

The Invaders Attack

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DeadShot

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John A. Howard

S117

Womble

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Prelude

Tensions were high in the Galaxy. The Coalition, consisting of the Terrans, Plexxans, Orfine, and Kolari, were beginning to edge towards war with the Anti-Coalition, the Matrix, Union, and Brood. Nobody knew when a war would come but they knew it would come sooner or later. Nobody was expecting what was about to happen.

It was a normal day, a day just like any other days. People were chatting, the Coalition and Anti-Coalition were yelling at each other, and the Hive, not in either, did nothing in particular. Others were just floating through space. I was the latter. I was in Ceti Alpha having some fun with some of the beasts that lived there-except the Klakanids because they wouldn't buy my minerals then-and wasn't paying any attention when my Valiant, *Running With Wolves*, started to get pulled towards Jeddah. I first noticed it when my ships screen said "Target- Jeddah, Moving to Orbit" I started to steer away but too no avail, my ship was set to go there and wasn't going to deviate from its current path.

When I entered orbit I was awed to see a base on the ground. It wasn't of Matrix build, of any build he knew of for that matter, until he saw a crashed ship. He knew instantly where he was. He was at the old Invader base that had been rumoured to be in Ceti Alpha. Nobody had been able to find it, until now. He just sat there, staring in awe.

Suddenly, an alarm went off and the bases guns started to shoot at me. I tried to steer out of orbit again and my ship responded this time. I was out of orbit.

"I found it! I found it!" I yelled over the global intercom. "What did you find?" Asked everyone. "I found the Invader bas-" I stopped when I saw, off in the distance, dozens of Worldships heading my way. "Oh...my...god." I said. "What?!" Asked everybody.

"INVADERS IN CETI ALPHA! INVADERS IN CETI ALPHA! I FOUND THEIR BASE AND SET OFF AN ALARM AND NOW THEIR HERE! REQUEST ASSISTANCE! REQUEST ASSISTANCE!" They were already shooting at me but because I was in a fighter they had a hard time hitting me. Klakanids were attacking the Invader ships and took a few down until there were no more Klakanids left. By then reinforcements had arrived. Among the first were ships from the Federation, led by one old friend.

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Orfine to the rescue?

General Chad, Vice-Leader of the Orfine-Alliance, was leading the Orfine Cloaking Pack on a training mission in Rigel when he heard some loud bangs coming from Ceti Alpha. He said on the intercom to his Pack:

"Let's go check this out, maybe there are some Pirates to kill." The Orfines smiled hungrily.

Chad entered Ceti Alpha and drove towards the middle. Chad gazed around in awe. Never had such a deadly fleet been seen. He saw masses of Invader ships destroying all in their sight. Preservers were being slaughtered. Nevertheless, the question remained. Help the Matrix?

Then, he saw the Plexxans going to assist Jake. He knew right then and there what to do. He said over the intercom:

"Orfine Cloaking Pack, open fire on the nearest Worldship!"

BANG! The Orfine were well-trained, and the salvo destroyed the Black Hole. Messages of thanks were sent on the intercom by all ships: the ship was hit just as it was about to attack. However, something very strange then happened. Appearing out of thin space were Invader ships: at least thirty of them. Invader Cloakers! This was unreal! Chad scanned the arena, considering his options. Realising that he was cornered, he gulped, and turned his gun towards the nearest Invader ship...

Announcements and Revelations

As the Second Inauguration of Emperor Taveius of the Terran Empire had started, the old Plexxan President slowly walked towards the Great Hall of Terra after landing his Presidential Yacht that had carried him from the Plexxan Mothership in orbit of Earth. By his side there were several Plexxan soldiers, assigned to guard their leader. As Howard entered the Great Hall he noticed the huge tables standing in the length of the building. Terran Council was seated on the end of the Great Hall. Ironically Taveius had decided that several Races present at the ceremony would be seated opposite of each other.

The Announcer noticed the President approaching the Great Hall, and announced him in an appropriate manner: "Hear hear!! On behalf of the Federation of the Plexxan People, stretching from Castor to Megrez, now entering the Great Hall of Terra is Captain John A. Howard, President of the Plexxan People, Leader of the Federation Grand Council!!!!" Howard made his way to the table at the end, towards Taveius. "Taveius!!" sounded his thundering voice through the gigantic Great Hall. The sound of his voice resonated from wall to wall, waking up some of the elderly Councillors.

"Taveius, old friend! May I congratulate you on behalf of the Plexxan Federation on your re-ascension?" "You may good friend; you may" was the response from the smiling Emperor-to-be.

"Congratulations then!" As Howard came closer to Taveius he bent forward and whispered: "You should have never left that Thrown my friend" and he made his way to the designated seating for the Federation delegation.

Next to enter was Machinehr, Overlord of the Union. The Announcer struggled with the Slah'ke names but managed. An old Slah'ke entered the Hall, dressed in a green with gold cape, crown on top of his scaly head, and his slitted eyes filled with disgust at the sight of the interior of the Great Hall.

"Taveius" the sound of the Overlords voice was hissing, soft and cold. "Terran foolishness knows no end I see." With that he made his way to his designated seating. In his path a ten-piece entourage followed consisting of soldiers and mostly slaves to carry several artefacts. Howard slowly sat down in his chair, making sure that his Plexxan Battleswords were not obstructed by the chair itself and looked up. The bright light in the Hall made his silver beard shine even more than normal and his eyes narrowed for the sight in front of him. Machinehr was sitting directly opposite to him, eying him with disgust and hatred, as always.

Slowly but surely Leaders of all Races arrived, Marc7005 on behalf of the Kolari Star Empire, the young Womble represented the Orfine Alliance, the Hive had sent one of their senior Councillors: Jasvecht. The last one to enter was Walt. A former Pirate, his body crippled by old age and disease, he slowly managed to make way to his appointed seat without saying a word.

The only one missing was Viga. The old Leader of the Matrix had not responded to the invitation to the ceremony. This had made tensions between the Matrix and the Empire skyrocket.

During the Ceremony Howard had a chance to speak with his good friend Marc7005 outside of the usual political talks they had. It was well-known that Howard was one of very few in the galaxy that was fluent in the Kolari language, which made the conversation pleasantly private.

At a certain point the President overheard a remark made by Machinehr, made at his address. Turning his head towards the Overlord, the old Plexxan suddenly to the surprise of all present

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spoke in a language nobody understood, nobody but the old Overlord. For a few minutes the both of them spoke without anyone understanding a thing. Out of nowhere Machinehr jumped up, breathing heavily, his eyes sprouting fire and drew his sword. Howard didn't move a muscle on the other hand.

Right then and there, the old Slah'ke threw a throwing knife at the President, who sat calmly in his chair. The knife hit a force field that was placed around all tables, for security reasons.

Taveius rose from his thrown and was about to ask for an explanation when the enormous view screen behind him suddenly activated itself. Peering into the Great Hall was a disgusting creature, more disgusting than a Brood could ever be.

Womble, the Leader of the Orfine, young and inexperienced, clearly struggled to hide his fear, while Marc7005 was just plain astonished by what he saw.

Howard slowly stood up, drawing everyone's attention towards him, and he spoke: "Dylan!! I see you found another party to crash! What in the name of all that is holy are you doing here? How dare you show your ugly face in my presence!!!" His thundering voice carried through the entire Hall, with an almost deafening volume.

Those that had recognised Bob Dylan on the view screen, knew very well that nobody had ever called him "Dylan". The boldest of all called him by his first name, but that was as far as anyone dared to stretch that line.

Howard stood there, as it seemed all alone on the top. He seemed to rise above everyone else, confidence in his posture, hatred and mockery in his voice. His eyes told a story, an old and ancient story. Bob and Howard had met before, and it hadn't been pleasant.

In the meantime the old Invader had begun his usual evil laughter, which resonated through the ears of all. "You old Plexxan fool! I see you still breathe up to this day. But your last days have come Howard! Your beard has grown long enough; it is time for you to find your end here and now! As you all will, for this Galaxy will be MINE!!!!".

Taveius was about to unleash his anger upon the view screen, when the Invaders image disappeared from it.

The Hive delegates left right away, horrified by what they had heard. All others stood there, eying the aged silver haired Plexxan in complete and utter disbelief.

Then Howard, and all other leaders got a communiqué on their communicators: Ceti Alpha was under attack!!!

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Defeat

BOOM! The Invader Ships were incredible! Chad fought on in his scarab, but most of the Orfine Cloakers had either ran or been destroyed. Chad desperately dodged another shot, when: BANG!!! The Invaders had breached his shield and were now pounding at his hull. Chad gasped, and using his battle knowledge tried to get back on top of things. He went for the cloak, but it was out. The Allies were helping him as best they could: the Federation were fighting bravely, and even a few Preservers had come to his aid, but he was dying, and fast. He needed backup!

He needed to send an Emergency message, but he did not know who. Being the loyal Orfine Vice-Leader, the only code that came to his mind was that of his leader, Womble. As another blast hit his scarab's hull, sending lights flashing, he sent a message to Womble, vaguely remembering him being at some sort of conference.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY! THIS IS CHAD- I AM ABOUT TO DIE. THE INVADERS ARE AT CETI ALPHA. HE-" And he saw something he will never forget. As the cloakers pulled back, something came out from space. Chad's heart plummeted. He had heard stories about this ship, but never actually seen it. Although, thinking laterally, as he always did. He jumped into his escape pod, while the Invaders had pulled back. Fear seemed to engulf the system. He heard a blast behind him, and glanced back to see floating rubble where his ship used to be. With a gulp, he calmly finished his message to Womble:

"I'm returning to Olfus in my escape pod: but don't get excited. Mr Tea lives."

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Reinforcements

As he travelled in Longsword a member of his crew came to him and said:

- We intercepted a message sir!
- Show me crewman!
- SIR!

As the message appeared on the screen S117 started to smile.

- Scan Ceti Alpha immediately, I want to know what is there now !!
- SIR!

The crew member went to his office and started looking at his pad doing a scan to Ceti Alpha. S117 wondered if his friend was there and if together they would defeat Mr Tea. Some minutes later the crewman came back and showed him his screen pad, after seeing the list, S117 gave the order:

- Set Course to Ceti Alpha, we have a battle to attend to.

The ship started to travel to Ceti Alpha and from there S117 could hear all the mayday messages floating around in all frequencies. As he entered the system a Black Hole welcomed him nicely.

- Shields up!!! We have to thank him for this warm welcome.

Shields became online and as soon as the Black Hole started moving towards him S117 gave the order:

- Shoot him down !!!

Super Heavy Laser was fired from the Longsword and did a straight hit but the Black Hole's shields didn't go down, not even a scratch, all data showed that his shields came down to 98% and S117 was starting to worry.

As the Longsword orbited Jeddah, S117 tried to figure out a way of destroying that Black Hole.

Suddenly he saw a fleet entering Ceti Alpha and it was lead by his friend John A. Howard, Taveius and Chad were also there.

- SIR! Help as.....
- Yes I know soldier, I can see that from my screen. Did you complete all scans on that Black Hole....
- Yes SIR
- Any weak spot?
- I think we found one but we aren't sure.
- Go ahead and tell me....
- They have two or more reactors sir, if we take one down and the ship loses all power and can only use back up two minutes later.
- Send that report to the fleet I want them to know as much as I do.
- SIR !

S117 went back to his seat where he now glanced a pair of Black Holes coming in his direction, luckily they still had to break the shields to be able to kill him. After waiting three long minutes to strike, he got a message, it was from JOEONE. He was right by his side in his Scarab.

As the Fleet came in the Black Holes quickly turned their attention to them allowing S117 to leave the planet's orbit but he didn't do it.....yet.....

To Try Once More

General Chad arrived at Olfus in an escape pod and jumped out. He looked around the starbase: it was deserted! Chad waited two minutes for a reply from Womble, and it never came. He knew he couldn't just sit there: he hopped into an explorer and set course for Earth, where the Great Terran Hall was. He needed this support.

Chad burst into the Great Hall, to see all the leaders of the Galaxy gazing at John Howard, all with the exception of the sneering Machinehr. Chad had gone for the big entry, but nobody even seemed to notice. Chad realised something was wrong, so he just took a seat in the corner. Then, Marc7005 noticed him.

"Hey Chad, my old friend. How goes it?" Marc asked.

"Not good, Marc." Chad replied. A few heads turned his way.

"The Invader Base has been found in Ceti Alpha: it has a fleet you wouldn't imagine.

Plexxans, Matrix and a few Orfine are left, but we are losing badly. We need serious help."

Gasped followed what Chad had said: some out of outrage, some out of belief, and some out of disbelief.

"Oh, and I need a new ship. Will you sell me an Invincible, Taveius?" Taveius nodded, and then it happened.

Chad strode down the hall with Taveius, his colleague in times of war. There was a sense of urgency around, and he glanced behind to see the group of leaders following him. Among the group was his close friend Marc7005, and he dropped back to talk to him.

"Pretty quick reaction," Chad commented in a whispering voice.

"I know," replied Marc.

"We already knew: we got your communication. But that isn't the big news."

"What is?" asked Chad.

"Bob Dylan came on the screen, saying he was going to rule the Galaxy." Before Chad could even gasp, Taveius, the most powerful man in the Galaxy, bellowed:

"Chad! I have found you a ship; it's a bit rusty, but it will do." Chad walked over to the Invincible: it had seen better days. But anything was good.

"Thanks, mate." Chad said, shaking the Emperor's hand.

All around him, the greatest pilots in the galaxy were hopping into ships: some old, some not so old, but all powerful. Chad glanced across, to see his Commander-in-Chief, Womble, giving him a wave in his powerful Grimtooth. Chad heard on his communicator from his Leader:

"The Orfine Fleets are on there way to Ceti Alpha. I heard you got our Cloaking Pack destroyed."

The way Womble said this enticed Chad to chuckle, but not this time. He just grimaced and replied:

"It was worth it." And they were off.

Led by Plexxan President John A. Howard (with undeniable distaste from Machinehr), the fleet of ships headed towards Ceti Alpha. Even from thousands, maybe millions of kilometres away, the carnage could be heard. The less experienced members of the fleet were sweating. People like Marc appeared to be enjoying it.

As they entered Ceti Alpha, everybody, including Howard and Taveius gasped. Never had such a massacring been seen: against the Invader Fleet, the allies were few and far between. Invader Ships were everywhere: and they always seemed to be right in front of piles of

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debris; ship debris. The Allies were losing.

Most Allies were retreating: not many had the bravery to stand up against such an armada. Blasts were everywhere. The light was blinding. Then, Chad spoke, over the System communicator, in a very deep and powerful voice:

"SILENCE!!!"

And all was still...

The Invaders then turned towards the fleet, and sped towards them. Although the Allies had many fearsome fighters, the Invaders had the power of Rank 5 ships. The two forces sped towards each other, ready to clash. Then Chad remembered something, and he felt so stupid for not mentioning it sooner:

"GUYS!!!" he yelled on the wing communicator.

"Mr Tea is here in the Invader Flagship!!!" He knew this was big news.

The fleet continued towards the Invaders, but unease was around: Mr Tea, who was thought to have been finished off years ago, was alive!

"Are you sure?" John Howard said in a private communication to Chad, only a few seconds before the Invaders were upon them.

"Yes, John. This isn't good." Was Chad's reply.

The battle was set to be big: the best ships in the Universe about to clash.

BANG! The Allies struck first, concentrating fire on the front Invader ships. The formation of the Invaders wasn't very good, so a few ships were ahead of the bunch. Although outgunned, the hardened Allies stayed in line and after seven synchronised salvos, the Allies had destroyed a small bunch of ships. However, in the distance, reinforcements could be seen. The Invaders decided to retreat, and join with the others.

"Don't let them get away!" yelled Marc.

"Those ships are slow. Chad, Taveius, Jasvecht, take the left flank. Draw them towards me and the others. Marc, take your guards and cover the rear!" said John meticulously, in his powerful voice.

The Allies set about the plan, and it appeared to be working. John was right: the Invaders didn't possess the same speed the Allies had, and his idea had them breaking apart. Chad fired the Super Heavy Laser on his ship, and with some help, had destroyed another Invader Ship. Just when it looked like victory was near, a huge beam roared past Chad's ship. It blasted into Jasvecht, and the ship totally disintegrated. Chad looked up, and his heart sunk. It was Mr Tea, coming through the middle of the battle, and he didn't look happy.

"RETREAT!!! IT'S MR TEA!!! RETREAT!!!" Someone yelled. Panic seemed to engulf the system, and everybody tried to make the jump. It didn't work!!! They were stuck!!! Most Allies turned around.

"HEEEEEELLL-!!!" yelled Machinehr, but his ship soon was no more. Mr Tea fired again and again: he could keep up with the Allies. All the Allies were dying: the few who fought were killed. The majority ran, and were being shot at will. Chad himself flew over Mr Tea's ship and fired, but it returned fire and hit Chad's tail. Chad tried to get out of range, get to repairs, but his engine was damaged. He fired a few more, but he was in trouble. A huge cackling voice echoed around the system. Then, something caught Mr Tea's attention. Floating right in front of him lay the defiant John Howard.

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Destroy Thy Enemy

S117 looked into his screen, every ship of the fleet were retreating, and one by one were being destroyed by Mr Tea. Suddenly he saw John A. Howard's ship facing Mr Tea flagship and then started thinking to himself: *No one can survive a shot made Mr Tea, what John is doing is madness, the hypergate on this planet still works and they are both in the jump point.* S117 started to smile.

- Ready up for hyper jump, let's use this hypergate now !!!

Using the hypergate, Longsword jumps in to hyper.

- Enter Ceti Alpha now !!! - yelled S117.

- Yes sir !!! - said the crew.

Now Longsword was entering the system and as he entered he saw Mr Tea's flagship at twenty million kilometres.

- Are weapons ready? - asked S117.

- Yes sir !!! - said the weapons officer.

- Fire all weapons against that flagship now !!

All the weapons on the Longsword fired and this time they did some damage, one of the three shields on the flagship went down and now John had a clean shot on Mr Tea. Mr Tea now turned and faced the Longsword.

- Sir, that flagship is sending us a message - said the communications officer.

- Show it on the screen - replied S117.

Mr Tea appeared on the screen he was mad and he wanted revenge.

- How dare you to attack me !!!! You'll suffer my wrath !!!! - screamed Mr Tea.

- Oh Sorry, but how can you make me suffer if you don't have a ship.

As soon as S117 finished that last word the Longsword and the Bloodred Death's weapons all fired at the same time, the two shields of Mr Tea's flagship were both gone and the Longsword's Distortion Cannon hit Mr Tea's flagship reactor, leaving Mr Tea floating with no system active. A message from John A. Howard came in.

You do the last shot

And so S117 did as he shot his SuperHeavy Laser and destroyed Mr Tea's flagship.

A Galaxy at War!!

As the Leaders of the Galaxy overcame their horror of the communications they received about the attack upon Ceti Alpha and the announcement made by Bob Dylan, nobody seemed to notice the old President quickly leaving the Great Hall. He transported onto his flagship that lay in orbit around Earth: the mighty Bloodred Death. A Paladin no less legendary than its Captain.

A channel was opened to the Plexxan High Council and the powerful voice of the President made the speakers in Brunneran buckle under the stress the volume caused: "Ready the Fleet! Dylan will not rule this Galaxy, not as long as there is a Plexxan to defend it!!!"

