead. You too!"

Gev checked automatically to see that her wingmen were on the same flight path and found to her satisfaction that they were in standard combat formation with perfect spacing. Even Gorlma in the number five ship was holding position like a pro.

Her appreciation for her squadron was cut short when she heard her Flight Ops frequency radio crackle to life.

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"Phoenix squadron, Flight Ops. New contacts around the closest carrier indicate that it's launched eight fighters. Acceleration profile indicates Marauder class fighters. Heading unknown."

"Flight Ops, Lead. We copy. Out."

Gev switched back to her flight's Tactical frequency.

"Four, Five and Six, increase acceleration to maximum. If their target is the shuttle, those fighters will be able to intercept it before the shuttle can reach the atmosphere."

Gev squeezed every ounce of acceleration from her fighter and verified that her flight was keeping pace. A glance at her radar display showed what she was afraid of. All eight enemy fighters were heading toward the shuttle. Gev quickly plotted the optimal interception point and relayed it to the rest of her flight. Her computer tagged the enemy ships with letters A through H to ease in identifying them. Gev's fingers flew over her computer screen as she assigned targets to the other three members of her flight.

"Four, your target is Marauder Foxtrot. Five, you take Hotel. Six, you've got Alpha. I'm targeting Echo. After that, choose targets at will. Let's stop them cold."

"Four copies"

"Five... uh... confirmed Lead."

"Six copies. Let's give 'em some payback for the *Admiral Clinton*"

Gev smiled, then began narrowing her radar beam for the most accurate measurements of her foe's velocity and heading. Her assault rocket would have to lead her target by a considerable distance if the Sathar fighters didn't alter their course to engage Gev's group. It was almost a shot straight into their flanks. Deflection shots like those were tricky with assault rockets, which were unguided but incredibly fast. If the target moved appreciably between launch and impact less than a second later, the shot would be wasted as the rocket sailed harmlessly by.

She waited as the range narrowed to her target. As the minutes clicked by, she saw a change in some of the enemy ships' headings.

"Four Five and Six, we've got four of the fighters turning to make a head on run at us. It seems we're not the only ones making an assault rocket attack."

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"Roger Lead, standing by for evasive maneuvers upon their launch. Five out"

The range to her target decreased quickly now, and Gev's finger hovered over the launch button while her eyes studied the radar and video display. After what seemed an eternity, the range reached forty thousand kilometers, and after some final adjustments, Gev's thumb pressed the launch button.

A white streak of light shot forward from under her fighter as the rocket's powerful fission drive accelerated it to astronomical speeds in less than a tenth of a second.

Her camera display showed the enemy fighter try to evade the rocket by firing its starboard thrusters and wrenching its nose to the left. The maneuver was too little and too late. The rocket struck at relativistic velocities and buried itself completely within the enemy fighter's hull before exploding in a white hot fireball.

Wreckage that spun away into space was all that remained of that ship.

"Scratch one worm!", Gev cried triumphantly into her microphone.

"Make that scratch two", she heard in reply and too her surprise, she saw the Sathar ship designated as "H" disappear from her monitor.

Her computer alerted Gev of an enemy rocket launch with an urgent whistling sound.

Without even thinking, Gev wrenched her control stick to the right and fired left side maneuvering thrusters. A blindingly fast streak shot by her fighter just beyond her cockpit canopy.

It exploded aft of her fighter, causing no damage to her ship.

"Six here, that was a close call Lead"

"You're telling me!", Gev replied.

"Lead this is Four. It appears five of the marauders are closing on us to use guns, but fighter Beta is going after the shuttle."

Gev glanced at her tactical display and agreed with Lanar's assessment.

"Four, keep me clear while I plant a rocket up Beta's tailpipe. Five and six, mix it up with the enemy. Shoot straight, we're outnumbered."

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"Lead, Four has your six o'clock covered."

Confidant that Grall Lanar was up to the task, Gev concentrated on closing on Marauder Beta.

She soon had the rapidly retreating fighter in her crosshairs on the Head Up Display. She studied her tactical plot display and quickly determined that she would just close to firing range before the Marauder would draw within range of the shuttle. Provided nothing distracts me, Gev thought. With five Marauders attacking her four fighters, the odds were definitely in the Sathar's' favor. Gev's radio speakers in her helmet came alive with transmissions from Gorlma and Noorn.

"Five, you've picked up a worm in your six. Slide right and lead him into my sights."

"Firing thrusters"

Judging from the sound of his voice, Noorn was keeping his head about him, but Gorlma sounded a bit nervous to her ears. Under the circumstances, she couldn't blame him, and she regretted leaving him and Noorn alone to take on the remaining fighters. Nevertheless, she had a hunch most would soon follow her and Lanar. As if on cue, she heard Lanar's voice.

"Lead, you've got two fighters lining up for a shot on you. I'll try to throw them off, but I'd shoot quick if I were you!"

Gev looked again at her tactical display. The twin Marauders were in a very close formation, with less than a kilometer between them. Their range to her fighter was less than ten K kilometers, which was well within range for assault rockets. Gev was still forty eight K kilometers from her quarry, and had to maintain a steady course and acceleration for three more minutes in order to be in position to stop that marauder from destroying the shuttle.

"Will do Four.", Gev lied, "but keep them occupied and distracted as long as you can."

Gev's set two of her long range cameras to track the two fighters to her rear, her third camera was focused on the Marauder in front. Her fourth, and final camera, she focused on Lanar's ship. She divided her attention between the first and second monitors, showing the marauders aiming at her. When they fired at her, she would have less than a second to react.

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A bright flash beneath the hull of each marauder signaled the launch of the assault rockets in unison. Gev's computer shrieked an urgent whistle once more, as Gev pulled back on the control stick and simultaneously sideslipped her fighter. The G forces from her maneuver slammed her down in her seat and to the right side as the fighter's course changed abruptly.

It was too little too late. One of the rockets detonated just below her fighter, spraying shards of shrapnel into the underside of her ship. Gev pushed forward on the control stick to realign her fighter with the marauder still in front of her, but found the steering to be sluggish. A glance at the System Status panel showed that while most of the shrapnel imbedded itself in the hull with little structural damage, one of the shards cut the fuel line to one of the primary nose maneuvering thrusters, cutting her maneuverability by twenty percent.

Still, under the circumstances, she was lucky. A direct hit would have destroyed her ship. Lanar's voice came in over her radio again.

"Lead, the two on your tail are closing to guns, estimate they'll be there in two minutes. I think I can target one of them first."

"I copy Four. Take out your target, then get back to help Five and Six. Let me worry about the last fighter."

"Roger Lead. Four out."

Two minutes... That will put that Marauder here at the same time I'll be ready to launch on Marauder Beta, Gev thought unhappily. I'll have to make the first shot count, because with a fighter on my tail, I won't get another.

Gev studied her display, watching the enemy fighters as they slowly closed range. Heavy lasers were effective only to a range of about two kilometers, even in space. Beyond that, they lacked the focal power to burn through her ship's reflective hull. Fortunately, Gev knew that an assault rocket launch was now out of the question for her pursuers. After firing each rocket, the rotary launcher in the ship's hull had to move the next rocket into place and interface with its targeting system. The calculations required to hit a distant ship with an unguided rocket were difficult even for a computer. Gev knew that the latest UPF and Sathar systems required roughly ten minutes between shots. She hoped the Sathar hadn't made some sort of advancement she wasn't aware of.

Gev recalculated the range to her target and the speed of the pursuing ships. They would be in range just four seconds before Gev would have a shot at Marauder

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Beta. As the final launch run meant she couldn't maneuver until her rocket was away, Gev hoped they were poor shots.

One of her monitors suddenly flared bright white and when it dimmed again, it showed only the wreckage of one of the pursuing Marauders.