Thousands of Paladins and close to a million fighters soon joined their President in hyperspace. A private message read that Marc had called his Council and they were rushing to assemble their fleets in Deneb.

Taveius had his monstrous fleet hypering out of the systems of the Empire at an astonishing rate, and while the Federation steered her fleet towards Ceti Alpha word came from the Matrix...

As Howard allowed the Matrix hail to appear on his tactical view screen, the oldest of all Preservers - at least of those that were functioning - appeared. "Howard" said the metallic voice of Viga, "You might want to stay clear of Ceti Alpha. We have ourselves a little squabble with the Invaders here."

"Viga, it's probably one of your circuit malfunctions that causes you to say something like that, but you should know that Dylan doesn't scare me. He will not set foot in this Galaxy." and with that the transmission ended.

Only moments later the Federation flagship jumped into the war torn system of Ceti Alpha only to see the Matrix fleets being slaughtered left and right.

"Ready weapons, power up the shields!!" the Captains voice was soft and almost silent but seemed to be booming all over the bridge.

As the Federation fleet jumped in and formed up behind Bloodred Death, one Invader ship seemed to notice the new arrivals and set course for Bloodred Death.

The Fleet received a message coming from Howard right that very moment: "Stay in position, wait for the Kolari and the Orfine to join up with you. I will take care of that Invader." And then he gave the order to plot an intercept course for the Invader ship....

While ships kept pouring into Ceti Alpha, among which a surprisingly large Brood fleet under the command of Walt, who just had been genetically stripped of the shortcomings his body endured due to his advanced age, Howard steered the Bloodred Death into position. Tea was moving towards him at high cruising speed. Sensors read that the Invader was charging weapons, thinning that Bloodred Death was no match for his ship.

As the first weapons fire hit the shields of the mighty Paladin, Howard's gunner returned fire, destroying the shields of his attacker and damaging his engines.

Most of the power of the shields was gone, Howard dared to steer the front of the ship towards his opponent again, intending to completely destroy him. The Invader ships hull almost crumbled under the stress of the Missile impact, and the ship was rapidly losing power due to the reactor being hit.

Out of nowhere, a Terran Battle Cruiser appeared, one with familiar markings. The old Plexxan recognised the ship immediately and ordered the Comm-officer to open a private channel to its captain.

Seconds later, a very familiar face appeared on the view screen on the bridge. The President slowly rose from his seat, and his thundering voice filled the speakers of the Battle Cruiser: "Spartan. How nice to see you again old friend!". S117 smiled and returned the greeting:

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"You got yourself another spitting contest here Howard? When will you learn, when will you have proven yourself enough? Let that poor Invader lick his wounds and go back to the hellhole he came from!". "I will let that lowlife be, but only if you finish him off. That Tactical officer of yours needs the practice." growled Howard.
And so, the system of Ceti Alpha witnessed the destruction of the flagship of Mr. Tea by the Longsword, commanded by S117, "The Spartan".

Victory and Defeat

After the destroying Mr Tea with the help of John A. Howard, he looks around him, all the Black Holes and Worldships seem like they were confused, there was no one to command them now and they were flying without knowing what to do. The fleet lead by John A. Howard quickly took advantage of that and started destroying them one by one, after the last one was destroyed everyone was happy and John A. Howard opened his comm. and said to everyone:

- This is time to celebrate, all are invited to Castor where we all will celebrate - said John with a big smile.

Everyone started to enter hyperspace and heading to Castor, last ship to enter hyperspace was the Longsword that was still repairing because of the fight he had with Mr Tea's flagship, as S117 set course to Castor he started thinking that that victory was too easy. As he entered Castor with the rest of the group he soon saw that he was right.

In his radar a massive Egaran Fleet lead by Warlord Kheng was now attacking Castor cleaning the planets and soon they witnessed the fall of the Federation Starbase.

A communication was received in the Longsword it came directly from John A. Howard's flagship.

- All ships to battle, we can still save what is left !!! - John growled with a loud voice.

Every single ship that wasn't Egaran was now shooting every single enemy ship, after some minutes of battle our fleet was completely crippled, S117 then looked to hyperspace and saw the Slah'ke Fleet coming to Castor, he then realised there was still hope.

As the Slah'ke Fleet entered the system an Orfine ship was there to welcome them using communications:

- Welcome Machinehr, thanks for coming to help us, we need it - said the Orfine.

Suddenly out of nowhere, Machinehr's flagship started shooting the Orfine ship, the Orfine still had time to use escape pod that was retrieved by one of our fleet members.

- Would you mind explaining what it is that you think you are doing Machinehr? - asked John with some agitation in his voice.

- Winning! - said Machinehr with a big evil smile.

The Egarans were now fighting the last of the last and the Slah'ke our now moving towards us. As Machinehr moved a Terran entered the system, it was Taveius, the new elected Emperor in his faithful Battle Cruiser Galactica.

- How dare you betray the Galaxy in such a foul way Machinehr!!!! - said Taveius, clearly furious about the actions of the Slah'ke.

- I didn't betray if that's what matters, I was never one your side - Machinehr hissed.

As Machinehr finished, the Mech Warrior now headed in Taveius' direction. The Emperor however didn't move a muscle. S117 quickly started to eliminate every Egaran in his way to be able to get to his Emperor but it became clear that they were to great in numbers.

- Let's take this fight somewhere else dirty lizard - said Taveius.

- Sure - answered the Slah'ke Dictator

Both the Terran Emperor and the Slah'ke Dictator hypered and headed to Ceti Alpha. S117 and John A. Howard were still in Castor that with the help of General Chad was cleared in a matter of minutes leaving the Slah'ke Fleet and the Quad Alliance Fleet alone.

Unpleasant Acquaintance

Chad fired his gun and soon the Egarans were finished. Chad looked around and smiled, and all seemed at peace. However, he heard a ship's gun, and he turned around. Chad gasped. Taveius was surrounded by Slah'ke ships, one of them Machinehr. Chad's heart sunk as he heard on the intercom:

"Any lasssst wordsssss, Taveiussss?" hissed Machinehr. Taveius stayed proud, in his almighty ship.

"You'll never get away with this, Machinehr." Taveius replied. By now Chad was zooming across the system, racing to try to save Taveius.

"Contraire, Taveiusss, I already have..." And he fired. Taveius' ship was ripped apart by the Dual Gamma Cannon of Machinehr, and he exploded in a blinding flash of light.

"NOOOOOO!" Screamed Chad over the intercom. Machinehr turned to see him coming, and smiled at him. However, Chad fired at Machinehr, knocking his ship back and the grin off his face. Before Chad could fire another shot, Machinehr has made the hyperspace jump.

Chad parked at Brunneran, to come into a huge celebration. Why shouldn't they be celebrating? Two unlikely victories in one day! However, Chad got out gloomily and strolled head down to wherever his feet would lead him. Then John came up to him.

"Well done today Chad, have a pint!" he said, handing Chad a beer. Chad took it but didn't drink it.

"J-John..." Chad stuttered.

"Yes Chad?" said John, now more serious.

"Machinehr got Taveius..." Chad said, the words sinking in.

"What? That is impossible... No... NO!!!" John Howard yelled, stopping the festivities, and everyone stared at him.

"Machinehr and his Slah'ke killed Taveius- every single one of those slimy lizards is now an enemy of the Galaxy!" Much murmuring started. Then, on the screen, appeared a familiar face:

"Nice party, Chad? John?"

"Not now, Dylan!" Chad replied.

"So, you can't take the fact then." said Bob Dylan smugly.

"SHUT UP!!!" Yelled Chad, as he took out his disintegrator and disintegrated the screen.

"John," Chad said aside to the Federation President.

"Yes, Chad?" sighed John.

"How did Dylan know?" Chad asked. John Howard stopped to think.

"We don't know much John, but I think I do know, the Galaxy is at war."

War at the Doorstep

Bloodred Death was repaired and Howard recalled every officer and crewman from the shore leave the crew had been granted in order to be able to celebrate.

“Release docking clamps!!”, the old voice that had sounded on so many bridges of equally many ships sounded like never before. Nobody dared to intervene with a Plexxan celebration, not when Howard was around.

As the mighty Plexxan Fleets launched again, the Slah’ke forces seemed to be confused by their lack of a leader for them to follow in this battle.

S117 and John seemed to think the same thing as they both gave the same order on the fleet channel: “Those filthy lizards are confused now, lets take them down and worry about Keng and his pathetic excuse for a war fleet later!!” S117 had taken control of the Terran Fleet in the absence of his Emperor to lead them, and General Chad had left his trusted friend Womble in command of the Orfine forces.

The Starbase of Brunneran seemed to spit out endless amounts of warships in only minutes. A massive fleet formed around the Plexxan home planet of Padeen as the first ships opened fire upon the invading Slah’ke.

A massive battle ensued. Union-built ships perished left and right, taking more Allied vessels with them into the fiery pits of hell than the Allies could afford...

Hours on end they fought, Egarans and Slah’ke alike soon found themselves outnumbered and on the verge of defeat.

In the middle of the battle a haunting howl spread over the system wide communications. It was General Chad. Howard was too busy to take any notice of the reason behind the cry for he was fighting half a squadron of Union fighters on his own. He noticed the Longsword setting course for a ship known as "The Red Reaper", the flagship of Warlord Keng, leader of the Egarans.

As the last one of the Union fighters perished by the firing of his Heavy Missile Launcher, Howard ordered to set a course for the Longsword. He wasn't going to take the chance that his good friend might lose this battle.

But the Com-officer spoke up: “Sir, I have a hail coming in from the Longsword!” “On screen!” came the response from the old President.

S117 appeared on the view screen and said: “John, lead the fleet. I will take care of Keng. Don't disagree with me. Keng is mine!” and the Terran captain disappeared from the view screen. “You heard the man, turn around and find a Lizard to teach some manners to!”

Howard ordered to his bridge officers.

The Tactical Officer of the Bloodred Death then noticed the Desta Kann pounding upon several unfortunate Kolari and Orfine warships. Bloodred Death manoeuvred through the battle, dodging enemy and friendly fire until she came in range of the Desta Kann and opened fire.

Facing a small squadron of warships, the Desta Kann was doomed, she fired once upon the Bloodred Death before the planetary guns of Occulons pulverized the ship.

"SIR! The Longsword!!!" the young Operations Officer stood behind his console as if he were frozen. All he could manage to do was relaying what he saw on his sensors to the central view screen.

The sight which unfolded into photons and energy shocked the old Plexxan Captain, his legs lost their ability to function and he found himself stumbling backwards, desperately trying to reach for his chair.

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On the view screen the mighty Longsword was shown in battle with The Red Reaper. At first sight it looked to John that his old friend was winning. He recognised several of the manoeuvres that the Longsword performed.

Then, the sensor data was projected in the lower left corner of the screen, and Howard's heart fell into a deep state of despair.

S117 was losing. Keng severely damaged the powerful battle cruiser, and Howard feared for the life of his friend, but could do nothing to help him, he was too far away.

All the sudden, out of nowhere, a flash of light appeared, almost blinding the view upon the battle, and S117's voice sounded with a tone of surprise throughout the system: "What!?!? YOU?? What is going on?? Why are yo....." And both the Longsword and the Red Reaper disappeared in thin air.

"Scan the system! Scan hyperspace!!! I want to know where they went!!!" was the immediate response that came from the Captain of the Bloodred Death. His voice rolled from wall to wall, snapping his bridge officers out of the trance that was educed by what they just had seen.

Moments later the word came: neither the Red Reaper nor the Longsword could be found. As the First Officer reported this disturbing news to his Captain, he saw something he had never seen before in the eyes of the man he had served for so many years. Howard seemed taken completely off guard, he slowly fell back into his chair and whispered: "What's the status of the battle?" The Tactical officer checked his console before answering: "Egarans are retreating and the last Union are pinned down by Terran and Kolari forces near Hoppens Sir."

The Presidents voice slowly cut through the air on his bridge, softly and fragile as the voice of a broken man: "Take us to Brunneran, request the entire fleet to dock."

As the Captains of the Terran, Orfine and Kolari fleets answered his request with acceptance, the Presidential flagship set course for its home: Brunneran.

Festivities had already started when Howard stepped through the airlock onto the starbase. A young Orfine made his way towards him and said: "Sir, Mr. President, my leader, General Chad requests that you join him as soon as you disembark. He has disturbing news for you." "Alright, bring me to him." was the answer of the old Plexxan. Soon Howard met up with Chad, and asked him what was so important that it had to be discussed right away. "Well John," growled the Orfine, "you might want to sit down before I tell you what it is that is the matter." With that, the President was offered a chair, which he refused. "I think I can handle it my young friend." was his commentary. "Alright, Taveius... he is... no longer with us. He was killed by Machinehr."

For a moment the entire world stood still for the old Plexxan, then his response came: "No, no, not Taveius!!". His voice was so loud that festivities seized, and many people looked around confused, wondering what it was that made Howard raise his voice to such a level. Howard whispered to his furred friend, his voice trembling of emotion: "Call Marc7005, call Walt, find Viga and get a representative of the Empire to join me in Conference Room B-15-Sigma."

Soon the Conference Room was occupied by the most powerful people in the Galaxy, however if one didn't know better one would have found the sight extremely amusing: a one hundred thirty-five year-old white-haired Plexxan, a Preserver whose age was only to be

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guessed, a young energetic Orfine, a seemingly ageless Kolari and a Brood who was thought to be older than the Plexxan Federation had existed...

A robotic voice filled the spacious room: "Who is it that we are waiting here for, Howard?"

Silence followed, and it seemed that Howard was not really present, so Marc7005 answered instead: "The Terrans still haven't sent a representative..."

To Be Or Not To Be

Captain S117 stood with his hands behind his back and tried to look calm. Not an easy thing when his ship was on a collision course with Warlord Keng flagship and his battle group. Inside adrenaline raced through his blood and his pulse pounded.

He had to at least appear in control for his crew. He was asking a lot from them.....probably everything in fact.

The flagship was three times as massive as the Longsword. She bristled with pulse laser turrets, insect like antennae, and missile pods. The flagship and the Egaran fleet moved toward the Longsword. They slowly drifted in system toward Padeen.

Their sides faced the C709 Longsword and the Singularity Cannon had now fired at him but missed.

- "Detecting high levels of radiation" One of his ships officers said. "They're getting ready to fire their Cannons, Captain"

- "Course correction, sir?" His navigation's officer asked. His fingers tapped in a new heading to hyper the ship out of the system.

- "Stay on course" It took Captain S117 concentration to say that.

His Navigation's Officer turned and started to speak but Captain S117 didn't have time to address his concerns.

- "Gunner" Captain S117 said. "Arm a Fusion Torpedo. Remove all safety locks."

- "Torpedo armed, sir" The gunner face was a mask of grim determination.

- "Set the Torpedo to remote destruction and set the course for mark one eight zero. Full burn for twelve seconds."

- "Aye, sir" he said, tapped in the parameters, and locked them into the system. "Torpedo ready, sir."

- "Sir, that course fires the torpedo directly away from our enemies."

- "I am aware of that, sit down and await for further orders." The Gunner sat. He rubbed his temple with a trembling hand, His other hand balled into a fist.

Captain S117 linked it the NAV-system and set a countdown timer on his data pad. Twenty-nine seconds. "on my mark, Gunner, launch that torpedo....and not a moment before."

- "Aye, sir." His hand hovered the control panel. "SuperHeavy Laser is still hot, Captain" he reminded him.

- "Divert the energy keeping the gun at full charge and route them to the engines." Captain S117 ordered.

- "Diverting energy now, engines now operating at one hundred fifty per cent of rated output. Red line in two minutes."

- "Contact! Contact!" the navigation officer shouted. "Enemy pulse torpedoes fired, sir!"

Lighting erupted from the Egaran battle group and it looked as it could burn space itself. The torpedoes were on a direct course for the Longsword.

- "Course correction, sir?" NAV officer asked.

- "Negative, continue on this heading. Arm all Torpedoes and rotate launch arcs one eight zero degrees."

S117 found himself strangely calm, this would either work or it would not. The odds were long, but he was confident that his actions were the only option to survive this encounter.

- "Collision with torpedoes in nineteen seconds, sir" The officer said.

- "Sir! This is suicide! Our armour can't withstand....."

S117 cut him off - "Mister, man your station or I will have you removed from the ship"

- "Collision in seven seconds"

- Soldier, transfer emergency thrusters controls to my station"

- "Yes...yes, sir"

Captain S117 consulted the countdown timer on his data pad. "Officer, fire the torpedo"

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- "Torpedo away, sir"

Captain S117 waited a heartbeat then hit the emergency thrusters to port. A bang resonated through the ship's hull.

The twin torpedoes streaked along their trajectories for a moment, then lazily arced, continuing their pursuit of the Longsword.

Captain S117 marvelled at the Egarans ability to direct those torpedoes from such a great distance. " Good" Captain S117 muttered to himself. "Chase us all the way to hell, you bastards."

- "Track them" he ordered his officer.

- "Aye, sir" he said. "Torpedoes increasing velocity now. They will intercept in 43 seconds."

The view screen flashed, the image changed to show the two Egaran battle cruisers turning to face the incoming Longsword head-on. Blue lights flickered along their hulls-pulse lasers charging.

Captain S117 turned the camera angle and saw the flagship and the other battle cruiser were still heading toward Padeen. He read their position off his data pad and quickly performed the necessary calculations.

- "Course correction, come about to heading zero, zero, four point two five. Declination zero, zero, zero point one eight."

The view screen turned and centred on the enormous Egaran Battle Cruiser.

- "Collision course, impact in eight seconds"

- "Stand by for new course correction: declination minus zero, zero, zero point one zero."

- "Aye, sir" the NAV officer said "Course online. Awaiting your order, sir"

- "Collision with enemy ship in five seconds"

The Battle cruiser grew in the view screen: laser turrets and launch bays, bulbous alien protrusions and flickering blue lights.

- "Hold this course and sound collision alarm"

The view screen snapped on and off and showed black space-then the flash of faint white hull of the Egaran ship.

The Longsword screeched and shuddered as she gazed the prow of an Egaran ship. Silver shields flickered on screen filled with static.

- "Course correction now!" Captain S117 shouted.

- "Aye, sir!"

There was a brief burn from the thrusters and the Longsword nudged down slightly.

- "Hull breach! Sealing pressure doors."

- "Fire all Torpedoes!" Captain S117 yelled

- "Torpedoes away"

S117 watched as the first of the torpedoes that had been trailing the Longsword impacted on the prow of the Egaran battle cruiser. The ship shields flared, flickered...and vanished. The second torpedo hit a moment later. The hull of the Egaran ship blazed and then turned red-hot, melted and boiled. Secondary explosions burst through the hull. The Torpedoes streaked toward the wounded ship, tiny trails of exhaust stretching from the Longsword to the target. They slammed into the gaping wounds in the hull and detonated. Fire and debris burst from the battle cruiser.

The Longsword was abruptly quiet. No rumble of her engines. And no one said anything until one of the officers stood and said " Sir, that was the most brilliant manoeuvre I have ever seen."

- "This isn't over yet. Stay sharp"

- "Ready the SuperHeavy Laser and the Distortion cannon"

S117 watched while Warlord Kengs flagship slightly moved away from the planet and from

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the battle.

The two remaining battle cruisers started to intercept the Longsword, however there was something near them that was too small to see on the view screen: the torpedo specially armed with nuclear items. S117 had launched that torpedo in the opposite direction-but its reverse thrust had not completely overcome their tremendous forward velocity.