"That was for my Clan!", Gev heard Lanar yell triumphantly, "Lead, you're down to one worm on your tail, and I'm going back to the furball."

Gev smiled... *One worm, I can handle.*

"Thanks Four. Good hunting."

Gev concentrated on aiming at her target. She'd lined up perfectly and was waiting for optimal range before squeezing the launch button. The computer counted down the seconds left.

At five seconds, she saw an amber colored laser beam light up her cockpit as it narrowly missed her fighter. Gev ignored it and held the ship ahead of her centered in her crosshairs.

Another beam flashed by her ship. With two seconds left, she considered an early launch, but the computer had a firing solution calculated for precisely forty K kilometers and an early shot could throw off that aim by almost a meter. This time, rather than see a shot, she heard it.

The unmistakable sizzle of melting metal was a sound few fighter pilots ever forgot. Although there was no air outside her suit to transmit the sound, the vibrations of the hull passed along a semblance of it. Gev looked at the Status panel, which showed damage to her fuselage just aft of the cockpit on the right side. Then, along with the damage tone, Gev heard the "optimal range to target" tone. Checking one last time that the target was centered in her crosshairs, she squeezed the trigger, closing her eyes to avoid being momentarily blinded by the flash of the rocket's Superfission drive.

As Gev began evasive maneuvers, she watched the camera view of her target as the rocket slammed home. The fighter's wing was sheared off by the blast and it began to spin end over end. Gev saw no maneuvering thrusters trying to counter the spin, so she hoped the Marauder was mortally wounded. Whether it was or not, Gev now had other pressing concerns.

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The fighter on her tail was attempting to line up again for another shot. Wrenching the control stick to the left and pushing forward slightly, Gev slid her fighter in what she hoped was an unexpected direction. Even with the fighter's reduced maneuverability caused by the damaged thruster, the negative G's from the maneuver almost caused her to black out. A glance at her monitor showed the Sathar Marauder was still glued to her tail.

Damn, this worm's good!, Gev thought miserably, in a damaged fighter, I need to get myself an edge.

Gev glanced at her tactical display again. She saw an object which piqued her interest, and punched up more data on it with a few quick strokes on her computer keyboard.

Leo, Volturnus' second moon, it has an atmosphere, so it will do nicely I think! This should even the odds.

Gev pointed her fighter toward the reddish colored moon, and continued evasive sideslips while closing rapidly on her objective. It was all she could do to avoid the Sathar fighter's laser bursts.

Gev focused her Doppler radar on the ionosphere of the moon, to attempt to get a rough idea of the density of the atmosphere. If she hit the atmosphere at too steep of an angle, it would be like hitting a brick wall, too shallow, and she could skip right back into space.

Gev glanced at her rear monitor just in time to see the Marauder fire again. Four amber beams seared into her craft's tail section, burning parallel lines into the engine housing. One of the rear cameras went dead after showing one of the lasers walk right into it. Warning sirens blared in Gev's helmet speakers just as Gev prepared for her next move. The moon loomed before her, and Gev felt familiar buffeting as her ship began to encounter it's upper ionosphere.

That's the last shot you'll be able to take at me you bastard!

Gev pulled the throttle back to the idle position, then continued to pull it back through the stop to the reverse power setting. The fission engine and retro rockets fired full strength and Gev was slammed full force against the restraining straps in her flight chair. The pursuing fighter, busy concentrating on his next shot, didn't react in time. As Gev's fighter suddenly decelerated, the Sathar fighter slid past Gev's, barely a meter above her cockpit canopy. Gev was a bit too busy to enjoy

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the view of the disc shaped canard and forward curving scythe shaped wings as the Marauder shot past her.

The metal hull of her fighter groaned in protest as the G forces of the braking thrust and the friction caused by the atmosphere cut her velocity in half in less than a minute. For a second, Gev feared that the combination of laser damage to her engine housing and fuselage, and her seat of the pants maneuver would break her ship apart. The forward hull and leading edges of the wings glowed red hot from the heat of the abrupt atmospheric entry and for an instant Gev wondered if she'd exceeded the maximum thermal specifications by too large a factor. The ship held together though, so after a relieved sigh, Gev concentrated on spotting her quarry. The Sathar fighter was glowing red from the heat of re-entry, making it easy to spot slightly ahead of her and a few hundred feet above her craft.

Gev smiled and eased back on the stick, climbing toward his soft underbelly. In the atmosphere, she was confident that she had no peer. As a Yazirian, she was born to flight, and she'd been honing her flying instincts all of her life. Her prey didn't know it, but he'd abandoned any chance of defeating her when he'd followed her into the atmosphere.

Here, maneuverability is determined more by aerodynamics, than by active thrusters. Gev's sleek UPF fighter design with it's modified delta wing shape was superior to the Sathar design. She was about to prove that once and for all. The Sathar pilot spotted Gev's ship with an auto-tracking camera seconds before Gev fired. The lasers missed as the pilot pushed his fighter over into a steep dive and turned under Gev's climbing fighter.

Oh, no you don't, Gev thought, snarling with determination. *I learned that move a long time ago.*

Instead of leveling off, turning and then diving after her foe, Gev pulled back further on her control stick until her ship's nose pointed straight up. She then cut her throttle to one quarter military thrust for a second, and then pushed her control stick hard to the left. Rockets in the nose and thrust vector vanes in the tail pushed her fighter into a one-hundred and eighty degree turn as it hung in mid-air directly above the Sathar ship. Gev saw the worm looking up at her in surprise through his cockpit canopy as her ship lined up on him and she triggered the quad lasers in her fighter's nose.

The ruby beams struck the narrowest point in the fuselage and chopped right through the left side. The Sathar pilot tried to dodge a bit too late. His sudden sharp turn over-stressed the damaged hull and the front of the craft broke off. Gev

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watched as the pilot ejected from his crippled craft and began a long descent to the surface. Her job done, Gev turned and headed back into space. It occurred to her that she hadn't heard any radio calls from her squadron for some time. As the red atmospheric tinge gave way to the blackness of space, Gev keyed her radio.

"Phoenix flight, this is Lead, report status."

Nothing broke the silence, not even static. Gev switched to her second radio.

"Flight Ops, Phoenix Lead. I'm having Com system trouble, report on the battle."

Once more, there was no reply. Gev felt completely alone.

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Chapter Twelve: Cold Death

Phoenix Two, Zebulon system F.Y. 3/24/156

Samantha Rand fought the urge to push a lock of her curly red hair out of her right eye. The stubborn strands were plastered there against her sweaty forehead and she would have liked nothing better than to tuck it behind her ear, but two things prevented her from doing so. First, it was impossible to reach through the glass visor of her helmet, and even if she wasn't in a depressurized cockpit, the bulky gloves would make that task maddeningly difficult. Second, Samantha was seconds away from firing her assault rocket into the hull of the distant Sathar destroyer *Pestilence*, and this required the utmost concentration to line up the shot.

Samantha deftly made the last course corrections to center the bulbous bridge section of the Sathar ship in her crosshairs just as the warbling launch tone sounded. After squeezing the trigger, she began evasive maneuvers to avoid the inevitable return fire. The rocket struck near where she intended, and a gout of flame and debris erupted from the point of impact. It was a good hit, but far from fatal. Sathar Hellbore class destroyers were infamous for their ability to absorb considerable damage and remain operational.

To her surprise, the destroyer's laser and electron beam batteries remained silent as Samantha swung her ship away. Then she saw new radar contacts her computer tagged as ship-to-ship guided rockets. They came not from the destroyer ahead of her, but from the frigate *Stinger* twenty-eight thousand kilometers to her left. At the time she planned her run, she hoped the frigate would be concentrating on the Phoenix Seven which was attacking it. From their launch tubes, the missiles swung in line with her fleeing fighter and began to close quickly.