The torpedoes now drifted closer to the battle cruisers.....who had fixed their attention solidly to the Longsword.

S117 tapped his data pad and sent the signal to detonate the torpedo.

There was a flash of white, a crackle of lightning, and the Egaran ships vanished as a cloud of destruction enveloped them. Both Egaran ships, however, were still intact. Their shields went dead.

- "Fire!!!"

The fire rounds tore through the enemy ships exploding through the chinks of hull and armour, tearing the Egaran ships apart.

S117 looked at the flagship, it stood right next to him.

- "You and me S117, now !! Warlord Kheng shouted

- "I only see me Kheng!!" S117 replied with a smile.

Suddenly a flash of light appeared making all within it's radius blind, after a few minutes S117 opened his eyes.

- "What!?!? YOU?? What is going on?? Why are you doing !!!!!"

- "Me? Nothing special, have you been brainwashed before" said Witchfinder with a big smile on his face.

A few days later S117 woke up, he was in a starbase, he could tell that looking at the door logos, the base was named Iluminati, he didn't remember anything, what was he doing there, he didn't even remember his name.

The door opened and a man entered.

"S117, Witchfinder wants to talk to you please follow me."

"Who is S117?"

"Why....you of course" the man answered.

S117 followed the man, used about 5 elevators in that starbase, but finally the man stopped and said:

"It's here, he's waiting for you"

"Who is waiting for me?"

"Witchfinder of course" the man answered.

"Who is Witchfinder and why can't I remember anything?" S117 asked.

"He'll answer all your questions and by the way, my name is Walt"

S117 entered the large room, it was so big that a G-66 could fit in it, at the other end of the room there was a big chair looked like it was made for a king. S117 headed to the middle of the room still waiting for someone to appear but still no one came, he went near the king chair, he touched it and suddenly a guy appeared sitting on it.

"Hide and Seek, such a funny game isn't it, unfortunately it was a game made by those Terrans" said Witchfinder.

"Who are you? Who am I?" asked S117

"I know you must have a lot of questions and I'm going to answer them, first things first, you are S117 the King of the Dagon" said Witchfinder with a big smile.

"Some days ago the Terrans and the Federation attacked us, you took your Dagon fleet and fought against them and you won, but unfortunately one of the Terrans shot you and your ship, you fell and your head took a beating, that's why you don't remember anything" - said Witchfinder.

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"So, you are saying I'm King of Dagoons and that we are all at war with the Terrans?" - S117 asked

"That is correct, the Invaders and the Egarans will give you all the support you need, the Slah'ke is currently fighting and our inside race is getting ready, your ship is in the bay repaired and upgraded with the best technology, lead your fleet into battle" - said Witchfinder
"The Terrans shall be destroyed" -said S117

S117 left the room, Walt was waiting for him, he took him to the launch bay and S117 launched the Longsword.

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Prey

Chad waited anxiously in the room, looking round at the leaders. Many familiar faces, but Chad wasn't in the mood to talk. Taveius had been a good friend, who helped Chad grow up to become the Orfine he had- Chad and him had fought side by side for years, and now, he was gone...

Then something occurred to Chad. He remembered Mr Tea had killed Machinehr, shot his ship. Chad thought back. The scum of a lizard's ship had disappeared, but left no rubble... It hadn't occurred to Chad how strange it was at the time. Chad felt angry for not realising something was wrong. The evil Union Overlord had been planning this with the Invaders the whole time! Coincidence could now be blamed for nothing...

Then, Greeny entered the room. The usual man was young, happy, yet somehow wise at the same time. Today, was different however. He looked solemn, angry and slightly distressed. John and Chad rose from their respective seats together: the others followed.

"Hello Greeny, nice to see you. I assume you are the representative of the Terrans?" Chad asked. Greeny replied warily:

"Indeed Chad."

The meeting had been going for a few hours now, and much was said. All the leaders had different ideas, different views. Viga thought maybe they should try to make peace, Marc wanted to bargain with them, Walt wanted a full scale war. However, Chad sat there, contributing, but making no ideas himself. Then he said:

"We will go after Machinehr. Hunt him down, and blockade Saurion. Once we have knocked the Union out, we should launch a full-scale assault on the Invaders' base in Ceti Alpha."

John said in a deep voice:

"I agree with Chad." The others too agreed, and they soon made messages and plans to track down Machinehr's fleet, and they prepared their support ships for the blockade. They never could have expected how much fighting was ahead.

Debate and Decisions

After a long wait, a Terran Councillor entered the Conference room. Young Greeny peered into the spacious room, and with a small voice he said: "Excuse me, is this the right Conference room?"

The Race leaders looked at the young Terran in disbelief. Was this kid going to represent the Terran Empire in these talks? The silence was broken by the friendly voice of Chad: "I assume you are representing the Terran Empire? Please, take a seat Greeny."

Greeny sat down and Howard rose to take the word. "Thank you for coming all. I know all are fully aware of the current situation." With the characteristic growl in his voice he continued: "I believe it is safe to assume that Machine is not acting on his own. The Hive have been remarkably silent during this entire episode, does anyone know their standing on all of this?"

"Knowing the Hive Council, I do believe...", all turned to Viga, who casually sat in his chair almost directly across the table from the Federation President, "that the Hive will not come to our aid once we embark upon the path of war against the Slah'ke. My Intelligence Services have proven to me that Hive is most likely in league with Machinehr."

"Why would the Hive do that? They have been at war with the Union more times than I can count." Growled a surprised Chad.

"I do not know that" answered Viga.

"But I do." For all this time, Walt had been silent and had sat in his chair observing his allies. Now the old Brood leader spoke: "The Hive is forced to side with the Slah'ke by Machinehr. Hive Council is more in favour of neutrality, for they fear to lose what little they have if they join in this war, but Machinehr has most likely threatened to take their Empire if they did not side with him." Silence followed, on all the faces in the Conference room one could read deep thoughts being thought, alternatives considered, and decisions being made.

The first to speak was Howard: "This does sound remarkably like the actions of Machinehr. I suggest we consider the Hive an enemy until their neutrality or alliance to us is proven and confirmed." All agreed to that.

Chad was the next to take the word, he rose and Howard gave a little nod before the General took the word.

"How should we take on the Union, they have formidable fighters, not to mention a huge strategic advantage. After all, they are already mobilized and we still have to start."

Marc answered with his synthetically created voice, which he needed to communicate with those that didn't possess enough knowledge of the Kolari language to understand what it was that he would be saying. "They may have an advantage Chad, but they do not have the numbers, unless Machinehr calls upon Bob for assistance. We all know now that he is in league with the Invaders, which will be a problem and is an advantage to them. But I believe we have superior numbers, and they also lack one thing that we have." Almost unseen by anyone else Marc gave a quick look to Howard while speaking those last words.

"What advantage?" asked all as one.

A dramatic silence followed, and after a minute that seemed to last for an eternity, Howard stood up and his voice made the ornaments on the table tremble: "Me."

"YOU?" Greeny's voice filled the conference room. "By the Emperors Crown! With all due respect Howard, but how can you be our greatest advantage?"

Some mumbling followed with some remarks addressing the unknowing of the younger generations, more specifically the Terran youth.

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“How can it be that I am your greatest asset?” replied the President with some irritation in his voice, while Chad eyed Greeny in disbelief, his eyes asking “How in the world could you question the use of someone like John??!!”.

Howard slowly rose from his seat, towering over the young Terran, and started to walk across the room, using a walking cane that nobody had noticed yet. Walt noticed that the old Plexxan was limping with his left leg, something that Walt had seen only a few times in his long life before...

“To start with,” the voice of the legendary Plexxan filled the room. “I know the Union better than most, my experience with Machinehr is only equal to Marc’s. Second of all, I am the only person in this entire galaxy that ever fought Dylan not only with an entire fleet but also hand to hand, and survived it. I know that Invader better than anyone else here. There is nobody that can do this job better than I can.”

The ferocity of Howard’s words made the young Terran visibly tremble in fear.

“Ok ok, mister President, I get the point. You are our best man. Tell us, what is the plan?”

“The plan? I will tell you the plan.” Howard turned around facing the conference table with a projection of the galaxy on the wall behind his back. The projection had all the borders of the Empires marked.

“I want you to do the following. Knowing all your personal strengths and weaknesses, this is what you will be doing.” Howard’s voice filled the Conference room, all were captured by the thundering voice of the Plexxan. He continued: “Viga, the last attack pretty much devastated your fleets didn’t it?” The Preserver nodded in agreement, somewhat embarrassed at the memory of the minimal effort it took for the Invaders to almost break the resistance of the otherwise so resilient and powerful Matrix. “Well, you will have to use this preparation time to rebuild your fleets and perfect them.”

“Greeny...” Howard turned a few degrees and faced the young Terran, and in doing so made it clear that his leg wasn’t functioning like it should. His movements were slow, and his body lacked the agility it usually had. “Terrans need to have someone in charge during this endeavour. I suggest you go back to your Council and decide on who leads the Empire, and you ready your fleets as well. Marc will be organising and coordinating the whole combined fleet and missions, for one reason, and one reason only...” His words clearly upset Greeny, and Howard raised his hand indicating no discussion was possible, and that he would explain his choice. “I know Marc well enough to know that he is the best man for that job. I know he can do this better than anyone else.” A small bow from the Kolari confirmed his acceptance to the task.

“Walt, I want you to ready that formidable war machine you have hidden away in Tau Cyngi my old friend. Make sure they are ready.” “Then there is the issue of avenging Taveius’ death. Machinehr expects the Terrans to do so, but they will not. The Terran Empire will destroy the Union, but not avenge the death of its Emperor. That task is there for the most creative of all hunters in this galaxy: the Orfine.” At hearing this Chad’s face lit up in pride. Howard slowly made his way to his chair and stood behind it. “The Federation will be commanded by StarRaider. Marc, I will send him to you so you can inform him of the tasks for the Federation. Everyone answers to Marc on this endeavour. And before you ask, no. I will not take part in the attacks on the Union and their Allies.”

Revelations

Silence filled the room when the Presidents last words faded, and all looked at the white haired legend with eyes filled with disbelief. Howard was going to pass on a battle of this magnitude? Nobody could really believe it.

"I will distract the Invaders, so you can deal with the Union and their Allies. Now, let's get to work!"

"Marc, I wish to have a word with you my friend." Walt said, while everyone made their way to their ships, so they could prepare for what was to come...

When all had left the Conference room and Howard was making his way to the door with his limping leg slowing him down dramatically, Marc and Walt called him: "John, we would like to discuss this with you."

The Plexxan turned around while shutting the door. "Yes?"

"You put me in charge of the coordination, and I was wondering what you had in mind when it comes to defeating the Union."

"Yes Marc, I know. What I would do is dividing out fleets into about four separate fleets and attack the outer systems first, and make our way to Saurion."

"My thoughts exactly" said Walt.

"Now that were on our own here, Walt, I would like you to assist Marc in developing the plans. You know, two minds know more then one." was Howards response.

"John, you do realise that Greeny is going to put himself out there as the appointed leader of the Terran fleets don't you?" asked Marc. "Yes, I know, but what can we do. We don't have the time to have them fighting over who is to be the one to lead."

"I guess you are right..." Marcs voice sounded unsure, but willing to accept that possibility.

"By the way John, what is that with your leg nowadays?" Walt's curiosity had gotten the better of himself.

"You remember that invasion seventy five years ago? With Dylan causing mayhem in the Federation systems?" the President asked his old friend.

"I wish I could forget that black day..."

"Yes, I was the only one that managed to stand up to Dylan and live to tell the tale. But there was a price to pay for me..."

"So those stories about that doctor? Are those true too John?" "Yes Marc, they are. If you both would be willing to excuse this old man, I have a mission to prepare." And Howard limped out of the room.

After a moment of silence, Walt asked: "Stories about a doctor?" "Yes, rumours have been going around in the galaxy for years. It seems that about twenty eight years ago, during a medical check-up a Plexxan doctor insisted on removing that scar and healing the wounds that John still bears. John flatly refused, and strong words were traded, if you know what I mean. Four days later that doctor lost his licence to practice medicine..." said Marc with a whisper in his voice.

"You see," he continued "if I know John, and I think I do, then he doesn't want to forget the fact that no matter how amazing and legendary his actions are, he is not immortal... He wants to remind himself of his own ability to fail. Also, its been said that that wound contains some kind of toxic that starts to irritate the nerves in his leg when Bob gets more.... active."

"But off course, that isn't proven?" Walt was thinking out loud. "No Walt, I'm purely speculating on that" said Marc while both of them finally left the Conference room and made their way to their ships to start their preparations of the upcoming missions....

Survival of the Fittest

Chad strode out of the conference room, thoughts spinning through his head. He was a highly intelligent Orfine, and he possessed one of the best minds in the galaxy. However, his knowledge of Union was very limited. Nevertheless, he could predict what a power-hungry dictator like Machinehr would be like. Doubles, hideouts, huge defences... This was no easy task. Chad frowned, and he heard a voice.

"Chad!" It was Walt. Walt limped up to him, and Chad comforted him with a pleasant smile. "Hello Walt."

"Chad, I see that you have been given the job of hunting down Machinehr." Walt said. Chad nodded and replied:

"That I have."

"Well," Walt said.

"The Genus have a top-line intelligence agency, with many people who have seen anything and everything. We have many spies, and I believe that we may be able to help you in your hunt." Chad smiled, it was a kind gesture which he couldn't afford to refuse. And Chad didn't doubt Genus's intelligence in the slightest.

"Much appreciated, thanks." Chad said, and he shook Walt's ageing hand.

"I must be off Chad, I have... A *meeting* to attend." Walt said, and he left.

Chad paced across Brunneran to the VIP-parking lot. His ship awaited him, and Chad was off to start his important mission. On his way though, he was stopped again.

"Chad!" He yelled. Chad turned around and smiled.

"Ah, Greeny. Nice to see you, how may I be of assistance?" Chad asked.

"Well, I've just come to inform you that the election for Terran Emperor has just started. My main competitors are Sonar and Gilbert." Greeny said, smiling.

"That is very nice." Chad said. He smiled, and remained friendly. He did like Greeny, but he was a bit annoyed at how quickly Taveius' death was tossed aside by the Empire.

"Well," Greeny started.

"You are a wise and respected Orfine. I was wondering if I could ask-" And he was cut off. A bang echoed, and Chad whipped out his Battle Claws, snarling all around. He scanned the area, and then looked down at Greeny. The Terran was lying on the floor, groaning. A laser hole was protruding through his right shoulder.

Chad scooped the Terran up, tossed him over his shoulder, and dashed for the Brunneran Hospital. For a strong Orfine like Chad, the weight of the Terran was nothing. However, the weight of Greeny's life was very heavy indeed. So much controversy would follow, and the enemy would have a big upper hand. Chad sprinted through the base, passing some stunned Plexxan workers and knocking past a few Terran tourists. Chad was panting, he was running fast and far. He could hear Greeny's breathing grow fainter, and then he spluttered violently. Chad had no choice but to lay him on the ground and examine him. Greeny was bleeding too much, and his heart was already starting to slow down from so much loss. Chad tried filling the wound and resuscitating Greeny, but neither were working. A few Terrans had gathered round. One started to ask:

"Isn't that Gree-"

"CALL THE HOSPITAL YOU MAGGOT!!!" Chad yelled at him. The Terran jumped and went dashing down Brunneran. Greeny started wheezing and his eyes went dazed. Chad had no choice but to dig in the wound, and find the cut vessel. Chad pulled in his claws, and dug his paw into the hole in Greeny's shoulder. Greeny screamed, but Chad ignored him. The Terran wasn't conscious anyway.

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Chad finally found the broken vessel: a vein, shot clean through. With great skill, Chad tied the vein around into a loop. The Orfine paws and fingers are much more sensitive than any other creatures, even so, it was very difficult. With the bleeding stopped, Chad could finally pick the Terran up and carry him to hospital. However, Chad realised Greeny has lost too much blood already. The Terran started shaking uncontrollably, in a seizure. His muscles were shaking all over, his eyes rolled back completely. Only then, did Chad get desperate. "Don't do this to me Greeny... Don't do this... DON'T DO THIS!!!" he shouted at Greeny. Greeny kept on shaking on the ground, and Chad was starting to panic. Wild thoughts raced through his mind: he scanned his memory for any help. Nothing. Greeny screamed out something incomprehensible, and Chad took his last resort. Aware that Greeny needed blood, he did something very brash indeed. He took out his sharp claws, and put a slice in Greeny's pulmonary artery. With a howl, Chad did it... He tore off his left ear. Blood flowed out, and Chad tipped his head sideways near Greeny's chest...

Chad looked at Greeny lying in the hospital bed. He was lucky to have survived, but his fight was long from over. After days of recovery, he would wake up to be haunted by the memory of the attempted assassination. He would then have to run an election campaign, hunt down an assassin and fight a war at once. Greeny needed help, no doubt about it, but it couldn't be from Chad. Chad had to get on with his mission, he had no time to wait around and deal with politics. So, Chad turned and walked out. He went down to the Brunneran VIP Parking, but took an explorer instead of his Invincible. He was heading back to Olfus to sort out a plan.

After a while sitting in his apartment at Olfus, Chad walked to his scarab, Divine Savage. He knew what he was going to do, and it was time to do it. He had no idea what lay ahead, however. On his way, Chad ran into his apprentice: Warhammer. Warhammer came up to him and said:

"Hello, sir!" Chad smiled, and kindly replied:

"How many times must I tell you Warhammer, Chad is fine." Warhammer bowed, and then he looked up and gasped.

"Chad, what happened to your ear!?!?" Chad didn't remove his smile, but felt slightly bitter inside.

"Another story for another day, Warhammer. Now, I am on an important mission. I am off to Adhara, would you like to join me?" Warhammer stood up straight, and with a proud smile said:

"Of course I would!"

"Excellent, come with me then." And they headed for Chad's Scarab. After a while, Warhammer moved in front of Chad to his right side. Chad laughed, and asked:

"What are you doing Warhammer?" Warhammer replied:

"Sorry, I forgot you couldn't hear on your left side." And the truth finally hit Chad:

"Warhammer, were you talking to me?"

"Yes, sir." Warhammer said. Chad then felt very helpless indeed.

Chad's explorer came scarab to Adhara. He was coming up to the outer ring of asteroids, and in the distance, he could see the faint light that was Guanus. Chad came up to one of the asteroids, and went into orbit.

"Warhammer, stay here. I'm going to look around." Chad said.

"Yes, sir!" Warhammer replied. Chad sighed, and jumped out of the ship. The size of the asteroid was tiny, and it only took 20 minutes for Chad to search it. Nothing. When he got back in his scarab, he scanned the asteroid. Nothing. Then, Chad went to the next asteroid.

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Three asteroids later, Chad had still found nothing, and he decided to move to Guanus, very close to the Union Starbase. In his ship, he flew around Guanus, searching for anything. And Chad spotted something: Away from the few colonies and mines, Chad saw what could only be a bunker. He smiled.

"Warhammer, we're moving to orbit."

Chad got out of his scarab and raced towards the bunker. He got to the door, and pressed his good ear up against it. He could hear some muffled sounds, some which could be distinguished as hisses and clicks. Slah'ke. Partially through anger with Machinehr, and partly due to his mission, Chad decided to blast his way in. He jogged back to the Scarab, and pulled out a bag. He jogged back to the bunker door, and lifted what was in the bag. Explosives. Chad then set the explosives on the door. When they were set up, he grabbed the trigger, and ran out back. When he was there, he crouched down and pressed the trigger.

BANG! The door blasted open. Shouts and hisses of anger could be heard, and Chad could even hear the clashing of metal, metal that was guns. Chad realised how stupid this was, but he couldn't pull out now. He jumped on top of the bunker, and jumped off the other side, landing perfectly. Slah'ke were standing in front of him, pointing guns at him.

"Handsssss up, Orfine." One said. Chad with a smile put his hands up- and whipped out his battle claws. The Slah'ke fired shots at him, but Chad deflected them all. He then did a forward flip to land inside the bunker, and using his claws, stabbed one in the heart. He then did the *Canee*. A *Canee* was an Orfine martial art, and the most deadly around. Chad was a master of it. It involves spins, flips, almost dancing, the whole time attacking and defending with legs, fists and battle claws. Chad spun, danced, flipped, did everything, and all of it gracefully. The Slah'ke couldn't lay a shot on him, and one by one, they fell to the might of his battle claws. Chad spun around, dodging a shot, and did a flip to land right in front of the last Slah'ke. He then spun his leg low, knocking him to the ground. Chad jumped up and stabbed him in the heart.

Chad searched the bunker, for any hint of where Machinehr might be. There were sheets and positions of some important information, but nothing about Machinehr. Chad grabbed a few of the more important sheets and put them in his bag outside. He came back in, pulled out his claws and snarled. A large Slah'ke was there, standing at least 9 feet tall, wearing more polished and modern armour than the others, and carrying a huge sword. No doubt, this was the head of the bunker.

"Prepare to die, Orfine. You will sssuffer for what you have done." The brute said.

"On the contrary, it is you who is to die." Chad replied angrily, still snarling. The brute chuckled and said:

"Big words for a small dog." And he jumped up and slashed his sword down. Chad blocked the slash with his battle claws, and lay a kick into the Slah'ke's stomach. The large lizard was taken off guard, but he quickly recovered, going into a complicated sequence of blows. Chad blocked them all, however, the Slah'ke was growing better. Finally, the Slah'ke went for the stab. He had underestimated Chad and Chad caught the sword in between two claws, and twisted his hand. The Slah'ke gasped as Chad spun his mighty sword around and caught it. Chad threw the sword aside, and walked towards the Slah'ke, snarling menacingly. The Slah'ke at first looked scared, but then snarled back.

"What do you want, you ssssslimy dog?" He asked Chad.

"Where is Machinehr?" Chad demanded, grabbing him by the neck.

"I don't know." The Slah'ke said. Chad punched him in the stomach, stabbed him in the leg, and kicked him in the jaw by doing a back flip. All in one move. The Slah'ke groaned. Chad

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put his claws up to the lizard's throat. He then said:

"I know you do, tell me or you die."

"I'll never tell you, long live the Union!" And Chad cut his throat.

Chad walked back to the scarab. He had got a few important sheets for the war, which he would give to John Howard, but apart from that, he was no closer to finding Machinehr. Chad jumped back into the scarab, and said to Warhammer:

"Let's leave this dirty system." Warhammer pointed at something, and replied:

"Sir!" Chad looked at what he was pointing at, and gasped. There was a fleet of Dagoes, and they seemed to be chasing a few Terran Invincibles. Chad said:

"We've overstayed our welcome." And he started the hyperdrive sequence. As they started to jump, Chad peered at the Dagoes. Just before he left, he realised something shocking. Up front was Longsword, S117's prized flagship. As they made the jump Chad looked down at his knees. S117 was dead.

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Alteration

Marc paced nervously around a conference room in Brunneran. It was unlike him to get nervous. But how was he supposed to conduct a full scale attack on Union territory if Walt was late. StarRaider was here on time and DeadShot was early. Walt was the only one Marc had told of the new plan. It was a stroke of genius actually that almost guaranteed an easy victory. But he could not unveil the plan until Walt was here. Finally Walt walked into the conference room and sat down.

“What took you so long,” DeadShot asking the question that was on the others minds.

“I was held up by important business,” Walt answered calmly,

“Now I believe you have a new plan for taking the Union systems Marc.”

“Yes I do. That is why DeadShot is here, I plan on splitting our fleets into three fleets instead of four. We will have a Brood fleet and a Kolari fleet these will attack from both sides different sides the Federation ships will be split into two one half will join the Brood and one half will join the Kolari,” Marc explained.

“Now the third fleet will be made up of Kolari, Brood and Federation cloakers, these will be under DeadShot command and will attack Eltanin this should draw the majority of the Union fleet away from the other systems, this is when we will strike.”

“I have a question, what happens if the Union aren’t pulled out of position by DeadShot’s attack,” asked StarRaider when marc was finished.

“Then we will spilt the two main fleets into four and continue with the original plan, the cloakers will clear Eltanin and then push upwards towards Proxima,” Marc replied, then he asked:

“Everyone clear on what they must do.” Everyone nodded the affirmative.

“Then get to it,” said Marc and everyone started to leave.

Preparations

After the meeting Howard retired to his working quarters on Bloodred Death. He had a lot of work to do, and very little time to do it in. As he sat down at his desk and activated his console, he entered his personal database and opened a few files nobody ever had even considered to be in existence. And so the race against time began...

While Howard was trying out many different scenarios on how to accomplish the near impossible task he had given himself, the door to his quarters made a sound, signalling that there was a visitor waiting to be allowed to step into the inner sanctuary of the Federation's Flagship.

Distracted but firm, the President's voice sounded: "Enter". The door opened with swift motion and there stood StarRaider. One of the oldest Plexxans around, a much respected Councillor and a very good friend of the President.

"John," the old and familiar voice made the President look up from his work, "you do realize the Council wasn't informed about your decision to go on that mystery-mission of yours don't you?". Howard detected some agitation in the voice of his long-time friend and trustee. "Yes, I know that StarRaider. Are there questions Council wishes to be answered?" A nod confirmed his suspicions. "Alright, call for a meeting, I will be there shortly."

With that StarRaider turned around and walked through the door and Howard returned to his work. There had to be a way he could accomplish what he had to accomplish...

A short twenty minutes later Howard walked into the Imperial Hall, and saw the entire Council already present.

"Ladies, Gentlemen. I will be short in my words today for I have a lot of work to do. I know you are all concerned about what it is that my mission will be. I cannot share those details with you, for I am sure that there are spies in our midst." Howard's voice carried through the Hall, and some Councillors muttered and whispered some words to each other.

"I will tell you this. This mission is vital to the success that our Fleets will try to achieve. Without my mission, the chances of defeating the Union fast and swiftly are extremely small."

"What are you talking about Howard?", a young Councillor rose. "What I mean is..." and the old President turned his head around to look the young Plexxan in the face "the Union will not stand alone. She will be aided by the Egaran, and possibly even the Dagon. That is all not much of a problem, the Allied Fleets can win that battle."

"However," he continued "There is the distinct possibility that the Invaders will aid Machinehr. That we cannot win, then we are outnumbered. I will be doing everything I can to keep the Invaders busy, keep them occupied and make them ignore the fighting in the Galaxy."

"Old fool! That is impossible." Again the young Councillor spoke.

Calmly the President responded: "It is entirely possible. There is more to your President than meets the eye. The fact that you still doubt me after all these years is a sign of your incompetence to read files and your failure to comprehend the lessons learned from history." The young Councillor stood as struck by lightning.

"On the matter of the leadership of our Fleets..." Howard was addressing the entire Council again. "StarRaider is perfect for the job. He gets command of our Fleets and he will receive all the information he needs from me. Any further objections?"

Silence.

StarRaider rose and spoke: "I think we all agree John."

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“Good, then one last order for all. Gather the Fleets, recommission every ship that is out of order. Make sure our Fleets are mobilized and ready. May you all go and have your path lit by the Gods themselves!”

Howard was already on his way out, his walking cane echoed through the Hall. Behind him he heard StarRaiders voice: “John, go with Honour, find Glory and return with Victory! May Balkuth be with you!” And with that in his ears Howard limped out of the Hall, on his way to his flagship. He had just gotten a revelation. He had found the way to make his mission a success.

“Captain on deck!!!” sounded the voice of the young ensign when the President set foot in the Engineering Bay of the Bloodred Death.

All around the officers and crewmembers of the legendary Paladin class starship saluted their beloved President.

Kenai, the Chief Engineer walked up to his Captain. “Sir, we are ready for departure, all systems are fully operational again.”

“Good. Report to my working quarters in ten minutes, together with the rest of the Senior Officers.” was the response he got from his Captain.

Ten minutes later the Captain gave permission for his Senior Officers to enter his working quarters, and pointed them to a table in the middle of the room, which was surrounded by skilfully crafted chairs.

”Lady and gentlemen, the mission we are embarking upon right now is one like none before. Chances are that this ship and crew will not return to the safety of our homes. If you have any objections to this mission, I request that you voice your concerns right now, so I can note them in my logs. Otherwise, I will give you your orders right now.” A short moment of silence followed in which the five officers glanced at each other, until that the young female officer that for the last twenty-eight months had graced the ship’s communication station on the bridge stood and said with a soft but clear voice: “Sir, I am quite sure that I speak on behalf of all of us, and all the people that serve under our supervision when I declare that we will stand by you no matter what. You have lead us in the past, you have been willing to give your life for us in the past, now let us humbly offer ours for your cause.” All officers nodded in agreement upon the woman’s words.

Upon that, Howard handed electronic notepads to all the officers present, which contained detailed instructions and orders for all departments on the ship. As the Chief Engineer took a look at his electronic notepad, he saw it contained various diagrams and complicated schematics, showing the details for a certain device that was to be built. “Sir, there is no way I can..” the Chief started. “You have 1 hour Kenai, I know you technically need more time, but that just isn’t available.” was the interruption of his Captain.

“Yes Sir” answered a puzzled Kenai.

At the moment that his officers walked to the doorway, ready to leave, the President received a transmission from the Security Minister on his desk console. Pushing a few buttons resulted in the appearing of the Minister’s face upon the screen of the console. “Forgive me for interrupting you Sir, but I thought this is something you should know.” The President raised his eyebrows, waiting for the Minister to say what was on his mind. “Sir, Representative Greeny has been shot on level 4, section B, corridor Omega-3.” Quickly the Minister told about the heroic acts of General Chad, and how Greeny ended up in one of the medical wards of the Plexxan homebase.

The expression on the face of the President hardened when he heard of what had happened to Greeny. His old voice was soft, but determined and commanding: “Minister, you will do

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whatever is needed to find the perpetrator. I don't care what it is that you have to do, this criminal has to be caught by the Plexxan authorities. His trail will be held in a Plexxan court, his case judged by a Plexxan judge and his sentence will be in accordance to Plexxan Criminal Law. You have allowed this security breach to be possible, you will find the flaw in your system, and you will fix it. I do not care what the Terran Empire may say, I do not care how much they threaten you, neither Greeny or the perpetrator will be released to them. Greeny will get the best possible medical care that we can provide. Get him the best doctors you can find in the Federation. Now quit sitting around and start solving this problem." The view screen of the desk console was slammed down rather violently after those words. The President walked out of his quarters and entered the bridge of his flagship, walked to his Head of Security and whispered in his ear: "I need statements of all of our crewmen on their whereabouts during the last four hours. Send those statements to the Minister of Security the moment you have them." The officer walked off to gather the information, and another officer took his place in his absence, so that all consoles on the bridge were ready and manned at all times.

Howard turned to his Tactical Officer, a tall, strong built man with a battle worn face. "Those weapon upgrades?" "Almost done Sir. We are installing the last of the extra gun batteries." "Once they are installed, we move out, so keep me informed." And with that, the President and his walking cane left the bridge. Howard went to search for his First Officer, and decided to walk, since his limp was getting worse by the minute and he needed to exercise for what was without doubt to come. His First Officer was found checking up on the progress of the instalment of the last few gun batteries that Howard had ordered.

The President took his First Officer aside, and told him: "Listen Genya, if on this mission anything causes me to leave the ship, or if anything results in me being incapable of leading the ship and the ship is at danger of being boarded or destroyed, then abandon it. I will not tolerate any discussion over this. You abandon the ship in those cases. This crew cannot be asked to give its life for this, I am already asking too much of them." "Yes Sir" answered a worried and puzzled Genya.

About fifty minutes later, three reports poured into the console of the Captains working quarters. As he opened them and read them, he knew it was time. Kenai was done, the gun batteries were installed and operating, and the entire crew had given their statements to the team the First Officer had put together.

Again, for the second time within the hour the bridge saw the President entering. This time, he sat down in his chair, and gave the order: "Release docking clamps, and jump to hyperspace right away!"

The enormous warship set itself in motion, moving out of the docking bay of the starbase, which truly dwarfed any ship known in the galaxy. All that were at the side of the docking bay in Brunneran that afternoon saw Bloodred Death disappear into hyperspace moments later, wondering if she would return home in glory, if she would return at all...

"Set course for Aldebaran" the old Plexxans voice rolled over the bridge like a nearing fierce thunderstorm. The helmsman specified the coordinates of the system and plotted a course. He waited for the order. "What are you waiting for Ensign?" he heard his captain say, indicating that he should get the ship moving.

A few hours later the Bloodred Death left hyperspace and entered the gravity well of the

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Aldebaran system. After a few scans, everything in the system looked normal, and the President requested the helmsman to move to a specific set of coordinates. While the huge Paladin was moving, the scanners picked something up. There seemed to be a massive fleet of ships entering the system.

The moment the sensor readings were shown on the view screen and Howard took a look at them, he ordered his Communications officer to encrypt those data and send it to Void on a secure frequency right away.

The screen showed a huge fleet of Dagon ships, who seemed to be trailing a Terran-built Invincible, which was identified as the “Longsword”. The strange thing was that none of the Dagon ships were locking on to the Longsword, yet they seemed to follow its lead. That meant one of two things to Howard.

Either his old friend was dead and his ship captured, or, and this he feared most, his friend was captured by the Dagon and forced to work for them. There had been rumours around the galaxy about that for ages, but nothing was ever substantially proven to be either wrong or true. What Howard knew for sure was that this was not good, and that his friend at Void was to be informed of this right away.

The Dagon fleet seemed not to be alarmed by the presence of the Plexxan flagship, and readied itself to enter hyperspace again.

After the fleet had disappeared off the system sensors, Howard came in action: “Every crewman will be armed from this moment on. Distribute the weapons.” The First Officer sped away. “Arm all weaponry and raise the shields.” the President ordered his Tactical Officer.

Then he opened a communication channel to the engineering bay. Kenai reported in over the speakers. “On my command you activate the device.” “But Sir, I have no idea how it...” the young engineer was interrupted by his Captain: “I know, that is enough. Wait for my command.” and the channel was closed.

Five minutes later, the Tactical Officer signalled that he was ready and the First Officer was reporting that he too was nearly finished. Then Howard gave the order to activate the strange device, of which he seemed to know the purpose and possibly even where it had come from.

As Kenai activated the device, the view screen in the bridge started to show something that had never been seen before by any of the officers on the bridge. Space seemed to distort and something appeared.

It was a bright tunnel-like anomaly. The ships scanners seemed unable to collect any data on it, the sensor sweeps seemed to disappear into the anomaly.

“Set course for that anomaly Ensign. Keep those weapons and shields active Lieutenant.” Howard’s voice seemed to twirl around in the bridge before anyone responded to it, the anomaly managed to capture all of their attention.

After a few seconds, the helmsman set a course to enter the anomaly. He was afraid, his mind racing: What if the Captain didn’t know something that he should know? What if this anomaly tore up the ship like a piece of Terran paper? Was it his place to doubt the President? Was it his place to question his Captain openly here on the bridge?

By the time the Ensign came to make up his mind, the majestic ship he was piloting was entering the anomaly. Sensors failed instantly, they were flying blind. “Shields holding” the Tactical Officer reported. The young Ensign checked his console, and saw that the structural integrity of the ship was perfect, just like when they entered this anomaly. What kind of

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anomaly was this?

The science officer seemed to have read his mind, and reported that the “wormhole” seemed to be stable, but that without data to compare it to, that assumption could not be verified.

Howard gave the order to enter the wormhole. After the ship had entered the tunnel with the greatest of care, the President again left the bridge.

I Am Ready, Are You?

This time he made his way to his elaborately decorated personal quarters, and once he arrived there, he made his way to an ancient wooden trunk. The decorative carvings on its surface resembled the Wars for Castor, which would in recorded history lead to the founding of the Plexxan Federation.

The large trunk was easily opened, since the old bearded man possessed the keys to its locks. Opening the trunk gave access to artefacts that helped shape the last century of not only Federation history, but also galactic history had been severely influenced by these artefacts and its owner. And today, it was time for another chapter to be written.

He grabbed a belt, and lifted it out of the trunk. The black leather was followed by worn down holsters, holsters for a pair of plasma pistols, which lay casually on the bottom of the trunk.

After the belt was firmly strapped to his hips, the President reached for his trusted pistols. He felt toe scars of battle on their surfaces, and flashes from long ago filled his mind: faces of old friends lost long ago, defeats and glorious victories all entered his worried mind for a moment.

The pistols were put in their holsters, and the belt was strapped to the old mans hips. Then, he grabbed a few knives and strapped them to his legs, his arms and then took his most prized possession from its storage.

The engraved metal was shining bright, almost blinding. A pair of long, well sharpened Plexxan battle swords rested in his hands, their weight pressing on his muscles. The old man stood for a moment, pondering about his plans: Had he considered every scenario? Were his assumptions about the enemy right? Had his decision concerning saving his crew been the right one to ensure their survival?

The cold steel made its way back into the dark, as it was pushed back into the scabbards, both weapons swung through the air, and landed on Howard's back in a crossed position. That way over each of his shoulders one hilt rose, seemingly out of nowhere.

A few other artefacts made their way into his battle gear before he closed the old trunk and locked it. With that, the President returned to the bridge once more.

"We will reach the end of the wormhole in three minutes Sir", was the answer one of the officers gave the First Officer when Howard returned upon the bridge. He whispered a few clear orders to his Tactical Officer in the middle of him being announced upon the bridge. Then, after a quick systems check, he stood in front of the view screen, leaning on his walking cane: ready for anything.

Identity

"Entering the gravity well of Aldebaran." The Longswords screens showed.

- "Sir, scanners show a Paladin in range!! Bloodred Death is what its identification tag shows!!" said the Intelligence Officer

- "Weapons are charged sir and shields are online, want me to kill it?" - The Gunner asked

- "No, let's just leave nothing important in this system, charge the hyperdrive and jump!!" -

S117 ordered "Intel Officer I want to talk to you...in private follow me" he added.

S117 went through the various corridors and stairs of the old ship until he got to the briefing room, the officer that was following him looked a little nervous but S117 didn't care, he had his mind somewhere else.

- "Sit please, this will be fast don't worry" he said

As the Intel-officer sat down, S117 did the same and started:

- "As you know, I suffered an accident during battle, my memory was shortly recovered and Witchfinder told me what he thought was enough, but I still have questions, what happened? why were the Terrans shooting me? Why am I so different from you guys?" he asked

- "Sir, those are a lot of questions and I can answer them all but please promise me one thing Sir" - the officer said.

- "Whatever it is you have my word soldier"

- "Promise you won't leave us.....promise you won't leave Dagon...."