Samantha cursed as she saw an incoming group of rockets. The Sathar frigate's rocket launcher fired nine missiles per salvo. The missiles were guided, but far slower than her assault rocket. Nevertheless, they would intercept her fighter in less than twenty seconds. Dodging one or two rockets wouldn't have been tough for a ship as nimble as a fighter, but the rockets worked together to create a deadly pattern that was like a wall.

Adjusting all four long range cameras to track the rocket pattern, Samantha studied the rocket formation for gaps large enough to slip through. To her disappointment, she saw none. I'm going to have to trust to luck on this one, I'm afraid, she thought. With less than five seconds left to impact, Samantha wrenched back on the control stick and rammed the throttle lever forward. The G forces crushed her into the chair as the fighter's course and speed changed rapidly. Her vision began to grey

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out and she wondered if she'd lapse into unconsciousness before she completed her dangerous maneuver.

I must remain conscious, Samantha chided herself. Through sheer force of will and the help of her G suit which automatically tightened around her legs and lower torso, she managed to hold on to consciousness.

Her vision returned slowly, and Samantha's eyes were glued to the camera monitors, which showed that the rockets were still following, but their carefully programmed pattern now had gaps.

Her fingers played across the thruster controls on the sides of the throttle lever to slide her ship to the right while keeping her fighter's thin tail pointed toward the missiles. White streaks passed around her on all sides as the missiles sped by. They didn't get close enough to trigger their proximity fuses, but they began a wide arcing curve to try to reacquire their target. Then Samantha saw their engines go dead, their propellant finally exhausted. She breathed a huge sigh of relief, then keyed her microphone.

"Three, this is Phoenix two. Report status."

Che'kek the Vrusk pilot replied with characteristic professionalism, "Three here. I'm in the middle of my attack run. Two thousand kilometers from optimal launch range."

Samantha glanced at her tactical plot to ensure that Che'kek's ship was on course and more importantly, that it was beyond the range of the frigate which had fired on her. Che'kek in Phoenix Three was approaching from the far side of the destroyer so that it was forced to divide it's attention between the two fighters. Instead, the Sathar gunners on the *Pestilence* seemed to have focused their efforts against him.

With the missiles from the frigate no longer a threat, Samantha turned her ships cameras to focus on the *Pestilence*. Her cameras showed that the damage from her assault rocket had been fairly minor, disabling none of the *Pestilence's* major systems. The flames which had earlier spouted from the hull were already extinguished by the vacuum of space. In their place was a section of twisted metal hull plates jutting out a weird angles.

Samantha frowned, "Three, be careful. There's still plenty of fight left in the *Pestilence* and you're it's likely target. Make your run and get clear fast."

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"Affirmative Two, ten seconds to launch."

Samantha watched as the destroyer began evasive maneuvers to throw off the attacking fighter's aim. The Sathar weapon turrets all faced Che'kek's ship. When Che'kek's ship reached the optimal launch point forty thousand kilometers from the *Pestilence*, Samantha turned one of her ship's cameras to focus on his fighter. To her surprise, Che'kek hadn't launched his rocket yet.

She began to get the feeling that something was wrong, when she heard his voice on her radio.

"Two, I'm having trouble with my radar and targeting system. The ghost image came back at an inopportune moment and I'm having to manually adjust the gain to get the targeting system to recognize the true return. It shouldn't take more than a few moments."

Samantha gauged the distance from Che'kek's fighter to the *Pestilence* and mentally calculated the time it would take for Che'kek to swing around and set up a new attack run. If he missed this run, it would take a minimum of three and a half minutes to circle around out of range before Che'kek could start his next run. Samantha wouldn't have her fighter in position to start another run for at least nine minutes, which meant that Che'kek would be going in alone instead of one fighter from each side in typical squadron wolfpack tactics. Still, with every single kilometer Che'kek closed on the destroyer, he made it that much easier for the Sathar gunners. Her decision was made.

"Three, get clear and set up a new...."

A bright flash on her monitors, one from the *Pestilence* and one from the camera monitor tracking Che'kek's ship told her that her orders came too late. The powerful stream of electrons from the destroyer played across the surface of Che'kek's tiny ship like the lightning it resembled in form. It was joined by a powerful ruby laser beam, which sliced through the hull like a razor blade, melting steel and boring through the center of the cockpit. The fighter began to spin slowly end over end, while still hurtling toward the *Pestilence*.

Samantha began to mentally calculate a way to rescue Che'kek from his wrecked ship, when the top of the fighter spun back into view of her camera. She looked carefully for some sign of life from the cockpit, but all she could see was that the normally clear canopy was solid red with blood splashed on the inner surface. *He's dead!* That realization hit her like a kiloton of tornadium D-19. She was stunned and shocked at how quickly it had happened.

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One moment I was ordering him to break off the attack, and the next....

It felt to her as though an incredible weight had settled on her shoulders. A weight which was far worse than physical. She wanted to scream and rage about how unfair it was. She wanted to cry for the friend she had lost. But another part of her mind told her that now was not the time. This was the time for vengeance.

Samantha keyed her radio on Tactical frequency one. "Seven, this is Two. Report status."

It took Lieutenant Watson a moment to respond, and for an instant, Samantha had wondered if he had been killed also.

"Sorry, Two, I was just finishing up my run against the *Stinger* and couldn't answer." Samantha heard obvious pride in his voice as he continued, "I got a hit on the engineering section, too. From the looks of things, I knocked out the main drives, at least for now. That's one ship that can't chase our carrier anymore."

"Well, Seven, are you up for a repeat performance on the *Pestilence*? It just took out Che'kek. He didn't even get a chance to eject."

Watson's voice betrayed his anger and grim determination. "Just send me the attack vector and the *Pestilence* will be scrap metal."

Samantha plotted an attack vector for both ships and hit the Transmit button to the right of the tactical display. She knew that Watson's cockpit would now display the same data that she had just created. They would both reach their waypoint in six minutes, leaving almost three minutes to line up their shots.

In the meantime, Samantha reported back to Flight Operations on the *Vengeance*.

"Flight Ops, this is two. Reporting the loss of Phoenix Three. One minor hit scored on the *Pestilence*, and the *Stinger* appears to have drive damage. Awaiting confirmation."

"Two, this is Flight Ops, can you raise Phoenix One? We haven't heard from Commander Braxal since she entered the atmosphere of Leo. There was a Sathar Marauder on her tail, and we lost radar contact with both spacecraft."

Samantha cursed. *This fight couldn't get much worse.*

"Seven, continue toward your waypoint to attack the *Pestilence*. Go to Tac One on your radio. Gev is missing, so I'm assuming command of the squadron."

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"Roger Two, switching frequencies now."

Samantha also switched her radio to Tac One and immediately heard desperate voices on the frequency.

"-eak right Five, let me get a shot at him!"

"I can't shake him Six, my starboard nose thrusters are out and I've only got fifty percent power to my main dri-."

Samantha heard an explosion over the communications channel, then Gorlma's voice continued, "Make that NO power to my main drive."

Samantha punched up a tactical display of the dogfight on her main monitor. It showed all four fighters, one Sathar, three Federation, eighty-thousand kilometers from her position, too far for her to do anything to help Gorlma. Then her radio crackled to life again as the Sathar fighter icon disappeared from her display

"It's okay Five, I just lit him up with my lasers, your tail's clear, you owe me a brew when we get back."

Samantha took advantage of the break in the chatter and joined in, "Five, what's your status?"

Gorlma sounded unencouraged by what he read on his damage report list.