- "I already said yes now please tell me what you know"

- "First sir, you weren't fighting the Terrans or being shot by them, you were fighting Warlord Keng....you were transported here and your mind was cleaned and so Witchfinder made you our leader because we didn't have one, that's basically why you are here"

- "So you telling me I'm not a Dagon?"

- "Yes sir....."

- "What am I then?"

- "You are a Terran"

S117 looked surprised but he felt like he knew it all along, it was a strange feeling.

- "Thank you for telling me this, I owe you one" - S117 said with a smile.

- "Sir, are you going to leave us?"

- "I gave my word I wouldn't, don't worry and go back to your station, I'll be in my room"

S117 still in the metal chair started thinking, he had not many options but he did have them, the question is would he use them.

- "Sir we have entered Hyperspace, where should we go now?" - The Nav-officer asked.

- "Set course to Arcturus now!!!" - S117 ordered "And please don't bother me I'm going to sleep a little" he added.

- "John, lead the fleet. I will take care of Keng. Don't disagree with me. Keng is mine!" he said

Something wasn't right and S117 could feel it but he knew he would win one way or another.

"What!?? YOU?? What is going on?? Why are yo....."

S117 woke up with the Nav-Officer in the Communications.

- "Sir we entered Arcturus and we have an Orfine fleet incoming!"

- "Who's leading their fleet? Find out now!!" S117 quickly ordered.

- "Womble is leading that fleet sir!" - The Nav-Officer quickly answered

- "Send a Peace Signal to that ship before they come in range!! Tell all ships to go to battle positions!!!" - S117 replied

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- "The Orfine fleet stopped and are holding position just at a hundred Mkm of our fleet sir!" - The Intel Officer replied.

- "Open communication frequencies to the ship that is leading them, I want to talk to Womble" - S117 ordered

- "Communications Open Sir" - Comm Officer said

- "So who am I talking to? Why isn't this in video conference mode?" - Womble asked

- "First no one and second I don't want to be seen" - S117 answered

- "Why you having a bad day Dagon? Or are you that ugly you are afraid I start to shoot at you?" - Womble said laughing

- "None my dear dog, I'm sending a conference ship to the middle of this battle field, I'll be there if you want to see me go there because I need to talk to you" - S117 finished

The conference ship was an old ship used in peace talks, no one used it since every war stopped and peace ruled in galaxy.

As the conference ship approached the middle of the battlefield an Orfine scout intercepted it and docked. The young Orfine stood tall. Despite of his canine appearance, he was without doubt handsome. His thick grey streaked black fur coat was shining in the lighting of the corridor. His eyes looked around, searching for possible fighters. This might be a trap.

Slowly but surely he convinced himself the corridor was safe, and he walked towards the person standing ahead of him, snarling. Negotiations were not something he was in the mood for. His scarred face was clear to see in the light.

Right over his left eye there was a long scar, an old scar from a battle many years ago. His greyish fur seemed to stand up. He was clearly angry, or at the very least agitated.

Strapped to his hips there were a set of Orfine Battle Claws, and on his shoulders, there were the generators for the Impact Armour, which would generate a strong shield around the strong built Orfine the moment its sensors picked up something that would be a potential thread.

Womble towered over the unknown figure that had spoken to him, intimidating him by casting a huge shadow over him.

- "So who are you then, I'm in hurry to start shooting that ugly face"

- "You should show some respect" - S117 said showing himself.

- "Respect to someone that doesn't show his face, don't think so" - Womble answered

- "I thought u should know me by my voices but if not maybe u can tell me who I am by seeing me, so here it goes" - S117 ended showing himself.

- "I can't believe it, S117!!! How are you? You have to tell me what happened to you mate, why the hell are you the leader of these things???"

- "That is a long story and as you can guess we don't have much time with all this war and I also have some questions, please follow me" - S117 said leading the way.

"Sir !!! Warlord Keng is shooting with all his guns what should we do!!!" - The young officer said

"Control yourself soldier!! Shoot him with one of our best rounds, overload those engines fast!!!"

S117 wakes up realising it was another bad dream, He gets up and looks at the mirror and then he started thinking, he started trying to remember and tried to connect all these bad dreams.

"Sir, we are entering Proxima now!"

"Thanks soldier, is Womble still in cryo?" - S117 asked

"Yes he is, Sir! We were going to wake him up as soon as we leave Algol unless u have

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something against it"

"No, leave him there, lets see if we have someone to welcome us, stay there, I'm coming to the control room"

"And another thing, is the Dagon Fleet still holding position in Hades?" - S117 asked with a nervous voice

"Yes Sir, they report every thirty minutes, they seem to be ok"

S117 left his room, he was still remembering all the dreams he had till that moment, could it be that they were fractions of memory that Witchfinder couldn't delete or just dreams and not more than that, he didn't know but as soon as he realised he was in the control room in his chair.

"What's the status?" - he asked

"Nothing Sir, Saurion seems to be empty we are at the very edge of the system and we have sent more than three messages asking to dock but no one is answering." - The Nav-officer said.

"Sir! We just received a transmission!" - The Comm Officer informed.

"Let me see it! On my screen please" - S117

As he S117 stopped talking an old lizard appeared on his screen.

"So...Who am I talking to?" - S117 asked

"It's strange you don't remember me but I'll say one thing, you and your ship are not welcome in here leave now!!!" - The lizard ended.

"Sir! They are targeting us, we expect about four Scarabs and three Rifts!"

"Prepare for Hyper!!!"

"Sir, three Battle cruisers just launched from Saurion, them and ten Zealots supporting them!!!"

"Ok, I think it's time, lets..."

S117 was interrupted with someone entering the room.

"What in Olfus sake is happening S117" - Womble said.

"Nothing, we are just leaving a party Womble, it seems they don't want us here"- S117 answered

The Longsword again entered hyper.

"Where to Sir?" - The Nav-Officer asked

"Womble?" - S117 said looking at him.

"Set course to Polaris"

"You heard the dog, set course now!"

Healthy hostility

The view screen cleared, and started to show uncharted planets with a beautiful nebula on the background, diffusing the light emanating from the dual-star, which formed the middle point of the system.

Howard stood, not one muscle in his being moved. He seemed to wait for something.

Minutes passed, and not one hair on Howard's beard moved. Not one of his Officers dared to ask the purpose of this visit into uncharted territory on the eve of one of the most destructive wars their Galaxy would ever witness.

It was over an hour before the deafening silence on the bridge was broken by the sound of an incoming transmission. Its origin was unknown, and the whereabouts of the sender proved to be even more puzzling to track down. As the crew was taken by surprise by the sudden incoming transmission, it did not seem to have much effect on the President other than that it seemed to amuse him.

As if he was a statue that suddenly had come to life, Howard started to move, his eyes twinkling. One small gesture with his left hand indicated that the Communications Officer was to open the channel.

The view of the system faded and was replaced by a familiar face.

"My nose was right! That stench is you. What brings my favourite Plexxan here?" The words of the Invader were drenched in hatred and mockery. His voice was powerful and commanding, yet nothing compared to his opponents. The voice of the giant Invader on the view screen was dark and dramatic; by lack of other words: evil.

While the words rolled over the bridge, invading the serenity and silence normally so characteristic for the bridge on Howard's ship, its Captain stood motionless and stared to the screen.

Moments passed, and the expression on his face changed slowly. He smiled. The crew was puzzled and somewhat amused by this. However, this had a completely opposite effect on the Invader on the other side of the channel, for he grew agitated, and once more demanded to know why the Paladin-class starship was here.

This time Howard answered. His voice was soft and gravely, but his words forced their way through the communications system like a giant storm, leaving nothing untouched in its path: "Just enjoying the view, taking a few snapshots, some scientific scans. I'm exploring, that is all."

Just before the Invader could respond he added: "Exploring, Dylan." Although his voice was still soft, his words seemed to take Bob Dylan by surprise, so much that the seemed to be without words.

Not for long though, because soon his response came: "Exploring? Is this the Plexxan way of exploring? Weapons charged and shields raised while entering a peaceful system, owned by a peaceful people!" An annoying sound followed, one that seemed to attempt to resemble the mocking laughter of the classic villain found in ancient Terran literature. Dylan was laughing at the Captain, which resulted in the Plexxan tactical officer waiting for the order to open fire; yet that refused to come to invade his ears.

The old President smiled: the game had started.

"Yes indeed Dylan. Yes indeed." There was an unmistakable demeaning undertone in Howard's voice. The result seemed to be that the Invader only got more agitated.

"And this is the way you welcome old friends? Cowering in the shadows, hiding behind your

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precious but inadequate cloaking device?” Before the giant Invader on the screen could respond, he continued: “Yes Dylan, I know exactly where you are. Tell me, why use that overrated Mothership of yours? Don’t tell me you are afraid of little old Plexxan me?”

What in the name of Balkuth was Howard doing? Why was he making this Invader warlord only more angry than he already was? As he witnessed the two insulting each other, embarrassing each other in front of their crews. What purpose did this have?

Then it hit him. Both of them wanted the other one to start the inevitable battle that was to follow at some point. All the sudden, he also understood why his Captain had waited for all that time before... He... (the poor Plexxan was even too afraid to think the Invaders name) had hailed the Bloodred Death. It was part of this all: the Invader had shown weakness by his willingness to find out, his impatience, no even his obsession with having to know why they had entered what was clearly his territory. Howard had the advantage here. A slight smile appeared on the face of the First Officer, now that all seemed to becoming clear to him, and he realized that he had just started to respect his superior even more.

Almost endlessly Howard and Bob seemed to continue, angering each other, trying to make the other make that one fatal mistake: starting the actual battle by firing his weapons at the other ship.

At some point, Dylan seemed to calm down just for a moment. Howard knew enough and kicked a little portable data console containing a heavily encrypted message towards his Communications Officer, just out of sight of the Invader. The message was rapidly sent according to the few instructions that came with it, and then Bob spoke: “Tell me one thing Howard, and you damn well tell me the truth! How did you know my position and how did you know what ship is mine?”

Calmly, as if nothing had happened Howard slowly answered: “I believe there is an old Terran saying that applies here.” “Excuse me Plexxan?” “A little bluebird told little old me of your position, oh great and mighty Invader.”

Howard couldn’t have made that sound more condescending even if he had tried. The answer came: “Tell that little bluebird of yours it won’t be talking to you much more Johnny-boy!”

As Bob Dylan’s maniacal laughter sounded, the channel was closed, and once again the Plexxan crew was looking at the view of the still unknown system.

Howard’s voice rumbled over the bridge: “Battle stations!” and within the blink of an eye Bloodred Death faced a ship nearly two times its own massive size: Dylan had decloaked and was charging his shields and astonishing amount of weapons.

“Target those shield generators before those shields get online!!” “Fire!” Howard’s voice was all-present on the bridge: he was in his element now.

The Tactical Officer complied and fired the Missile Launchers, targeting the several shield generators.

Small flashes of light erupted from the missile tubes on the outer hull of the ship, at the same time sending missiles towards their targets at mind-boggling speed.

The time of tricks and games had ended: the two sworn enemies would finally face each other after all these years and faith was to decide which of the two warriors was to survive.

Moments later, the missiles hit, shattering their outer shell against the hull of the Mothership. Subsequently the explosive charges were detonated, completely tearing the shield generators to shrapnel. The explosions caused massive damage, wrecking the hull around the used-to-be shield generators. The massive amount of shrapnel contributed to the damage to the ship,

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cause of its high velocity, what made it smash into the rest of the hull, here and there creating small holes into the outer hull.

By the time the shield generators were hit, the next full salvo was fired from the Paladin. A rain of coloured rays, missiles and balls of lightning rained down upon the Mothership, slashing its hull, causing explosions all over.

By this time Bob's weapons had been charged, locked and he too opened fire. Suddenly space seemed to light up as if it were daylight on Alanda. Bloodred Death's shields were being bombarded, but held up strong and mighty. The crew realized now why Howard had ordered such a huge refit before he left on this mission.

The battle raged, Bloodred Death – taking advantage of its smaller size and its relatively larger manoeuvrability – seemed to dance around its prey, teasing, tearing into its massive hull bit by bit with missiles and the large amount of beam-based weaponry the Paladin possessed since the last refit.

From the nearby planet the battle could be seen, not in great detail, but it was visible nonetheless. With each round fired from either ship the planet's atmosphere lit up as if a rainbow draped its sheer beauty over the entire sky.

Coloured bursts of concentrated energy erupted and dissipated, and at times they even collided, creating a chaotic view of nearly the entire visual spectrum as man is able to witness it through his eyes.

Both ships took serious damage. Howard received damage reports almost by the dozens: his trusted old partner in crime was in over her head: slowly but surely Bob's ship was gaining the upper hand.

While Howard was manoeuvring his ship, and ordering his guns all over the ship, he closely monitored the hull of his target. Suddenly, he noticed a huge crater. Quick scans revealed that it reached deep down into the ship. "Full spread of missiles!! These coordinates!!" he ordered while he transmitted the coordinates to his Tactical Officer, who fired the missiles at once. Damage reports kept pouring in: "Life support systems just went down on Deck Fifteen Section Alpha, Delta and Epsilon Sir!! Crew is being evacuated."

"Hull breach just above Launch bay Three!! Decompression cannot be halted!" The bridge crew was yelling and screaming, reporting all at once. On the view screen the status of the enemy was shown, at least for now, because the sensors weren't working at full capacity anymore either.

The Invader Mothership had taken extensive damage to its outer hull, several of its key weapon systems were offline or inoperable, and it seemed one of the engines was failing.

Howard gave the hilts of his swords a strong tug, making sure they were secured, and strapped his walking cane to his back. Then he took out his pistols out of their holsters, checked the ammo: 20 shots in each, and the power level of the batteries which turned out to be fully loaded. One nod to his First Officer was enough: the second man in command now was the ruler of Howard's little kingdom: the bridge. Then the signal was given, and a bright light erupted out of nowhere on the exact position where the President had stood, while the First Officer was commanding the ship and issuing orders for evasive manoeuvres in order to evade several incoming torpedoes. "Good luck old man" the First Officer thought to himself, and requested another damage report.

Belly of the Beast

A second later, Howard found himself upon the Invader Mothership, exactly where he had planned himself to be right now: in a remote cargo hold filled with crates and containers of all sizes, marked in the strange Invader language. There was only a minimum of security guards. With his pistols drawn, he approached them, trying hard not to make a noise.

However he did not notice a small crate in front of his left foot, and kicked it accidentally, causing it to slide over the ground with an abnormal loud scratching sound. This off course caused the guards to turn around with their weapons drawn and open fire upon him.

Quickly he dived behind one of the large crates, focused on the positions of the guards as he remembered them, jumped up, and fired.

Howard was outnumbered, literally five to one. He had only one advantage: these Invaders didn't have the slightest idea who they were dealing with, and so they treated him like an average fighter.

One of the Invaders slid down the floor, firing his weapon through the open corridor between several crates, attempting to hit Howard. Howard jumped up just in time, fired his trusted pistols once, and penetrated his opponents' natural armour with just one dual shot, hitting him in the head. The wounds were small, but fatal. The Invaders brain was squashed on the inside, and dead on impact.

Quickly Howard changed his position, moving erratically through the various cargo containers. However, he was on their territory, and two of them eventually managed to trap him in a small corridor between a few enormous crates, slowly closing on him from both sides with their guns drawn.

Howard's brain worked like lightning, examining possible solutions, playing scenarios, and within a few seconds he knew what to do.

As he got ready, the world seemed to slow down to a state of slow-motion. He threw his pistols towards the first Invader, who was surprised, and in a reflex tried to catch them and thereby dropping his gun. Howard took a dive for the gun, grabbed it and fired at the second Invader. The gun was heavy for the Plexxan. Invaders had much more body strength, and they had the advantage of a second pair of arms. This gun was off course especially constructed to accommodate for that biological feature. It had two handles, one on top, and one facing down. Both had a trigger-like button which fired the device. Both had to be used at the same time to make the weapon be activated. Howard had to use both his hands to fire the weapon.

He pressed the buttons with all his force, and an all destructive beam of energy hurled towards its target, which was firing a similar gun towards the Captain.

The shockwave that the gun produced threw the old Plexxan backwards with great force, knocking over his second enemy. The Invader hit by the beam was catapulted towards the stack of crates behind him. When he hit the crates, his massive body mass and the force of the beam caused him to crash right through the bottom box. With one of its sides completely gone, the crate collapsed under the weight of the other crates on top of it, causing the Invader to be crushed under the weight.

In the mean time Howard had managed to get up, grab the gun again and was slinging it at the first Invader, who was desperately trying to work the Plexxan pistols. The gun hit him, handle first, against his neck. Although the Invader body is completely covered in strong natural armour and the skin underneath has incredible strength, the neck, especially the sides, is vulnerable.

The handle crashed into the neck plating, piercing it as if it was a piece of paper, and dug deep into the flesh, thereby severing several arteries. This caused massive internal bleeding, while that the handle kept going further, smashing into the vertebrae of the neck, completely

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shattering them on impact. The Invader fell down, life slowly fading out of his body. Howard grabbed his pistols and went to find the other two guards. One of them had climbed upon the crates and tried to ambush him by jumping down as Howard moved right underneath him. Unfortunately, whether it was due to lack of brainpower or just sheer underestimation of his opponent, the guard had not thought of the possibility that Howard had fast reflexes.

And that was just the case, despite of his much advanced years – he was old, very old for Plexxan standards: 136 Terran years, and that while most Plexxans rarely live beyond 140 – but his reflexes were still quite rapid, even though strongly affected by his advanced age. As the guard jumped down, Howard rolled forward and turned around, just in time to see the guard come crashing down. As his opponent desperately tried to get back on his feet, Howard pulled the trigger on his pistols, and hit the alien body five times before he was sure that he was dead.

The last guard proved tough, but Howard eventually managed to smoke him out of his hiding, and suddenly had the guard storming at him at full speed. Then Howard noticed that he stood right in front of a communication console. Years of studying the Invaders had resulted in a rather advanced knowledge of both their language and the working of their systems. He quickly opened a channel to the bridge of the ship, which opened in an instant. Bob answered agitated: “Yes?”

Then, on the bridge the speakers were suddenly filled with the voice of the old Plexxan: “Knock, knock!”. Before Bob could respond at all, all heard some muffled noises, indicating that someone fell or had quickly jumped onto one of the smaller crates, and then a huge bang deafened the crew on the bridge. After that, nothing but static: the Invader guard had crashed into the communication console.

Howard was amazed by the sheer amount of blood that had forced its way out of the head of the Invader. His entire uniform was covered in the yellow-brown coloured and rather smelly liquid.

The wall had been redecorated in the same colour, and finished off with pieces of flesh, brain and muscle dripping off the wall. The entire view was disgusting.

Howard quickly made his way out of the cargo hold, leaving a small battlefield behind, and started making his way to the bridge. He knew that he had to move fast now that Bob knew that he was on the ship, and that he had a location from where he had started moving. But Howard had always enjoyed a good challenge.

Bob immediately ordered his ships security personnel to start searching for the intruder and to bring him to him. His explanation – not surprisingly - was that he “wanted to deal with that old pest personally, once and for all”.