"I've got half my maneuvering thrusters functioning, no power to my main drive, auxiliary power is shaky, my radar is out, my computer is only functioning when it wants to, and that's not very damn often it would seem."

Samantha frowned at the velocity readings on Gorlma's fighter. They were slower than the Carrier they would have to catch up to. This wasn't a problem for the other two ships in the engagement, but if he couldn't get his atomic drive back on line, Gorlma wouldn't be making the return trip.

"Five, how's your computer self-repair capacity?"

"It would be fine Two, if the damn thing would stay on, but with auxiliary power conking out every few minutes, that's not likely."

"Five, do you know what a fix you're in?"

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Gorlma laughed, "Yeah Two, but at least I won't have to eat that nasty chow all the way back to the Truane's Star system."

Samantha could here the resignation in his voice despite his forced jocularity. There was nothing she could do though. If the carrier came back for him, the entire Sathar fleet would jump it and no one would escape alive. Samantha studied the tactical display and said, "Five, you'll have to make for Volturnus to link up with Friendlies. I'll relay the coordinates of the colony to your ship. You should make the atmosphere about twenty minutes before the Sathar ships, so if you hurry, you'll be able to land unopposed. Good luck Five."

"Roger Two, don't worry about me. I always wanted to see Volturnus up close, but this was the only way I could legally go AWOL."

Samantha laughed in spite of the seriousness of the situation, and watched as the icon representing his fighter turned slowly toward Volturnus. Sure that Gorlma was safely on his way, she turned her attention back to the rest of the squadron.

"Two to Four, what's your status?"

"Four here, my assault rocket launcher is currently inoperative. The computer is working on it though and it may be back online in less than thirty minutes. Other than that, all systems are go."

Samantha knew the odds of a fighter's meager self-repair capacity fixing anything was small, but without the assault rockets, Lieutenant Lanar's ship was of no use against Sathar vessels larger than a fighter. "Two to Six, report status."

Lieutenant Noorn's confident voice replied, "Six here, not a scratch on my ship. One assault rocket left. The shuttle has made it into the atmosphere and is out of harm's way."

That leaves three fighters ready to attack the pursuing Sathar destroyers, Samantha mused.

"Six, join Seven on his attack run on the Pestilence. Four, escort him on the run. Stay at least twenty thousand kilometers behind him and keep an eye out for enemy fighters. Seven, decelerate and wait for Six to form on your wing before we hit the attack run waypoints."

"Confirmed Two, decelerating at five Gees. Estimated time to waypoint, twenty minutes."

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"Seven accelerating at three gees, will join Six at the attack waypoint in twenty."

Samantha nodded to herself, and slowed her ship to reach her own attack waypoint at the same time. The *Pestilence* was already damaged, and Samantha was confident that her flight of three would finish the destroyer off this run. That left only the destroyers *Venomous* and *Doomfist* pursuing the *Challenger* and *Vengeance*. The *Challenger* was covering the rear as the two Federation capitol ships fled. The *Vengeance* was armed, but was outgunned by even a single destroyer. The guns on the *Challenger* alone were enough to discourage pursuit, but three to one odds were not a good bet. Samantha was determined that her squadron would even out those odds. In the meantime....

"Flight Ops, this is Two, any word from Phoenix Lead yet?"

Samantha waited impatiently for Flight Ops to reply. After what seemed an eternity to her, Samantha heard, "Standby Two, there's a new contact coming around the far side of Leo now."

Ours or theirs?, Samantha wondered.

The radio came to life again, this time she heard several people in the background cheering before the exuberant voice of the flight controller answered, "Phoenix Flight, this is Flight Ops, we still can't raise her on the radio, but Commander Braxal is okay. Her fighter is accelerating to join us."

Samantha let out her breath, which until then, she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

Smiling, she keyed her mike, "Thanks Flight Ops, that's good to hear. ETA on her ship?"

"She'll reach your position in thirty-three minutes."

Samantha turned her attention back to the rest of the flight. Still smiling, she radioed her squadron, "All right people, this is Two. Phoenix Lead is watching our run, so let's do it by the book. If we don't take down the *Pestilence*, we'll never hear the end of it in her debriefing."

Noorn was the first to reply, "You aren't kidding Two. We'll hit our waypoint in sixteen minutes. We'll make this run count. This one's for Che'kek."

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With that grim reminder of the dangers ahead of them, the squadron waited in silence as they closed on their waypoints. At last, they reached the waypoints and turned toward the *Pestilence* in unison like hungry sharks.

They each had three minutes to line up their shot and make final corrections to allow for evasive maneuvers. As the closest destroyer to the *Challenger*, the *Pestilence* was the biggest threat. She and Noorn had only one rocket left, Watson had two. Lanar had two rockets as well, but with his launcher inoperative, they were useless. If they couldn't destroy the *Pestilence* this run, then it would be in range to fire at the *Challenger* before they could attack it again. Samantha had no intention of letting that happen.

"Phoenix six and seven, this is Two, launch on reaching optimum range. Make your shots count."

"This is Six, affirmative Two."

"Seven here, affirmative Two."

After one last scan for any unexpected threats that could approach her within the next three minutes, Samantha blocked out everything but the distant destroyer ahead of her. She armed her assault rocket, took last minute readings of changes in target velocity and heading. The distance closed steadily, and Samantha poised her thumb over the launch button. The launch tone warbled in her headset, and her thumb pressed the button firmly. The rocket shot forward from under her ship's hull and buried itself in the *Pestilence* midway down its hull. For an instant, Samantha wondered if it had failed to detonate, but then the entire side of that deck blew out, exposing the steel framework and flushing Sathar crew into the vacuum of space. The hit looked serious, but she could see Sathar damage control teams in spacesuits already in that section begin to shore up the framework.

Then, two rockets slammed into the ship at that same point but from the far side almost simultaneously. The blast was tremendous, and tore through that section of the ship. The front of the ship was completely separated from the stern, but the thrust from the ship's powerful atomic drives soon corrected that. The rear of the ship slammed into what remained of the front and the whole hull began to break up. Watson's triumphant shout echoed in her helmet, "Scratch one destroyer!"

"Flight Ops to Phoenix squadron, great work! Set up for a run against the *Doomfist* next."

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Those words reminded Samantha of just how bad the situation still was. If either the *Doomfist* or the *Venomous* got past the *Challenger*, they could destroy the squadron's ride home. To make things worse, Samantha knew that they had only one assault rocket in the entire squadron.

"Flight ops, this is Phoenix Two, Be advised that we only have one assault rocket remaining. We can scratch their hull, but unless we get really lucky, I don't think we'll be much help."

"Understood Phoenix Two, do your best."

Samantha shook her head and studied her tactical display. There was little she could do.

"Four, this is Two, please tell me that your damage control system has repaired your assault rocket launcher."

"Negative Two, no progress yet."

"Alright squadron, here's what we're going to do. I'll go in against the *Doomfist* first to draw their fire. That should leave Seven a free shot without risking return fire. Four and Six, return to the *Vengeance* at once to rearm."

Samantha heard each ship confirm her orders, and she contemplated what she was about to do. She would have to get close in order to be sure that the *Doomfist* attacked her instead of Watson. That meant her odds of survival were not good. Still, it was survival of the squadron and capital ships that mattered. Giving Watson the extra time to aim might make the difference. Samantha wheeled her fighter in toward the *Doomfist*. She focused her fighter's cameras on the three weapon turrets on the destroyer. They swiveled to face her onrushing fighter and waited until her range decreased to assault rocket launch range. Her radar display showed fewer than fifty-thousand kilometers between her and the destroyer so Samantha began to perform evasive maneuvers. She sideslipped her fighter at random, but short, intervals. The guns tracked her fighter, but they made no effort to fire. More surprising was that the destroyer was not performing evasive maneuvers itself. It would make an easy target for Watson's ship.

That struck Samantha as wrong somehow. The Sathar are not stupid, what is this guy up too? Samantha reprogramed one of her cameras to scan the destroyers hull. There, she saw where she had made the error. Along the hull, about midway down the spine of the ship, she saw open launch tube doors and a complicated radar antenna array.

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"Seven, this is Two. The *Doomfist* is not a Hellbore class destroyer, it looks to be equipped with Interceptor Missiles."

A single battery of Interceptor Missiles was ineffective against something as fast as an assault rocket, but multiple batteries worked together. In the numbers that this destroyer had, they would surely be enough to stop a single incoming rocket.

Nevertheless, they had no choice but to try. Samantha looked again at the distance to the destroyer. She had closed to a mere thirty-thousand kilometers from the *Doomfist*. Then, the *Doomfist* opened fire on her. The laser turret struck her fighter's left wing, and burned right through the reflective armor. The wing superheated and melted off, leaving a trail of molten metal as Samantha pulled up and accelerated away from the beam. The destroyer's electron battery fired seconds later, and thankfully missed what was left of Samantha's fighter. Alarm klaxons blared until Samantha snapped irritably, "Audible alarm off."

The computer complied and her cockpit was filled with silence for a second, before the alarm went off again.

"I said alarm-", Samantha stopped as she realized that this tone was different. She looked at her threat display. It showed nine rockets heading toward her fighter from the *Doomfist*. *A Rocket battery salvo. Great. As if I haven't gone through enough of this already.* Samantha trained a camera on the salvo. Unlike before, this salvo was coming at her almost head on. She tried to turn left to escape the salvo, but her fighter refused to budge in that direction. A glance at her damage display showed that her port wing maneuvering jets were gone along with the better part of that wing. She could never turn away from the missiles in time. Outmaneuvering them was hardly an option in her damaged craft. Samantha turned her fighter toward the missiles instead, with a crazy idea forming in her head.

The missiles were approaching in a spread out star pattern. Samantha aimed her fighter toward the center of the rocket pattern. *I hope this works....*

Samantha poised her finger on the firing stud for her fighter's nose mounted heavy lasers and centered the rocket in her computer generated crosshairs as the range quickly closed. When the rocket was in range at two kilometers, her finger tightened on the firing stud and ruby beams seered out toward the missile, passing on both sides of the tiny rocket. *The missile is too narrow!* In a heartbeat, she corrected the aim a bit to the right and fired again. This time, a beam from the port laser caught the missile dead on and detonated it less than fifty meters in front of her fighter. Samantha flew through the resulting fireball as the other rockets sped past on all sides.

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"Seven, this is two. You are clear to make your run. It will be some time before the *Doomfist* is able to fire a salvo like that again."

Watson's voice came in loud and clear. "Affirmative Two. Launching in ten seconds."

Samantha concentrated on nursing her fighter back toward the *Vengeance*. The damage was severe enough to put her out of this fight, but she was confident that she could make it back.

Samantha allowed herself to relax and she turned a camera toward Watson's ship, leaving the others scanning the *Doomfist*. She saw the assault rocket fire from Phoenix Seven and streak toward the *Doomfist*. The *Doomfist* responded by launching five salvos of ICMs at the incoming rocket. For a second Samantha thought the rocket would slip through, then a bright flash signaled the destruction of the assault rocket.

Just as Samantha started to turn away in disappointment, a missile streaked into the hull of the destroyer. It flew into an empty ICM silo and exploded. A huge hull plate was blasted away, taking half the frame in that section with it. Samantha searched her radar display to see where that projectile had come from and saw an icon on her tactical display marked, Phoenix Lead.

Of course! Just because her comm system is down doesn't mean she's out of the fight. Gev saw the opportunity to strike and took advantage of it. The destroyer looked badly stricken by that hit and it stopped accelerating toward the retreating Federation ships. Its twin, the *Venomous* also stopped accelerating. Samantha heard a very relieved voice in Flight Ops radio their squadron, "Phoenix Flight, the Sathar have broken off pursuit. You are cleared to land."

Samantha checked to see that all fighters were heading toward the *Vengeance*, including Gev's fighter. Satisfied they were on course, Samantha sighed, "Roger Flight Ops, Phoenix two reports five birds inbound. My fighter is damaged, and I request Inertia Barrier equipped bays for Lead and myself."

"Two, this is Flight Ops, request granted. Inertia screens in place on landing bays two and four. Crash crews are standing by."

Samantha relaxed and stretched as much as she could in the cramped cockpit. The flight to the *Vengeance* would take almost forty minutes. In the meantime, her thoughts kept returning to Che'kek and Gorlma. One was dead, and the other would be marooned on Volturnus, provided he could bring his fighter down in one piece.

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Even if Gorkma did bring it down safely, he was stuck on a hostile world cut off from the rest of the Frontier by a Sathar battle armada that dwarfed anything the UPF had remaining.

The squadron gave better than they got, losing two fighters while destroying eight Sathar fighters and the destroyer *Pestilence*, as well as damaging the *Stinger* and *Doomfist*. While Phoenix squadron could claim a tactical victory based on losses, strategically, it was impossible to call this anything but a retreat. A retreat that left over four hundred Federation citizens at imminent risk of uncontested planetary invasion by the Sathar. Voltarnus' indigenous lifeforms, which had all suffered because of the Sathar before, were once more at risk.

Samantha knew that in the next system, a retreat would leave millions of civilians on Pale and New Pale at the mercy of the Sathar, and the Sathar were not known for mercy.

First however, the Sathar would have to deal with Phoenix squadron. *And we won't go down without a fight!*

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Chapter 13: Digging In

Volturnus Colony, Zebulon system F.Y. 3/24/156

Kev'cect felt the mild bump that signaled that the shuttlecraft had finally touched down. He quickly unstrapped his torso from the restraining straps of the seat and waited as security force beings filed out from the back row. Then his row, second from the back, filed out. Kev'cect squeezed through the shuttle's airlock and skillfully descended the ladder to the ground. The first seven men off the shuttle had already started to form a crude perimeter around the shuttle, more out of habit than because of an actual threat already on the ground.

Lieutenant Henin was supervising the lowering of the armed explorer van from the belly of the shuttle. The winch lowered it to the ground, and another security Landfleet soldier was opening the main hatch of the van. Kev'cect took a few moments to look around. It was the first time he had set foot on this world, but he had heard many stories about it. Through the dust that had been kicked up by the shuttle's VTOL thrusters, Kev'cect could make out the domes and towers of the colony about two-hundred meters away.

The colony appeared to be surrounded by a low metal wall at least four meters tall. There were watch towers positioned every fifty meters along its length. There was also a larger tower where the wall sections joined at each corner. The wall appeared to be hexagon shaped as viewed from the air. It had a large gate at the center of each of the three wall sections that Kev'cect could see from where he stood, one of which was open. He assumed the other three walls on the far side had a similar layout. As Kev'cect watched, a civilian groundcar drove out of the open gate and turned toward the shuttlecraft. It moved slowly over the uneven ground and came to a stop twenty meters from the shuttle's right wing. Lieutenant Henin motioned Kev'cect and two others to follow him as he marched toward the groundcar.

A human male stepped out of the back of the car and walked toward the group. He was soon followed by a Dralasite Landfleet officer and a startlingly attractive Vrusk female. Kev'cect only half heard the introduction and pleasantries exchanged between the two humans as Lieutenant Henin and Governor Bradley spoke. Kev'cect tore his gaze from the female Vrusk long enough to appraise the other two visitors. The Dralasite had a name tag that read, "Oorl." The Human wore no military uniform, but his demeanor left little doubt that he considered himself to be in charge. He had a large amount of facial hair. Kev'cect reminded himself that humans referred to it as a beard, and remembered that most human males would have them if not for their tendencies to cut those hairs very close to

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the skin daily. This human seemed to enjoy the hair though, as he had an odd mannerism of stroking the hairs nearest his chin while he addressed Lieutenant Henin.