Howard moved fast, and quickly ran into some of the crew, who were startled and amazed at his presence, but were not able to resist his weapons fire. Unfortunately, the Mothership was large, and housed many crewmen, and it seemed that a large portion of the crew managed to locate themselves on the route the President was taking. This caused his ammunition supply to run low quite rapidly, and soon he found himself with empty pistols facing a security team. The Invaders were quite a bit taller than the Plexxan.

They approached slowly, and gave their prey thereby the time to arm himself with his Battleswords.

The metal of the swords was shining bright in the hallway lights. Howard slowly positioned

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himself into a good position, making sure that he was not cornered. Then, the first one took a shot at attacking him. Unfortunately, Howard did not carry his swords with him at all time without a reason: he was much more adept at the subtle arts of sword fighting than he was a gunman. The Invader was struck by a strong blow to the left shoulder, cracking his strong outer armour and causing him to bend through his knees somewhat. The second sword came crashing into his right side, just between the both of his right arms, cutting deep into his flesh. As the first attacker fell to the floor, feeling pains he had never felt before, the others attacked. Guns were fired, but all shots missed their target. To the large Invaders, whose body structure did not allow them to be as agile as their opponent, the intruder was lightning-fast. Howard struck with strong blows, had his swords dive deep into his opponents, spilling their blood all over the hallway.

Soon he was the only one standing, with four neutralized enemies unconscious, seriously wounded or dying at his feet.

Quickly he moved further through the ship, avoiding the crew as much as possible. However, the ship was large, and several times something very similar happened, each time with pretty much the same outcome.

The Plexxan forced his way through the halls, leaving a trail of corpses. The Invaders seemed to be no match for him and his weapons. He slit their throats, pierced their bodies and even snapped their necks between a column and the floor by applying his full weight upon them, while being jumped by another Invader.

Final Showdown!?

Finally he managed to reach the bridge, and felt tired. Due to his age, his stamina wasn't what it once had been. He wasn't the man he was sixty years ago, no, now this was a real challenge for him. He took a moment to catch his breath, straighten his uniform and wipe the blades of his swords clean, using part of a uniform of one of his opponents that he had cut off just before.

Suddenly that pain was back, he arched over, grabbing his left leg. Softly the old man groaned. The pain was more intense than ever before: the one that had inflicted that wound upon him was closer now than he had been in over seventy long years. It was time to end this. He massaged his leg for a moment, then stood up straight again, and slammed his fist against the scanner next to the door to the bridge. This scanner had to identify the person behind the DNA it read and analyzed, thus selecting the very few that were allowed upon the bridge. Of course, Howard would not be able to pass this door the usual way, so he smashed the scanner, ripped it out and rearranged the circuits to open the door manually. After a few minutes the door unlocked, and Howard pushed it open.

The bridge was large and quite heavily defended. Six officers made a dash for him, trying to run him over or to knock him down. A few quick movements made those plans fail, as some of the officers slammed into the walls, the railing that was placed to separate the back of the bridge from the front and even each other.

At the same time Howard was drawing more gunfire than he liked. He unbuttoned his throwing knives while running for cover behind a console. Using his knives and their reflective surfaces as mirrors, he scanned the bridge and memorized the exact spot where all of his opponents were standing. Seeing as that he did not have any guns with ammunition at the moment, he would have to use his knives to take out the nearest Invader armed with a usable gun, which turned out to be the one to the left of his hiding spot.

He faked a move to the right, causing the defenders facing the console from there to open fire on him and focus on that part of the bridge long enough for him to rise up on the left, and throw his knives with deadly accuracy. He hit his target in the eyes, in two of his hands and right in the middle of the neck.

Quickly ducking down again, he saw the giant figure slowly crumble down, falling towards the floor. Then the President made a run for it; again a rain of gunfire: laser beams and bolts of energy crashing into the wall, floor and nearly everything around him. Somehow they all managed to miss their actual target, and Howard – now in the possession of a gun – positioned himself again behind a console. Repeating the same actions as before, he again memorized where everyone was. He noticed Bob standing in the middle, and a few Invaders directly to the left and right of Bob's position. Howard lay down on his stomach, holding the gun, which was luckily substantially lighter than the one he had used in the cargo hold.

Bob yelled something about him not leaving this ship alive, and it seemed the Bloodred Death was still putting up a fight, because the impact of a missile could be heard.

Howard positioned his gun right next to the console, and fired twice. Both Invaders went down, leaving Bob isolated. Response to that was the now usual rain of gunfire, which had substantially been lessened with those two gunmen down.

The last officer had been sneaking around the bridge while all this happened, and attempted to attack Howard from the sides. Howard however, had noticed him moving during his last assessment of the situation, and was ready. A few clear shots to the chest made that ambush be listed as one of many failed ways to kill the legendary Captain.

Now Bob and Howard were alone, because the Invader commander had sealed off the bridge the moment Howard entered it. It seemed that that mechanism was separately controllable

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from the scanner that Howard had destroyed earlier.

Dylan dared Howard to stand up and fight, one to one. He seemed to want to finish what he had started several decades ago.

They agreed to dump their guns, and Howard made sure that he saw Bob throw away every gun he had upon himself. That mistake had been made once, and would not be made again. The two old nemeses then stood opposed to each other, now in the front end of the bridge, and started circling each other, their blades drawn.

Bob said something in his own language, and to Howard it sounded as a command directed to his ships computer. He turned out to be right, because all the sudden the ship seemed to move, but not in a regular way. Howard quickly figured it out: Dylan had activated the Wormhole Drive, something that the Races in the known Galaxy had not yet mastered. This drive made it possible for the Invaders to move almost instantly from one Galaxy to another if needed, but it worked on shorter distances as well.

“Does that seem familiar to you?” Bob asked, as an image appeared upon the screen. It was the system of Mizar. The Klakanid Homebase was clearly shown on the background, and all around it ships were flying, fighting.

The Allies were fighting the Union and the Egaran. The system was filled with all classes of ships: from Slah’ke Zealots, Orfine Warhounds and Plexxan Paladins to Egaran Cruisers, Matrix Starpoints, Terran ‘G66’ Eliminators and Brood Death-Helices were fighting. Left and right ships exploded, debris drifted throughout the entire system.

All the sudden two Kolari Rift-class vessels decloaked right on top of a Tosaga-Blade, firing their missiles at its shields. The weak shields lit up and seemed to hold, but soon the second volley came and the first explosions on the hull became visible. The powerful Nexus-built guns tore into the hull of the Support Cruiser. Out of nowhere a Spectre uncloaked, and the in-vision sensors made it clear that the Support Cruiser was being boarded by Pirates.

The advanced sensors of the Invader Mothership registered the life signs, and seemed to be able to identify the people on board of the ships. The Captain of the Tosaga-Blade – Churchill_bur – faced a superior opponent on his ship: Reaper, the once Terran, now Pirate martial arts-expert. Within a matter of seconds the ship was overrun, and Reaper activated the hyper drive. As the Support Cruiser prepared for its journey towards Wolf 359 in hyperspace, and the Spectre raised its cloak once more, several ships in the system seemed to notice the Mothership.

Bob was able to monitor all communications, and they could hear the frightened voices of the crews, the requests for backup from all Captains.

All this took only three seconds to unfold, and then Bob Dylan opened a system wide channel, overriding all other communications: “Today you are the spectators of the show of the Era! Today you will all sit and watch how your Saviour – at this point he pointed into the direction of Howard, who was clearly visible for all who were watching – will meet his demise!!”

With that, and with the channel still open, Bob charged at the President. Sparks generated an orange glow over their faces as their blades met. Both were excellent swordsmen, and this battle could take forever to finish.

Out of precaution nearly all ships took a safe distance. The fighting had seized, since both fleets had new priorities: cheer on their leader and hope and pray that that would be enough to have him claim victory over the enemy.

The two nemeses fought, jumped, crawled and lunged at each other for what seemed to take forever.

Bob managed to hit Howard in the right leg, just beneath his kneecap, and the old Plexxan was brought to his knees. Everyone in the system seemed to hold their breath. Just as it

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seemed that the fight was over and Bob was about to kill his old enemy, one of the Plexxan blades shot up and penetrated the natural armour of the Invader, giving Howard time to get back on his feet. He did not waste one moment of his bought time, and his second sword flashed through the air, landing into the flesh of the Invaders left upper arm, severing it from the rest of the body, continuing down to the second left arm and doing serious damage there, and causing litres of the yellow-brown blood to be spilt.

With his left side barely useful, Bob took his left blades into his right hands, so that he now held two blades in both hands, in opposite directions.

Howard saw the attack coming, and crossed his swords while bending one of his knees and kneeling down. The blades of his opponent came crashing down and caused a rain of sparks. One fast move made Howard manage to break loose out of this position, and he prepared for his next attack. After successfully evading the defensive movements of the Invader the Plexxan-forged steel again entered the alien body, cutting through the flesh, making its way to the inner sanctum: one of the Invaders three hearts. The steel ripped through the tissue, and the Invader fell to his knees, caused by the combination of severe loss of blood and now one of his hearts being struck. Fortunately, his hearts were designed to function together as well as separate, and quickly his two remaining clockworks took over the duties of their fallen brother, however Bob would be less able then before.

Howard turned around the sword, just to cause even more extensive damage to his opponent and failed to notice the sword en route to his upper thigh. He was struck with force, but the Invaders muscles were weakened and he didn't have the strength to cut through the bone of the Plexxan leg.

Howard roared in pain, as if he were a lion struck by a falling tree branch. Both of the old warriors were severely wounded and crippled, but still they went on.

They moved over the bridge, slowly, but they moved, leaning on consoles and against the walls along the way.

Dylan made his way to a console, typed in a code and suddenly the lighting on the bridge changed. When Howard finally managed to drag himself into the vicinity of the console he saw it: the self-destruction sequence was activated, and there was no way to stop it.

Several Kolari vessels that were close to the Mothership noticed that as well, and moved in closer, in an attempt to beam the President over to their ships as soon as the battle had ended, or in the final few seconds before the destruction of the ship. The Kolari were the only ones that dared to come this close at this moment to the Mothership, because they had found a way to combine their cloaking devices with their shielding, making it possible for them to have their strong shields raised during the times they were cloaked.

Dylan was leaning against the console, smiling as Howard slowly approached, and leaned against the opposite console. Both elderly warriors were exhausted by the wounds they suffered as well as the toll this duel was taking on their physiques.

Howard lashed out one more time, with both his swords held horizontally and moving in the opposite direction right at the height of Bob's neck. They struck with all the power the old man could still muster up, and severed his head from his body. Blood was spilling everywhere, and together they plummeted to the floor: one dead, the other completely exhausted.

One of the cloaked Kolari ships tried to get a lock on Howard, and for a moment they managed to get one. Their time was running out, the countdown was closing the moment of detonation fast, but unfortunately they were not aware of that.

A fraction of a second before the ship exploded, the Kolari transporter was energized and the

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transport of the old Plexxan was started. A shockwave erupted from the Mothership as it was exploding, throwing nearly all ships in the vicinity back with great force. The Captain of the Rift that was attempting to transport Howard to safety had anticipated that however, and activated the engines at full speed forwards the moment before the shockwave hit, causing the Rift to manage to stay more or less on the same position.

When the shockwave had passed, the female Kolari Captain informed about the transport: “Do we have him? Is Howard aboard our ship?”. The Operations Officer searched the ship with the internal sensors and hesitated to respond.

“What is it?” “Ma’am, I do not believe we have President Howard aboard the ship at this moment...”

The Captain was disappointed. She had tried and failed. This would be a shock to not only the Kolari leadership, but also to the Federation, as well as a big blow to the morale of the Allies.

The Union ships in the system had also scanned the explosion, and had managed to isolate the life sign of the old Plexxan just before the explosion. They now could however not pick up the sign anywhere, much to their delight.

“Check again” the Kolari Captain was not willing to accept that Howard was dead, that his life had been so easily lost. She also had been told the stories of his deeds, the amazing tales of the battles he had fought, and the amazing victories he had achieved against all odds.

“Hmm, this is strange”, the voice of the Operations Officer gave her just a little bit of hope. Maybe, just maybe... “What is it?” “There seems to be something stuck in the buffer Captain, but I cannot isolate it, nor am I able to make it materialize it. I need more advanced equipment for that. May I suggest that we move back to Deneb at once?”

“By all means!! Set a course for Deneb! Activate the hyperdrive!! We have no time to lose! Engineering, I want every bit of speed that you can get out of out of those engines, and I want it now!!”

And thus, the Rift pulled itself into hyperspace, en route to Deneb, travelling as fast as possible.

Arriving there, the Captain heard that the battle for Mizar was lost, and she knew why...

Keep Your Friends Close and Your Enemies Closer

As S117 got up he noticed there was light on one of the ships window, he found it rather strange, they weren't supposed to be near any sun or any star, so how could there be light. He picked up his Dagon Nightshield and his Dagon Hammer.

Both of these items felt strange, he didn't like them, he felt it just wasn't right, the Nightshield was a force field just like the Displacer Field, it just used less energy and was more effective. As for the Dagon Hammer, a close combat weapon, not very good if we are up against one of those Kolari Plasma Sniper but the Hammer can actually use the Nightshield's generator and get an higher force field.

S117 was almost ready when he got an incoming transmission from the bridge.

"Sir, sorry to bother you but we are ready to leave Mizar" – the navigation officer said.

"WHAT THE HELL!?!?! Why are we in Mizar??" – S117 asked while on his way to the bridge.

"We got a transmission from a Commando ship saying we were needed here Sir" – the navigation officer promptly said.

"Well I'm on my way to the bridge so start explaining!" – S117 ordered starting to loose his patience.

"Sir, we got a transmission from a Dagon Commando ship saying an Invader Mothership was heavily damaged and needed support, right after that Bob Dylan contacted us saying he had a Plexxan on board and that he was about to self destruct, as we got here the Mothership was already destroyed, but we are about to help the Slah'ke against the remaining Nexus forces" – the navigation officer said with a very serious tone of voice.

"You did good but next time I want you to warn me about every transmission we get instead of deciding blindly by yourself what to do, this is my ship and it moves when I say so, understood?" – S117 said beginning to calm down.

The bridge of the Longsword was very small, it was different from the other Battle Cruisers, it had more armour so the command crew could be safer, also if the ship was ever to die, the bridge could be a perfect escape pod thanks to the low dimension engines added by the Invaders. The ship had been refitted and every single mistake made by the Terrans when they built it was corrected, at least the known ones. S117 liked it and he was thankful but still he felt like this ship was almost having his final battle.

"What's our status officer?" – He asked.

"We are ready to start Sir, they have few numbers, few Rifts just left the system in a hurry so we can win" – the gun officer replied.

"What do we have in our fleet? Type of ships and numbers, please"

"Five Zealots Sir!" – the communications officer said.

"Incoming Rifts, six of them, on our scanners"

"Incoming transmission!"

On the bridge screen a familiar face appeared, it was Orca and with a smile he said:

"We are giving you a chance to give up and go home, and yes I'm talking to you, the guys in the Longsword, that or we revenge S117's death!"

S117 turned to the communications officer and made him an hand signal, at first the young officer didn't understand what the captain meant but soon he understood and started typing on his panel. After that S117 turned back to the screen and in a few seconds he began:

"You do know with who you are talking to, right?"

Orca's face suddenly changed, he was surprised and looked like he just seen a ghost.

"You are talking to the Captain of the Longsword, the Captain that commanded this ship for over fifty-seven years, the Captain that lead people to victory several times but also the Captain that was there when this ship lost a battle...." – And with a small tear, S117 ended

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and turned his face.

“S117 how can it be you are still alive !?!?! John told me you died...”

S117 stood up and looked to the screen again, and with a determinate look he answered.

“I’m not dead as you can see and I’m about to answer your surrender proposal”

S117 made another hand sign to the gun officer and to the communication officer and so the battle started, the Longsword fired a volley of Fusion Torpedoes to one of the Nexus Rifts but the fast Rift evaded it and got out of Longswords range, the Zealots started to move towards the Rifts faster than the Longsword which made the old Battle Cruiser look pathetic compared to them. One of the Zealots exploded as the Rifts teamed him out of their range and soon another Zealot went down too, that made the lasting Zealots fall back to Longswords position.

“Sir, one of ours is hailing us”

“Get it through”

The screen flashed and Tomglomerate appeared on the screen.

“S117 we need to get close enough to the Rifts to shoot them, any ideas?”

“Yes I think I have one, tell the other Zealots to get closer to me and standby”

When S117 finished the Longsword started moving backwards and so did the Zealots following him, the Rifts started following and with their weapons charged they kept shooting, luckily the Zealots were able to evade the shots but they were getting closer and closer to hit them.

“Officer, tell all of the Zealots to intercept the Rifts now!! Set an intercept course to those Rifts and charge the Super Heavy Laser”

The Rifts were suddenly surprised at this action they weren’t waiting for it and they were now in the Zealots and in the Longswords range.

“Shoot!!”

The system now looked full of fireworks from the Longswords screen, Dual Gamma Cannons shooting and Fusion Torpedoes flying in the system and hitting the Rifts very hard, the Rifts were destroyed one by one until only Orca’s ship was left.

“Sir, the enemy Rift is hypering!”

“Let him go....Lets hyper out, and go to Polaris to meet the rest of our fleet”

S117 walked away from the screen and headed to the bridge door when the screen flashed and Womble appeared on the screen.

“S117 we need your assistance, we were ambushed by the Hive in Polaris, the Dagon and Orfine are fighting them, but we don’t know for how long we can take it!!”

“What about the Va’Tal ?!?!” – S117 asked as he got to his chair.

“They won’t leave their base without talking to you”

“God damn it !! Tell everyone to hyper out !! Head to Megrez”

“Isn’t there a Nexus base there?” – Womble asked wondering what S117 had in mind.

“Not anymore, just go!”

S117 turned to the Navigation Officer:

“To Megrez it is....wake me up when we get there I’ll be in my room” – As he ended he left the bridge and started making his way to his room only thinking about a good night of sleep.

Trip To The Past (Special Valentine's Day)

Many years ago..

In one of Mars Large Domes, big gardens could finally grow with modified environment , Terrans were very busy as usual but something was happening, it was February 14th, what they called Valentine's Day; Terrans were very nervous and some could be seen running around to the shops to buy gifts.

In one of the central gardens there was a big fountain but unlike any other fountains this one didn't have water, instead it was lava, Terrans were strangely fascinated by it and liked it, besides, due to the planet's temperature water didn't stay there for a long time. S117 was there near one of the old trees but suddenly another Terran arrived, it was Taveius, he gave him a letter and after some big conversation S117 left running to the Diplomatic Palace but before that happened, the words "Take care of her" could be heard.

Diplomatic Palaces could be found in the inner and outer colonies of the Terran Empire, they were used to communicate with the Imperial Palace in Sol very fast, and it was one of the few only things Terrans made that had worked for years without malfunctioning.

S117 was already inside the docking bays, preparing to enter the Longsword as he started reading the letter:

"Greetings S117,

We have information that the Brood are preparing to launch an attack on Sol, they have a fleet of hundreds of Insidious with some Scarabs supporting them, I guess we can take them out near Earth but I want you here just in case, Taveius will be assigned for the security of Mars so don't worry, he will do a good job.

Regards,

Aragon"

This message was worrying, yes Brood could take a planet like Mars or Jupiter but Earth? It was the closest planet to Utopia who made it almost impossible to take.

"Officer set course to Earth, let's meet with Aragon's fleet"

"Yes Sir!"

S117 looked at hyper with his ship scanners, the Brood fleet was already half way from Sol so S117 had to hurry or he wouldn't get there in time.

"Sir we are getting an anomaly in space around Mars" – The Ops Officer said

"Hyperspace?" – S117 asked

"No Sir, Cloakers, I estimate 10 of them Sir!" – The officer answered.

"Damn they are going to attack Mars, contact Aragon, and tell him I'm not going to join him!" – S117 ordered the young officer.

"Sir?"

"Just do as I say or get removed from the bridge!"

The Longsword now near Pallas was returning to Mars and S117 knew he had to go very fast or he wouldn't get there in time.

"Incoming transmission, Sir!"

"S117 I don't know what you are doing and I don't care, get here or be outlawed!!" – Aragon said.

"Outlaw me if you see the need but I won't be heading there". – S117 answered.

And with a last *sigh* Aragon closed the channel, it was clear that the young Chancellor wasn't happy but S117 knew he could talk his way out of this one like he did in past times.

"Sir....." – started the gunner saying

"What!?!?" – S117 asked

"They are there.....they entered Sol and they are right on top of the main domes Sir,

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above the Diplomatic Palace” – he ended

S117 looked at the main screen, it was true, the fleet of Insidious was right on top of Mars Diplomatic Palace, using the small screens on his left he took a look at the Terran Fleet in Earth, they weren't moving, S117 started thinking.....weren't they going to help them .

“Another transmission Sir, this time from Galactica” – the Nav-officer informed.

“S117 they broke through our shields, the Scarabs aren't letting us even shoot a salvo at those Insidious!!”

“Aren't our orbital guns shooting them??”

“No, they destroyed all of our orbital reactors, everything we have is offline and the main fleet is at Earth *static* “

The channel went silence, S117 stared at the Communications Officer waiting for the report, hoping that he said it was his own ship's communication equipment malfunctioning.

“Sir, the Galactica was destroyed and Diplomatic Palace with it....” – the officer paused “The Brood are preparing to hyper Sir!”

“Move to where the Diplomatic Palace was, I want to see how much damage Mars took” – S117 ordered.

As the Longsword arrived to Mars, a Scout ship left her launch bays, the ship was headed to the Diplomatic Palace old location, where the private rooms were located, S117 didn't want to know the damage the planet took, he was looking for a survivor in particular, the ship landed on the surface and S117 still hoping to find someone ran over and over again screaming and asking for survivors, no one came, he looked up and saw the red clouds and knew this was the day he would remember forever.

Remembrance

*Good news may travel fast and wide as winds strong and hard,
Bad news will reach waiting ears quicker than the light of star.
- Que'Wagm Ta the Wise One (8708.5 E – 9682.9 E)*

The sun was rising, draping the City in a light orange glow, unreal and wondrous in its colouring. To a stranger the streets may have seemed under the rule of an early curfew, yet to those fortunate enough to call themselves residents of this magnificent City, the silence of the empty streets had a deep and profound meaning.

The light of the rising star had the plastered walls bathing in an almost magical light, majestic buildings seemed to rise up from the ground, trying to reach even higher towards the sky, propelled by their desire to feel the morning light upon their outer walls, yet others among these sturdy creations seemed to bow to both the light and their high-reaching superiors, allowing those to shine even brighter upon the view of the skyline.

The characteristic pointed dual towers – Honour and Loyalty – dominated this skyline, reaching further towards the clouds than anything else in sight, and seemed to do yet another attempt to touch the stars under which they slept every night again.

The streets, which were normally filled with people around this hour, were now empty as if the City had been abandoned by those that loved it the most.

Banners hung low, gently rocking their cloth bodies upon the subtle morning breeze. The gates of the City were open – they always were, due to an automated system which only closed them in case of an alien invasion or a natural disaster, both which hadn't happened in many decades.

Apart from the noise of the automated transportation system, the City was held captive by silence.

Padeen City, in all its splendour and glory, lay in the morning sun as if she as a relic of an ancient past untouched. Nothing like that would explain the silence in the normally so exuberant City, for she was, as countless of her sisters across the vast empire, in mourning. Every city and town in the Federation looked the same that morning, and would look the same for an entire week.

Slowly the travellers made their way through the curving streets, careful not to disturb the seemingly peaceful silence that seemed to rule them.

Quietly they approached their destination in the utmost centre of the immense City, and again they noticed the many banners hanging low, as they had seen before when they had entered the City through its gates from the south passage, and in the various streets which they had passed through. The low hanging banners, as they knew, were a custom of the people that they would call their hosts for the coming days, a custom they were eager to honour.

Although the planet was well equipped with the joys of anti-gravity propelled public transport – which was automatically operated – the travellers had come by foot, at least, from the site where they had been given permission to land their starship. They had travelled in this manner in respect for their goal and their destination.

At last the company of travellers reached their destination: the Great Hall. They climbed the stairs, and the first of the strangers knocked on the Kotar-wood (which is indigenous to Padeen) of the door. This resulted into a deep baritone drumming sound resonating from – as it seemed – within the ancient wood. The carvings on the doors were decorative, yet quite functional at the same time, a rare combination.

Many years ago the finest craftsmen in the City dedicated a year of their lives to creating these doors, and it was considered the crowning achievement upon building the Great Hall.

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After a few moments, there was movement: access had been granted to the travellers and the doors slowly opened just enough to let the tired strangers enter this great sanctuary. After the group entered the Hall, the doors once more closed, leaving no trace that they had ever given access to anyone or anything.

Inside, the strangers shed their travelling clothes. Instantly they became old friends to those gathered in the Hall, for now they were recognised.

Many familiar faces were there, many old friends, yet also people that had barely ever met each other had come here with a common destination, a shared goal: Remembrance.

As all took their seat, an old Plexxan stood up and made his way to the end of the Great Hall, where he was to hold his welcoming speech.

As the sound system kicked in, and the Plexxan, whose face was now visible on a large screen behind him, started to speak, everyone turned their attention to him.

“We are here to remember an ally, a leader, a fighter, but above all a dear friend, one that is no longer in our midst.” Behind the old Plexxan, who all now recognised as StarRaider, a picture appeared on the screen. It was a face that all knew: the face of a fallen warrior, a legend as there were many in the Galaxy: President John A. Howard.

After StarRaider finished his speech, many people came forward to share their condolences with the Plexxans, to remember their most fondest stories of the one Remembered.

At some point, Prophet of Sin stepped forward to tell those gathered in the Great Hall the story which made him remember Howard the most.

The skinny Plexxan Captain stood, tall as he was and spoke in a soft and somewhat shaky voice. “I remember Howard, when I was stationed here in Padeen City as a guard and escort for the diplomats that came to visit and talk with him. One day, during the time that the Federation had some serious disagreements with the Union, and the friction was so bad that war was close, the Union government sent a diplomat. That diplomat was a spokesperson, a messenger.”

Faintly one could hear some laughter and some snickering in the Hall, because most of the people there knew Howard’s opinion on the use of messengers all too well. Sending him a messenger with a diplomatic offer was something you only did once, but never, never again.

Prophet went on: “The Slah’ke was tall and very proud, too proud in my opinion. I escorted him to the Presidential Office, and let him in. The Slah’ke made his way to Howard’s working quarters, and – as I later found out by reviewing the security camera tapes – positioned himself right across the Presidents desk, right on top of an old rug. As a proud Slah’ke should, he made demands, he told Howard to do something, something that the Federation would never do, and offered something utterly ridiculous in return.”

“Long story short, next thing I know, Howard is dragging the Slah’ke by his tail out the door onto the street, publicly humiliating the Overlords messenger. Then he rounds up the entire Slah’ke diplomatic staff currently working and living in the building of the Slah’ke Embassy and ends up kicking him back into the nearest cargo vessel. Needless to say, that transport vessel just happened to make a one way trip back to Proxima.”

Laughter ensued in the Great Hall.

As Prophet of Sin stepped down, one of the strangers – Marc7005 stepped up, and started to speak – using the artificial voice-amplifier built into his Encounter suit – and talked about how he and Howard met.

Long memories, old stories, and many good – and some less than good – jokes were told, shared by all who had attended.

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Many people followed and spoke of their memories, positive and negative. Although Remembrance usually is a sad moment, a sad day for all attending, it seemed that the people gathered to Remember the old Captain and President found more than just a bit of comfort in this gathering. Representation of the Union was unsurprisingly very absent.

At some point during the Remembrance, a very old Terran Admiral stood up, and shared the story he wished to share.

His time-worn voice was barely heard to Plexxan ears as he spoke of John A. Howard.

“Many, many years ago, the Empire was at war with the Federation, a war in which I as young and inexperienced Captain fought. It was the first war in which Howard had been given command of a war fleet. Terran forces were assaulting the then Federation owned – and in our point of view rightfully our property – Procyon, and making good progress.”

“We had a massive fleet consisting of about a hundred Invincibles and a few hundred Type-74s, G-66’s and some assorted vessels as our assault force, a fleet several times of what the Federation could muster at that moment. As we were moving in on Procyon I after successfully laying waste to a few of the asteroids, the Federation defensive forces arrived in the system, under command of Howard.”

A small pause, the old man seemed to be catching his breath. “Off course, our forces turned their attention to the defenders by chancing course to intercept the enemy fleet. This fleet was small in comparison of ours, barely 30% of our numbers. That day, the Federation finally managed to really strike back in defending what was theirs. That battle saw the birth of several tactics that now are being studied all throughout the Galaxy as classic Federation strategy, as well as used and applied by many fleets in battle. Those tactics are of the hand of our dear departed friend, foe, ally and enemy. On that day, they were brand new, and more than just effective against our forces. That battle turned the tide of our war, wiped out a large portion of our entire fleet, only a few ships of the assault force made it out of Procyon that day, and set the Federation on the galactic map of power to recon with. Howard’s name was suddenly known throughout the Empire, and hated for that matter. I have the deepest respect for him, for his military accomplishments, his ability, his honour, and his sheer love for a good battle. I salute you, you old Plexxan troublemaker! May you rest in peace.”

The old man smiled at the picture of the recently deceased as he started to walk off the stage, at a pace that made a Terran snail look fast.

Some of the leaders that were present quietly discussed how that the Allied forces should cope with the rest of the war, but as was to be expected, no real decisions were made at that time.

The Federation mourned for another four days, and then started to prepare slowly for the upcoming elections: a new President was needed. In the mean time, Federation forces kept fighting, together with their allies.

One thing remained unclear to the Plexxan military leadership though: what had been the faith of Bloodred Death?

A Hunt Joined

After making the jump to hyperspace General Chad handed over the bridge of the Divine Savage and retired to his quarters. As he looked round the sparse apartment consisting merely of a cot, a cluttered desk and chest of some of his most treasured possessions, he suddenly felt weak. With Taveius dead Greeny in critical condition and now S117 dead the Terran high command was looking severely weakened. Not only that, but John Howard dead as well throwing to the Federation into the disarray of its complex election process. These humans had all been close friends of Chad's and for neither the first nor the last time he cursed the Slah'ke and the Invaders for these attacks and betrayals.

Pulling himself out of his self pity he sat down at his desk, pushing aside some paperwork on building violations in Achernar and called up the Orfine Council tactical net. Clicking through some inconclusive skirmishes in the Serpens sector he was surprised to find Lord Womble had personally taken a fleet to fend off the Dagon in Aldebaran. As Chad read down the report he was more and more unsettled with what he learnt. The fleet Womble led had entered Aldebaran to find a much larger fleet than was usual for the Dagon and without firing a shot had agreed to meet with the leader of the fleet. Very soon after meeting the Dagon fleet leader Womble had sent for two elite Orfine Close combat squads, sent the fleet back to Olfus to be re-dispatched under Marc7005 (Chad always found Kolari names odd, even for giant light bulbs) On a mission to take Mizar, then headed off with the Dagon.

The old Orfine leaned back on his chair and puzzled over this, the Dagon were sworn enemies of the Orfine, trying to extend an ancient claim over many Orfine systems and harassing Orfine patrols regularly. After considering this for a while he decided that his leader must have his reasons. Chad, whilst respecting Womble as his friend and superior, always thought that he had far too lax an attitude towards war. Even though Womble's tactical prowess was undeniable Chad considered him to lack the killer instinct that most species assumed all Orfines to possess. Rubbing his tired eyes Chad punched out a report to the council to the council saying he had been unsuccessful at locating Machinehr in Adhara and was moving on to El Nath.

Standing up Chad went over to his trunk and opened up the old leather chest and pulled out his battered copy of "L'Orinoco de colección" a classic novel dating back to the Orfine days on Uranus, and Chad's personal favourite. Intending to spend an hour or two reading it before turning in, Chad laid down in his cot and fell asleep before he finished the first page...

Eight hours later the General was woken by a soft chime over the quarter's intercom.

"Chad here," he said groggily, he was getting too old to be fighting had to hand with these damn lizards "what's the situation?"

"Sir! We are about to enter the El Nath system." His first officer Dark Lycan replied

"I'll be right there" he grunted shutting off the intercom and gently putting his book back in the trunk for another time.

"Long range sensors report" Chad said striding onto the bridge of the Scarab.

"System appears to be empty sir"

"Helm requesting permission to set course for the primary planet sir"

"Granted" Chad said walking over to the Helmsman. A talented young recruit, but over promoted due to the fact that his Uncle was a system Lord.

"Take us in slowly" Chad said quietly to the helmsman "approach along a vector close to the primary star, I don't want us being detected"

"Aye sir!" he replied, slightly too loudly.

Sitting down in the large cracked leather Command chair Chad flicked the Ship wide

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intercom on with one claw

**

This is General Chad speaking, We are now approaching the Planet where we believe Machinehr to be hiding, Security teams report to the transporter stations, the rest of you man your posts with extra vigilance, this may turn heated very quickly

**

With this and strapping his Battle Claws to his side Chad left the bridge and headed to the docking bay to lead the attack on the Union's 'Secret' Base.

As Chad was strapping himself into the Co-Pilots seat of one of the two customised Nexus Photons Docked on the *Divine Savage* he got a call from Dark Lycan on the bridge.

"Sir we have an encoded transmission from an unidentified source, it's an older code but it checks out, do you want me to patch it though?"

"Go ahead Lycan" the general replied, this transmission was very strange, the *Divine Savage* was deep in enemy territory and no other Orfine ships were within twenty-five Parsecs.

As the com panel switched turned on Chad let out a short gasp of surprise, it was a Genus on the secured channel! Chad quickly regained his composure and addressed the mutant.

"Identify yourself Brood! How did you have access to this channel?! And how in Varak's name did you know we were here?!"

The Genus' face contorted in what Chad assumed was a smile.

"In answer to your questions in order I am Leader of Darkness, there is little that the Brood do not know, and you Orfine aren't exactly renowned for your abilities in a cloaker now are you?"

Chad could feel his nose drying out in embarrassment and anger and hoped that this Genus knew as little about Orfine physiology as he knew about theirs.

"Well what are you doing here, and why didn't you contact us on a standard channel?"

"Why I'm doing the same thing you are my good dog, looking for that traitorous lizard Machinehr"

'Sir' Lycan's Voice sounded in his personal COM-piece in his ear 'The Genus is sending us his tactical data and requesting we reciprocate, should I comply?'

Chad tapped the earpiece one signalling an affirmative, as he looked at the Photons tactical display it showed a brood Venom-class light interceptor by the name of *Lockheed* eight Mkm off the starboard bow of his Scarab, it was shown in italics on the screen indicating that no visual lock was available to confirm its presence.

"The Brood must be in worse economic trouble than I realised if they can only spare one Venom to hunt this lizard" Chad said with a slight mocking tone in his voice.

"Let's just say this is a personal matter for me not a Factional one" the Genus replied

"anyway, I take it your heading down to Drammal?"

"Possibly" Chad cautiously replied still not entirely trusting this smooth talking Genus

"Well then I'm sure you won't mind me tagging along then will you?"

Chad was getting irritated with the slow progress of this conversation now, he wanted to get down to the surface and get this mission over with

"Land at these co-ordinates, Chad out"

He turned off the communication screen and turned round to the Orfine Shock troops sitting patiently in the Improvised cargo area where the secondary gun and hyperdrive were housed before Chad had them hauled out and refitted.

"Ok Hounds, time to go catch a lizard!"

With the hearty roar that greeted this statement Chad nodded to the pilot and they headed out towards the planet below.

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On the turbulent ride down to the frozen cobalt blue surface of Drammal General Chad, Lord of Capella, forth in command of the entire Orfine empire, was as quiet as a mouse. He just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with this mission, it undoubtedly had something to do with Leader of Darkness, the Genus that had discovered them in the system while cloaked then invited himself onto their mission. But he couldn't put his finger on why that made him so uneasy, the Brood were technically allies against the Invaders and Slah'ke. Shaking himself out of his pensiveness he noticed that the assault squad were getting restless, he checked his chronometer as was fairly surprised to see that twenty minutes had gone by since they had departed from the *Divine Savage*. The General lifted himself out of his chair and turned to the squad of eleven hardened combat troops, all eyes were on him. "Hounds of the twenty seventh Blood Pack!" he roared "we are about to undertake a mission of vital importance, we have information that upon this frozen waste of planet lies a Union base"

"The vicious lizard dictator Machinehr, himself may be here" Chad paused to allow this to sink in

"Make no mistake our enemies outnumber us vastly and many of you may die. However we have a unique opportunity to strike a crushing blow on our enemy, are you with me?!"

The roaring and baying in reply to that last rhetorical question was so loud that Chad half thought that they might be detected simply because of it, then dismissed the thought for the nonsense it was.

"Landing ETA two minutes" the pilot shouted of the dying roars of the combat troops "Get into your seats pups, were going in at high speed"

The Photon transport streaked down through the alien air at just over five times the speed of sound. Its cloaking device projecting the image of a fifty metres asteroid burning up in the atmosphere as it went. As the pilot dropped down to a mere two hundred metres from the surface two particle bombs were released as the Photon pulled out of its dive, killed its speed and shifted its cloaking device to project the asteroid over the bombs.

The end result of this was a fairly convincing display of an asteroid crashing into the planet rather than a troop transport coming in for an assault.

The ship landed about a kilometre behind the still rising cloud of smoke and debris from the faked asteroid crash and twelve Combat Orfine quickly bailed out of the uncloaked ship and as soon as they had done it shimmered seemingly out of existence and took off with a gust of wind.

"Good luck guys" came the pilot's voice "Give 'em hell for me!"

And with that Chad lead the Orfine assault squad on the twenty kilometres trek to where the Union base had been spotted during the decent.

Aggression is survival

The stadium-like Forum was buzzing, literally, with discussion and chatter. All of the fifty three united subspecies had all sent their two assigned Councillors to speak at this urgent meeting, which had been called for by the Queen herself.

A loud repetitive banging noise was heard four times, indicating that the Queen was about to enter. A light flashed on in each of the fifty three seating cabins, the see through sign in front of the light source indicating that the universal translators in the arena below had been activated but not yet switched on, which would happen automatically at the moment that one of the Councillors addressed the Queen and Council in his own native language.

As the doors down below at the far end of the arena opened and the Queen made her way to the middle, where a throne was placed for her seating, a respectful silence took reign of the Forum.

The huge insectoid slowly made its way to the centre of the floor and took its place in the royal chair., which was for the moment engulfed in a bright light that probably hurt the compound eyes of the creature.

All Councillors looked down in awe at their rightful Queen: the centre of power in their society, their entire point of existence, and held their breath.