"I can't say I'm unhappy to see you, but it appears we're in a bit of a bind. Our Deep Space Radar control has recorded twenty-five shuttlecraft heading toward the planet. Our colony is equipped with a Geothermal powered laser battery that they'll likely steer clear of, but the rest of the airspace is undefended."

Thomas Bradley nodded his head toward the Vrusk, "My assistant Jenk'sik believes they intend to enter the atmosphere on the far hemisphere and then fly in low as close to the colony as they can get. That way, they can avoid costly atmospheric losses. Once they're on the ground, they can make a frontal assault."

Kev'cect considered the situation. If he were in the Sathar commanders' shoes, he would do much the same thing. Jenk'sik's analysis sounded reasonable. He turned his mind to preparations to repel a ground assault.

Lieutenant Henin asked, "What defenses have you prepared so far?"

The Dralasite was the first to answer, "I've got my troops digging foxholes along the southern perimeter with overlapping fields of fire. I've also asked for civilian volunteers and began training them with weapons. Deep Space radar control is analyzing the radar profile of the Sathar assault shuttles so that we can estimate how many troops each can carry."

Governor Bradley interrupted him, "And that appears to be way too many troops. Twenty-five shuttles can carry as many as three-thousand soldiers. We have fewer than thirty in the colony. Even with your troops, that makes less than fifty. Lieutenant Oorl believes that the best chance we have is to dig in here and wait for more Landfleet reinforcements."

Lieutenant Henin looked skeptical. "I wouldn't hold your breath waiting for reinforcements. I don't know how much you've heard out here, but Spacefleet is on the ropes and they'll have a hard enough time protecting the heavily populated worlds without protecting troop transports to reinforce us here."

Henin paused and considered the situation, "If we prepare adequate defenses and the Sathar didn't land much in the way of heavy support weapons though, we may be able to hold a perimeter. For several weeks, at least. I don't see many other options."

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Kev'cect listened as Governor Bradley, Lieutenant Oorl, and Lieutenant Henin began to discuss the best layout for the defensive positions, with the help of a map on a datapad Lieutenant Oorl carried in his pseudopod. Kev'cect also allowed himself to surreptitiously study Jenk'sik. She was also following the conversation, and adding her own observations when she deemed them appropriate. Kev'cect noted that she didn't seem to have military experience, but her opinions about the surrounding terrain were insightful and helped to further the plans for reconnaissance and foxhole positions. Then, Jenk'sik then looked directly at him, and for an instant Kev'cect feared that she had been aware of his quiet observation of her. He felt like a youth discovered doing something wrong by his parents. To his relief, her gaze only settled on him for an instant, then it continued on to each man and woman who accompanied the shuttle to the surface. It appeared to Kev'cect that she was appraising them.

Kev'cect saw that Bradley and the two Lieutenants were finished with the map datapad and had added foxhole positions to the map a bit beyond the wall to the research compound. Lieutenant Henin turned to Kev'cect and the other lower ranking soldiers. "Rollins, take you squad to the north and start digging. You're in charge of setting up the fields of fire and setting up the communication lines to the compound. Cover the arc between three-hundred fifteen degrees and forty-five degrees. Naralk, same thing but cover this arc between forty-five and one-hundred fifteen degrees. Kev'cect, take your team and cover two-hundred twenty-five degrees to three-hundred fifteen degrees. The locals have the remaining southern arc started. Everybody clear on this?"

Lieutenant Henin looked at each squad leader in turn. Kev'cect nodded automatically when Henin looked at him. Next, Henin fixed his gaze on Governor Bradley. "I'd be lying if I told you our chances were good. If we are to have a chance at all, we need adequate preparations and we need every being in your compound to pitch in on the digging. Can I count on them?"

Governor Bradley forced a laugh, "They may be scientists and researchers, but I guarantee that they'll work like their lives depend on it. I'm pretty handy with a shovel myself. Just tell me where to start."

Kev'cect walked back to his small squad of Privates. They were still off-loading ammunition crates and heavy weapons from the shuttlecraft's cargo hold. Kev'cect waded in and assisted them in loading them into the back of the Governor's groundcar, then led his men around the Colony wall to the far side of the compound where his section of the perimeter would lie.

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The hot Volturnus winds blew sand against his carapace as he walked. His squad was remarkably quiet today, perhaps aware of the gravity of the situation. Kev'cect looked again at his map to get an idea of the size of the area his squad was assigned to cover.

Although the arc didn't look long on the datapad, it actually was an area four-hundred meters in length. Even with civilian volunteers to help man the foxholes, there would be far too many for his five man squad to cover. Ideally, there would be a foxhole about every fifteen meters along the length, which amounted to about twenty-seven foxholes. *That's fifty-four men, not counting the Heavy support weapon squads*, Kev'cect realized. *At that rate, half of the colonists will be needed to man the perimeter.*

Looking more carefully at the Datapad, Kev'cect saw that the foxholes had been placed twenty-five meters apart instead of fifteen. That cut down the number in his coverage arc to just sixteen foxholes. This meant that every third foxhole could be manned by a member of Kev'cect's squad, with civilian volunteers manning the rest. It also meant that the Sathar could slip through the gaps between the foxholes without facing withering point blank range crossfire. At last, Kev'cect arrived at the beginning of his squad's arc.

There was a group of thirty civilians waiting at the start of his defensive perimeter section. Kev'cect split them up assigning five beings to each member of his squad. Each six man team had only to dig three foxholes, which wasn't as bad as Kev'cect feared it would be. When he queried one of the civilians about who organized the work groups, he was not surprised to hear that it was the Assistant Governor Jenk'sik.

After making sure his three foxholes were started in the right place, Kev'cect left the civilians to work and walked the line. All of his men had taken similar steps and the defensive perimeter was shaping up nicely. By midday, they were covering the foxholes with metal plates and covering the plates with still more dirt before camouflaging each foxhole. Lieutenants Oorl and Henin walked the line just before dusk, making sure that the land communications lines were installed to each foxhole and that the heavy support weapons positions were prepared to their satisfaction.

By nightfall, all the work was completed. The men were caked with dirt and their hands were callused from the unaccustomed manual labor. Kev'cect and his men began to teach the volunteers the finer points of firing lane coverage, antipersonnel mines, radio and land line communications procedures, and battlefield first aid.

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Most of the civilians were able bodied and took quickly to the training, but some seemed unable to hit the broad side of a groundcar at ten meters. Sathar target outlines two hundred meters away were almost impossible for those novice gunners to hit. Kev'cect made sure that they received fully automatic weapons, which could be fired in short burst covering a wider arc. He knew that this wouldn't actually increase their odds of hitting very much, but he hoped the noise they made would cause the Sathar to attack down other, seemingly safer firing lanes. Kev'cect paused for a moment to watch the sun set over the horizon, filling the sky with brilliant shades of red and purple.

Kev'cect found himself wondering if it would be his last.

One quarter of the way around the world, in the vast desert region of Volturnus, Junior Lieutenant Gorkma slowly drifted back to consciousness. He was first aware of pain near his shoulders, then a similar, if somewhat less intense pain coming from his hips. His eyes didn't appear to be working, but he could smell coolant and the acrid smell of burnt circuitry.

The smell triggered memories of the crash, which flooded back to him all at once.

Gorkma vividly recalled entering the atmosphere of this rock and learning that the damage made his craft very difficult to control. Gorkma had intended to land by the colony, but then his auxiliary power, which had been spotty, failed altogether. Without power, the fighter's atmospheric control surfaces failed to function. Everything on the fighter was computer controlled, so without power, there was no control. To make matters worse, the little atomic fighter had a very high wing loading, which made it glide only slightly better than a brick.

His fighter plummeted thousands of meters through the atmosphere before the auxiliary power began to work again. The controls felt sluggish and unresponsive, but Gorkma was able to fly the fighter to some extent. Still, the slowest rate of descent he could manage was over two-hundred meters per minute.

By the time Gorkma was able to pick out a landing spot, the controls were getting worse. He was still facing a dead stick landing, with no runway and no vertical landing thrusters. At four hundred meters Gorkma tried to put the landing gear down and noticed that the green "Landing gear locked" indicator was only displayed for the tail skids. The nose skid indicator was displaying a message on his Tactical display screen. It read "do not attempt landing before performing EVA checkout of nose gear. Landing without nose skid may cause loss of control and damage to astrogations and targeting sensor package."

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"Thanks a lot computer!" Gorlma spat, wondering what he had done to deserve such trouble.

As the ground came up, Gorlma pulled back on the stick as hard as he could to flare for landing, trading airspeed for a softer landing. He'd just brought the nose level with the horizon when the computer's voice warning intoned, "Auxiliary power failed. Atmospheric control surface function los-"

Then the fighter hit, smashing belly first into the sand. Gorlma was slammed against the restraining straps, then the right wing tip caught on a rock, spinning the fighter around and flipping the fighter onto its back, where it came to rest. Gorlma knew he must have lost consciousness because of that impact.

How long has it been, Gorlma wondered, and why can't I see?

Gorlma could smell air that wasn't from his Inssuit. Gorlma removed his gloves and flipped up the face plate. He cautiously reached up to touch his face, half expecting to find a bloody mess. His hand touched his skin and found it mercifully intact, as were his eyes. Gorlma breathed a sigh of relief, then felt his left wrist for the chronometer he wore there. His thumb hit the button, which lit up the face of the chronometer. Nothing looked better than those glowing green numbers.

17:38 G.S.T. At least I know I'm not blind! Then another thought hit him, *I've been unconscious for over seven hours!* Gorlma craned his head around, wondering if it was night time on this worthless rock. At that point, he realized that he was hanging upside down in his seat. He reached up his hand and felt the cockpit canopy over his head. No, beneath my head, he corrected himself.

He fought with the five point harness buckles for a moment, which suddenly sprang free, dumping him unceremoniously on his head.

"Ouch!" he muttered, feeling some of the sensation beginning to return to his shoulders and hips, which he realized had been hurt by the straps holding him in his seat.

He felt around in the dark for the manual cockpit canopy release levers. The task was made rather difficult by the complete darkness and the fact that the cockpit was upside down.

At last, he felt the release handles and cranks. The canopy began to move when he turned the crank, but only a few inches. Sand began to pour into the cockpit through the gap, and then he saw light.

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The light was enough to see by, and proved that at least one of Volturnus' moons were providing some illumination. The entire canopy had been imbedded in the sand to several centimeters above the level where the clear canopy met the hull.

Gorlma tried to turn the crank again, but the canopy was stuck. It was open only twelve centimeters near the front and a mere sliver at the back.

Great! It's jammed against the sand, with the entire weight of the fuselage on top of it, Gorlma thought miserably.

He thought for a moment, then realized that there was a chance he could still get out of this. He began to absorb his left arm into his body and slowly stretched his right arm into a long digging tool. He stretched it to two meters in length, then made his arm more thin to fit through the gap at the front of the canopy. After he had formed the limb to his satisfaction, he reached through the gap in the front and began pulling sand out from under the canopy. The process took several hours of hard work, but at last Gorlma was able to open the canopy enough to squeeze out.

Gorlma reached behind the seat and pulled out his survival bag, with water, food, vitasalt pills, a medkit, a laser pistol, and a toxyrad gauge. To his relief, the toxyrad gauge showed all reading except radiation to be within safe limits. The radiation was to be expected sitting this close to an atomic reactor, and Gorlma knew his Inssuit protected him to a large extent. Just to be safe, he put his visor back down and donned his gloves. He grabbed the Wartech laser pistol and crawled back to the front of the canopy. Poking the weapon out ahead of him, Gorlma squeezed through the gap and crawled up the short distance to the surface. He cautiously peered out and saw the Volturnian desert for the first time. It stretched for as far as he could see in every direction, utterly flat and featureless. The sand took on the faint reddish glow cast by the moon Leo, which hung cold and distant in the sky. Gorlma crawled the rest of the way out and holstered his laser pistol.

He began to walk around his fighter, inspecting the damage.

It wasn't as good as he'd hoped, but neither was it as bad as he'd feared. The bottom of the fuselage, now facing the sky, was scratched and dented in many places, particularly near the nose. The nose skid had apparently been partially down when he landed, because it was now completely torn off. Looking back along the furrow the fighter left through the sand, Gorlma spotted the skid jutting up from the sand a hundred meters back. The right rear landing skid was bent outward, almost in half, and broken hydraulic cushioning shocks leaked reddish fluid all over the belly of the craft. The right wing had sustained the worst damage as far as he could tell. The tip was shredded where it struck the rock that jutted from the sand fifty meters

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back. The Conformal Control Surface hydraulics, which warped the wing's shape instead of using more traditional flaps and ailerons, appeared to be undamaged, which was the best news Gorkma had received in the last seven hours. If he could get the fighter turned over, he might yet be able to make it fly again.

A glow on the horizon warned Gorkma that dawn was coming soon, and from what he remembered of his system briefing, some parts of this planet reached over thirty degrees Celsius.

Looking at the lack of apparent plant and animal life, Gorkma guessed that he was right in the heart of one of the desert regions. From what he knew of the native wildlife, he figured he should be glad of that. In particular, a creature the Sathar left as a gift to this planet's indigenous population stood out in his mind. It was fast, murderously efficient, and well camouflaged. The briefing, which he had only half listened to, said to be particularly weary of these things. They were called Rapidkillers, or something like that, by the local inhabitants.

Gorkma fought the urge to draw his laser pistol, instead pulling his survival pack from the cockpit and retrieving the tool kit. He knew he had his work cut out for him over the next few days.

Who am I kidding? It will be weeks before I get this fighter air worthy again... if ever!

Gorkma could no longer contain his rage and frustration. He kicked the side of the fighter as hard as he could, intending to curse it out for stranding him on this rock. When his foot struck the metal hull though, he let out a much different curse than he had planned. He hopped about on one leg, holding his wounded toe in his hands and yelping at the top of his air bellows.

Then, he heard a noise not more than five meters behind him.

It sounded like a footstep, but a heavy one. Gorkma was about to draw his pistol and turn, when he felt something strike the back of his neck.

Of all the lousy luck! Gorkma thought. Survive a dogfight with the Sathar, not to mention a crash landing, only to meet my death here at the hands of some native creature!

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Chapter 14: The Price of War

UPFS Vengeance, Outbound, Zebulon system F.Y. 3/25/156

Gev Braxal had searched just about everywhere for her friend. Gev hadn't seen Samantha since the flight debriefing ten hours earlier. The damaged fighters had landed without incident, except perhaps that Chief Technician Collins had been quite verbally upset by the damage to Gev's fighter. He tended to take those things a bit too personally. Collins acted as though Gev had damaged her fighter just to annoy him. When it appeared that Collins was going to chew her out, Gev gave him her best, "Say one wrong word" look. Collin's mouth snapped shut and he sullenly went about damage diagnostic procedures.

There were certain advantages to having a reputation for an uncontrollable temper, Gev thought happily. The joy drained out of her when she thought about the flight debriefing.

Phoenix Squadron was a close knit group, and the loss of two of its members affected every one of them deeply. Everyone hoped that Gorlma would return safe, but no one held out much hope for him or the colonists on Volturnus. Che'kek's loss affected them the most though. He had been a well-liked member of the squadron, and had been with them for years instead of weeks. Although his body still floated in the husk of his ruined fighter several Astronomical Units back, his formal Burial at Sea memorial service was scheduled for eighteen hundred hours today. Although he was officially assigned to the *Vengeance*, and the responsibility would normally fall upon the Captain, Gev had requested that she be the one to lead the service.

Given the long period Phoenix Squadron had spent at Fortress Pale while the *Vengeance* underwent its refit, Gev didn't feel right handing the service over to a Captain that had barely known Che'kek for nine days. Gev had just cleared that matter with Captain Morgan an hour earlier. Since that time, she had looked for her executive officer and friend. Truth be told, Gev was more than a little worried about Samantha.

She had been professional and composed during the debriefing, but Gev knew Samantha too long to miss the signs that something more than Che'kek's death was bothering her. After the debriefing, Gev thought Samantha had left a little too quickly and was not her normal outgoing self. In all their years of friendship, Gev had never known Samantha to prefer solitude to social interactions. Gev expected to see Samantha in the mess hall this morning, as had been their habit since Samantha became Executive Officer for the squadron. Breakfast gave them time to

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plan the day's schedule and go over potential problems with the squadron. Gev was certain she'd find Samantha soon. There were only so many places one could go on a ship, even one the size of the *Vengeance*.

Gev rounded the corner and came upon the new observation lounge. The room was a recent addition to the *Vengeance*, and Gev had to admit it was impressive. Built just aft of the Flightdecks where the hull narrowed, the lounge consisted of a two meter by ten meter room with a long outward sloping Plastiglass panel. The panel made up an entire wall and almost half of the floor. Positioned where it was, crew members could look straight down at the ship's atomic drives or enjoy the rest of the ninety degree plus panorama to the sides. The lounge was only dimly lit so as not to detract from the starfield. Gev leaned through the door and peered into the room. There was a single rail just before the window, and Gev saw Samantha slumped against it, looking down toward Volturnus.

That planet was now just a speck of light among a thousand others. Samantha appeared lost in thought, so Gev stepped quietly through the pressure seal and waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Without glancing up, Samantha noticed her and Gev heard her forlorn voice state, "Che'kek is back there, and I got him killed."

So, that's what's bothering her, Gev mused.

This had been Samantha's first combat action while she was in a command position. Losing a friend was never easy. Losing a friend you were responsible for was harder still. Gev walked up to Samantha and joined her by the rail. She reached out and placed her hand comfortingly on her friend's shoulder.

"Samantha, you can't blame yourself for what happened to Che'kek."

Samantha tore her gaze from the viewport and turned to Gev.

"Why not? After all. It's my fault. If I had ordered him to break off his attack run against the *Pestilence* earlier, he'd still be alive today. I knew that attack run was going wrong, but I hesitated. That hesitation is what got him killed."

Gev shook her head, "No Samantha. Che'kek knew the risks on that run as well as you did. He made the choice to continue toward the target while adjusting his radar. He did that because he knew it was important to hit the *Pestilence* as soon as possible."

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Samantha looked back down toward Volturnus, and paused before replying, "It was my decision to make, and my error, not his."

There was a finality in her statement that made Gev wonder if there was any hope of changing her friend's mind about blaming herself. Gev had never backed away from a tough fight before, and she wasn't going to start now.

Gev paused for a moment, choosing her words carefully. She looked down at Volturnus, then back at her human friend.

"Samantha, why did you go in with no assault rockets against the *Doomfist*?"

Samantha glanced up, surprised at the apparent change of subject.

"You already know why Gev. If I drew their fire, then Watson had a better chance of getting a hit. It was a logical decision. Are you saying it was wrong?"

Gev shook her head, "I never said that, but I was wondering how you made that choice."

Samantha brushed a hair out of her eye and tucked it behind her ear. "Gev, that destroyer had to go down. Everyone was counting on us. If we hadn't done everything we could to stop it, then it would have caught up with the *Challenger* and possibly damaged it so much that the rest of the Sathar fleet could catch up."

Gev nodded, and said, "Don't you think that Che'kek felt the same way you did?"

She watched Samantha's reaction to see if her friend really understood what she was saying, then continued. "I know you believe you could have made a difference if you'd ordered him to break off his attack sooner. The fact is, I've known Che'kek longer than you, and I know that he felt just as strongly about helping the fleet escape, even if that meant escaping without him. Had you ordered him to break off the attack immediately instead of weighing the odds, you would have been wrong."

Samantha looked quizzically at Gev, "You're saying I would have been wrong to try to save a man in my command?"

Gev shook her head, "Not at all, but what we do out there is dangerous. When you fly fighters, you live with the knowledge that a solid hit from any weapon a capital ship carries can reduce your ship to scrap metal in a split second. Each time we leave the *Vengeance*, there's a good chance many of us will not return. I stress flying defensively, and using your head to gain every tactical advantage, but in the

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end, sometimes it comes down to luck. The decisions we make can influence those odds, but it's up to the person in the cockpit to make it back in one piece."

Gev paused and reflected for a moment. "You're not alone second guessing yourself Samantha. Every good commander evaluates her actions after a battle. Our people count on us to watch out for their welfare, but they also count on us to let them do their jobs. Our job is to kill the enemy and reduce his ability to wage war against us. Every choice we make should take into account the risk our forces take and balance that against the potential damage we do to the enemy. We have an obligation to use our people as effectively as possible. If the potential payoff is high enough, we even have the obligation to order them into situations that will most likely get them killed. That's the hardest thing to learn about command. It sounds tough when you hear that in a classroom at the Academy, but in reality, it's far worse than you ever imagined."

"So how do you learn to deal with the guilt?", Samantha asked. "I can't get the picture of his mate and children waiting for him on Cassadine out of my mind. They still don't know that he won't be coming back. That all they have left of their father or spouse are the memories. They don't even know of the sacrifice he made for them, and for us."

Gev reflected on her words for a long time, staring out at the field of stars. Just when Samantha was wondering what she was thinking, Gev rejoined, "I guess that's why commanders have a long standing history of writing letters to the families of the men in their command that fell before the enemy. I'm still working on just how to tell his family how courageous and noble he was. I don't know if I have the words. Che'kek was one of a kind. His loss is the Galaxy's loss. I've always heard that it was comforting for the families to know that the men and women who have fallen in battle were loved by their comrades and admired by their commanders. In my time of service with Spacefleet, I've had to write eight letters, and do you want to know what the funny thing is? I remember the wording of every damn one. I'd love for this letter to be the last I'll have to write to loved ones of my men, but I'm too much of a realist to believe it."

Gev searched her eyes for some sign that Samantha had understood what Gev had wanted to tell her. Her mood didn't appear much improved, and there was a familiar weariness in her face now. It was a look Gev saw in the mirror just this morning.

Gev patted Samantha's arm. "Samantha, let yourself feel the loss and the guilt and the pain. Experience it fully, and then move on. This war is far from over, and as

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much as we miss Che'kek, the other men in our command need you here and now. You're a good leader Lieutenant Rand, and they need you. I need you too."

Samantha nodded once, and looked out the viewport once more. Gev could see the resolve in her eyes. Samantha would be there and be ready when the next fight came, Gev was sure of that.

What she needed now was time. As much as Gev wanted to help, she knew she had done all she could at this point. Gev slowly turned from her friend and walked out. The weight of command must ultimately be borne alone.