As she sat on her throne in the middle of the arena-like floor, the Queen was surrounded by high walls which contained many small areas – all filled with nothing but two measly seats – where the Councillors of all fifty three united races had taken their place.

These areas were connected to the centre of the Forum by a balcony-like opening in the wall, only big enough to see through and be seen through.

It would have been clear to anyone that bothered to study the government of the species simply known as the Hive, that these Councillors have no actual power whatsoever. They were there merely as a sounding board for the Queen, in order to anticipate whether or not the various subspecies would support the major decisions without more extreme measures of persuasion, or that they would follow like they were supposed to: blindly without question or doubt. If this council was to agree, the entire planning behind what the Queen had in mind would be rushed into practice much faster, quieter and overall: much easier.

The meeting was opened and the Queen spoke in the Unified Speech of the Hive, which only goal was to make communication easier and faster between the numerous species.

“Today, subjects, you are all here, assembled with a goal. Soon the galaxy will be at war, a war beyond the likes of what any of us have every witnessed. And the Hive cannot stand by and watch without taking action. We feel the need to join in this conflict, for the simple reason that the people need more space to live and prosper, and we need a larger corner of this galaxy to be called our own. We ask the council to determine which course of action is best followed. Is the hive to be Allied or are we best to join the noble Slah’ke and their fellow warriors and seize control of this galaxy, playing a part in the dawning of a new era? Rise council, rise and speak!”

Most of the council was somewhat shocked as they probably all came here under the assumption that interplanetary trade-regulations would be discussed, not war; and a few moments of deliberation followed. The actual conversations were impossible to follow or even determine, due to the fact that fifty three languages were spoken at the same time, by double that amount in councillors. The noise generated by the clicking and the buzzing was only superseded by rattling, crackling and off course louder clicking and buzzing.

The first to stand was a young insectoid whose physique resembled that of a native Earth insectoid species generally referred to by Terran biologists as ants.

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The young councillor approached the edge of the space assigned to himself and his fellow representative and spoke as required in the Unified Language, fluent but not without accent: “On behalf of the race of the Jii-Uhasq, from the north-western continent on the planet of Somana, the representative by the name of Topher11 wishes to address the Queens Council.” Introductions were always lengthy, due to the many sub-species the various worlds they inhabited.

“Speak!” The Queens voice was loud and clear.

Topher drew his breath and spoke in a rather unusual gentle voice: “It is clear the Hive cannot remain neutral in this conflict, and is expected to survive in the end to serve its Queen to her pleasing and comfort. The course of war is our only alternative to ensure survival. The Jii-Uhasq feel that joining the Alliance created and led by the one known as Greybeard, named by the Plexxans themselves as John A. Howard...” Such light use of a name deemed unworthy of being spoken in the presence of the Queen – at least up to the moment she used it herself in this meeting – shocked the Council, it was unheard of and frankly, a sign of disrespect towards the Queen, or one of great courage, depending on the point of view one would wish to defend. “... is the best alternative. Greybeard is known as a formidable strategist and a great leader in times of war. He can lead our galaxy to victory, ensuring thereby the survival of the Hive in course of this conflict, so that our Queen can take advantage of the weakened state of our enemies around us, and afterwards expand her empire. It should be noted that the choice of our race was made after careful consideration and assessment of all possible outcomes, anticipating the worth of the various parties involved in this conflict both as allies and enemies.”

“The Slah’ke are formidable warriors, perhaps only equalled by the Egarans, but both races are known to be blinded by their thirst for blood. This can be used against them if a strategically correct plan is formulated and brought into practice. However, there is a third member of that alliance. What do we know about these people? Nothing! What forces do they have, is their word filled with honour or deceit? What is their reputation on the battlefield? The Jii-Uhasq are convinced that the best chance for survival and gain through this war, is to support the Alliance of Greybeard.”

With that, Topher returned to his seating, and another councillor rose, whose introduction revealed his race and name: Rysheu of the Xuy’cquih.

It was well known that this race was more warlike than most others, contrary to the peaceful traders of the people represented by the young Topher.

“A fool sent by cowards! That, my Queen, is what you just have listened to!” Rysheu spoke with a raspy voice, one slow and dark. His body was mutilated by the wounds of war and battle.

“I have read of this mysterious race of which the noble Slah’ke call themselves allies. Known only as the “Invaders”, this knows war almost better than even the most bloodthirsty of the Unions best. When these people declare war, planets burn and civilisations are enslaved, if not plain wiped from existence. And this fool wishes to oppose them?”

Rysheu points towards Topher in anger and utter disrespect, and continues in a louder and more commanding voice: “The Plexxan of whom you speak so highly, you believe that he will be your rescue? Your saviour? Wake up young ignorant kid! Your precious Greybeard is no more!! Only days ago the old fool took on one of the leaders of the Invaders by himself, and he perished as he should have ages ago. The Alliance you favour is in disarray, they have no capable leadership, only the memories over which they drown in tears and sorrow. They have been weakened by the foolishness of that old delusional bipedal. I say, on behalf of the people of the Xuy’cquih, we join this ferocious beast and together conquer this galaxy, and do what we are destined to do: claim it to be ours!!!” A deep breath he drew, while the Council let his words sink in, and overcome the shock of the news brought to them.

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Many hours were spent debating, arguments came and went, and finally the Queen announced her decision, which was supposedly based upon the debate that had taken place: the fleets of the Hive were to engage in battle besides the reptilian Proxima-natives, against the forces mustered by Greybeard.

And so, the admiralty was ordered to start building up new fleets. And build they did. Every shipyard, production facility and available engineer was ordered into government commission. Daily production of Scarab-class cloaking frigates, Noble-class assault cruisers, and the various smaller classes of warships skyrocketed.

The mines in the empire of the Collective were working overtime, forcing their productivity beyond their actual limits: the Hive was out to spill blood.

The fleets were building up in the system of Naos, safely hidden away from the entire galaxy, for surprise was key to ensuring the role of the Hive in this bloody conflict.

A few thousand of ships orbited the planets, roamed the system, and even more were being made ready for battle in the starbase near the planet of Phadeon, not to mention the amount of ships hidden in the home system of Betelgeux.

Due to the silence around the Hive for so long, the galaxy had begun to underestimate their ability to raise an army even close to what was being raised.

While the Hive was planning, scheming and preparing, the galaxy more and more started to understand how enormous this conflict really was. The forces of the Slah'ke were laying waste to the Federation, no matter how hard they fought, the Plexxans were loosing slowly but surely. Off course, the loss of their beloved President did not aid them, it was their greatest weakness at the moment.

Greeny was pillaging the territories of the Egarans, with some success but not without great losses. He had been forced to rush into the actual fighting while his fleets, no matter how massive, were still in the process of being built up. Every conceivable possible place where ships could be constructed was being occupied. Fighters were mass-produced on the sandy plains of Dahl Merak and underground beneath the toxic atmosphere of Poinés in the system of Merak. Each day, the Martian Shipyards alone were producing thirty two Invincible-class Battle Cruisers and twenty five Dominator-class Support Cruisers. Every starbase in the Empire was under orders to produce as many warships as possible, not even to mention the hundreds of large and small shipyards across the systems under the Terran banner. However, despite of the already significant forces the Terrans had in commission, the Egarans had managed to force the mighty Empire into defending Boötes from the invading alien forces.

The Egarans had taken over control of the space within the system, but had yet to launch a real attack upon the planets. The Terran fleets were concentrated around the base, defending it at all costs.

The starbase was not only a refuge to the inhabitants of the Boötes system; it was also the base of operations for the Empire in that system.

As the Egarans kept sending more and more ships, and the Terrans did not seize their efforts of ship construction in the system, soon Boötes became flooded with ships, and a battle was imminent.

A relatively young Terran Captain stood on the bridge of his newly commissioned Dominator-class warship and watched the Egaran forces move about. Frustration and a thirst for battle gnawed on his consciousness, but he was under strict orders not to attack, only to defend. Off course, the defending would be done without mercy, without hesitation, and with all the force the Terran fleet had at its disposal.

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Suddenly, his Communications officer warned him that he had received a personal message from the Terran Council, and that it was rerouted to his working quarters which lay adjoined to the bridge.

A small nod to the officer, and he made his way to his working quarters. The ship had only been commissioned four days ago, so the quarters were still quite sterile and only contained the most basic of furnishing.

As he sat down at his desk, he turned on the monitor of his console, and noticed a blinking icon on the screen. Touching the icon on the screen brought up a window, in which he had to identify himself and have his security clearance checked.

After a successful identification, the message popped up and read:

Dennis,

On behalf of our great Emperor, you are hereby instructed to launch an attack upon the Egaran forces occupying the Boötes system. Use whatever force you deem necessary.

All hail the Emperor!

Aragon

Dennis reread the message a few times, before it sank in completely: finally he could wipe out the Egaran scum that had dared to defy the power of the Empire and occupy the territory of his glorious Emperor.

With a last look upon the portrait of Emperor Greeny, which was part of the standard outfitting of every Terran-built ship, and then he walked out the room and onto the bridge. “Open a secure channel to the fleet.” He said determined as ever and with steady voice. The day would be his.

Imperial Wrath

“Agreed Dennis. My forces are ready at your command. Let’s give these fools something to remember!” The huge infectious grin on the face of his friend Armageddon slowly faded as the connection was terminated.

The fleet knew what to do. The 45th Fighter Squadron was in place, and the main fighting force, consisting out of fifty Invincible-class cruisers and a few more than thirty Dominators was preparing itself. In between of those massive ships one could find several smaller Type-42 and Type-74-class Destroyers, as battle ready as they could be. And Dennis had a small surprise for his enemies, deviously hidden on the artificially created surface of Peresh, the nearby gas giant.

Obviously, the troop movement of the Terrans did not go unnoticed by the Egarans, and in return they started assembling their fleets too. Most of their forces were concentrated over Holios, for the time being, where as the Terrans had gathered their main striking force in the direct vicinity of the starbase, which was in synchronic orbit around Peresh. The Egaran forces were outnumbering the Terrans at a rate of five to one, but had a disadvantage: Terrans were angry and wanted their system back.

The Terran forces created a huge wall of ships, not wide but high. Three lines of vessels, with the Dominators located at the back rows was the formation. The old and proven “stacking”-tactic was applied: another layer of ships was positioned on top of the existing one. In total three layers of ships were created. If used effectively, it was extremely hard to break a defence line like that, especially considering the relative lack of space between the ships. The massive Terran Battle Cruisers were impressive, their sheer firepower was renowned and even feared throughout the galaxy. It took either great numbers or great strategic skills to break such a defence line. Both Armageddon and Dennis positioned their ships, the USS Beware and the Destruction X among the first line of ships, as any good commander would. Besides it was customary in the Imperial Fleet: you lead a fleet, then you lead it from the front lines, and no place else.

The Base Commander gave the order to ready the guns on the Base. “Phase Cannons ready Sir!” was the response he had anticipated.

“Captain Dennis” he said on the secured channel to the fleet “we are ready to give you all the assistance you need.” “Acknowledged!”

Then Dennis sent a message to the planet surface: “Engage the enemy as planned.”

Off course it was standard procedure for the Egarans in case of occupying a system to make sure no defiant enemy forces were there to disrupt any planned operations. However, this invasion of Boötes was not an ordinary one. Terran forces were still very active, the starbase was still operational and worst of all, no actual attempt on bombing the planets had been made yet, preparations for that were all still underway. All that the Egaran Commander assigned to the task of conquering this system had accomplished so far was domination of the system by sheer numbers.

Continuous scans were run to ensure that the position of every Terran unit was known at all times. Unfortunately, there seemed to be an ongoing disruption of the sensor sweeps around Peresh, one that could not be identified at this time. Egaran scientists were attempting to break through the disruption, which had been identified as an artificial jamming-frequency, but very little progress had been made so far.

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The Head Scientist sat in his chair, monitoring the readings of the jamming station, noticed that the Egarans still couldn't get past the ingenious calibration of his jamming equipment, which was programmed to make ships look like planetary shield-emitters, and altered the frequency-rotation once more, just to avoid the Egarans actually succeeding. Then he heard the noise of engines firing up. Not just any kind of engines, but a specific type: the Dual Ion Drives that were used to power the – as the Imperial Naval Information Service had introduced them at the time – greatest, most advanced and most manoeuvrable fighter in the entire galaxy: the 'G-66' Eliminator.

He got up from his shabby old chair and looked outside the window to see forty of these marvels of cutting edge technology and engineering prepare for battle.

Within moments the crafts lifted themselves slowly from the ground using their thrusters, and they took off, lifting themselves higher into the sky as they went, reaching amazing speeds. Before the fighters could pass through the planetary shielding, which was more than well represented on Peresh, they had to power up their weapons. This needed to be done because the shielding had to be deactivated for the two seconds it took for the Squadron to clear the area where the shields were emitted by their emitters on the ground. The required deactivation of the shields left the ground below vulnerable for those two seconds, which gave their enemies a window of opportunity to sneak a couple of ships past the shielding. This could only be prevented if the outgoing forces could defend the perimeter until the planetary defensive weapons were activated, aimed and ultimately fired.

The fighters cleared the shielding quickly enough to make sure the Egarans had no chance to do such a thing, and the defensive shielding was restored in place, causing it to briefly light up the sky on that particular part of the planets artificially created surface, as it had done when the de-activation procedure had occurred just seconds before. In doing so, the sky was, just for a moment, filled with beautiful sparkling light, and the surface below bathed in an orange light, as quickly fading as it had appeared.

Having cleared the planet, the Squadron pushed their engines to their maximum, racing through the vacuum of space, quickly meeting up with their targets. Their goal however was not destruction but distraction.

"Ok people, just like we practiced!" crackled the voice of the Squadron Leader over the closed communications circuit. As a result the various fighters broke formation and headed into different directions.

Flying directly into the firing range of two Egaran Cruisers, the pilot of Fighter 45-081A had to be very careful. His mission was not one that involved suicidal attempts at capturing glory. Instead he was to lure as many ships as possible closer to the main fleet.

Closer and closer he approached his target-range, and he noticed that the Cruisers started moving in his direction. He had clearly been noticed. He grabbed his controls just a little firmer, and exhaled while he started to count down in his mind: five, four, three, two, one... The gravitational forces would have been enough to make his ears bleed if the fighter hadn't been equipped with automated inertial dampeners. Slamming the controls fully to his right, the fighter had made a hairpin turn, banked and not lost the slightest fraction of its speed, while the uninvited company on his tail had serious trouble following his lead, which was however no reason for them not to attempt, and succeed for that matter.

The Cruisers were now in pursuit, brutally abusing their engines in a futile attempt to keep up with the Eliminator. Across their sensors other Eliminators darted around in space, tempting and taunting the rest of the fleet quite successfully.

Slowly but surely the 'G-66' gathered a larger following, even the Desta Kann was called in to assist. By now more than ten ships were firing at the tiny fighter, whose manoeuvring thrusters were being tested in a way the facilities on Luna would never be able to successfully

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recreate. In between all the banking, evading, running, hiding and misleading slowly but surely the fighter, as many of its kin, managed to get the Egaran fleet to commit large amounts of their ships to this largely futile attempt to get rid of these abnormal annoying puny ships.

However, the Eliminators would not be able to hold on for long, and one by one they were shot down, thereby causing their colleagues to have to deal with even more attention for their own tail.

During all this display of piloting spectacle, the main fleet had quietly and almost completely unnoticed managed to sneak in closer to the relative positions of their targets. By slowly swarming out his forces, Dennis had created a blockade stretching as far possible without weakening the lines.

As the first of the fighters approached his position, Dennis gave his fleet the order to engage, upon which every last one of the Terran ships under the Captains command “put the pedal to the medal” as Captain Armageddon, who had an unexplainable affinity for Terran twentieth century popular culture, would have put it.

From the Egaran point of view this must have been a seriously nasty surprise. They had been so focussed upon the Eliminators and so hell-bent on their destruction, nobody seemed to have bothered to check the sensors for any other fleet movements. The Commander screamed his orders into his communicator, furious and somewhat embarrassed: “Engage them, destroy them at all cost! In the name of Keng, Warlord and Eternal Ruler of Egaria!!”

As the first Eliminators came into the firing range of the fleet, their pilots employed a popular and extremely effective trick to engage the enemies chasing them. In one movement, they pulled up the nose of their ship, at the same time rolling the turning one hundred eighty degrees along their horizontal axis, and did all of this at full speed so that they “pulled a hard one-eighty” as the popular term described it.

Surprised by the sudden change of direction of their targets, the Egaran were not quick to react, giving the first of the Invincibles, which came storming towards their prey, just enough time for a first salvo.

It is needless to say the first wave of Egaran ships were completely obliterated by the overwhelming firepower unleashed upon them by the Terrans. Fusion torpedoes dug themselves into the hull of their target left and right, as Distortion Cannons ploughed through entire decks as if they were scissors cutting through paper.

Captain Armageddon stood on the bridge of the USS Beware, and grinned at the view screen, which showed a portion of space filled with Egaran ships all closing on his location quickly. “Fire at will.” He said with a smirk while he turned his head to his Tactical Officer. Backed up by his brothers and sisters, the USS Beware forced itself a way though the many hostiles. The Dominators stayed back in order to utilize their long range, and provide cover fire.

Dennis had broken formation and was on an intercept course with two Cruisers, both of them firing at him, and thereby having their energy beams collide with the superior shield of the Battle Cruiser. Dennis answered their fire with a full spread of fusion torpedoes, which were programmed to localise their target, lock on to it and not let go. As the torpedoes quickly came crashing though the shielding of both Cruisers, the Distortion Cannon and the SuperHeavy Laser were fired at the first of Dennis’ two opponents, causing massive damage to the hull of the ship as the Invincible came flying past, its lower decks just mere metres away from the Cruiser as Dennis ordered a port side banking manoeuvre. Both ships kept firing at their attacker, finally managing to obliterate the last of its Ceramite Plating, which had been absorbing and dispersing the previous weapons fire.

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As Dennis was coming about, crossing the path of an Eliminator pursuing a damaged Seeker, new weapons fire cut through the outer hull of the stern, making the engines vulnerable to being damaged. The captain of the *Desta Kann* had decided that his glory would lie in defeating Dennis. At least, that was the setup of this attack.

On the other side of the battlefield, a Type-42 was being pounded by an Egaran Startrap, quickly loosing its hull integrity and most of the vital systems. The Terran captain was just about to abandon ship when out of nowhere a Dominator-class Light Support Cruiser came to his rescue, blasting its Torpedo Arrays at the Startrap, drawing away its fire, and in the process ramming the already heavily damaged Frigate. The impact of the vastly larger Dominator, in combination with the already extensive damage literally obliterated the small ship, yet it did not leave the Dominator without serious damage to the outer hull, where the collision had caused some hull breaches along the impact zone. The crew of the Type-42 were quickly transported to safety upon the Dominator while the Startrap continued to suffer its wrath. In return, the Egaran ship fired its Obliterator Cannon time and time again, further crippling the condition of its opponent.

It was only because of two Eliminators redirecting their fire at the Startrap that the Dominator did not suffer even more damage, as the Distortion Cannons on one of those two fighters hit by a stroke of luck the reactor of the ship, causing it to overload and destroy the ship from within.

The battle raged on, and many Egaran vessels were transformed into floating pieces of useless debris, often covered with radiation from the reactor core that had exploded. Still, the Imperial fleet suffered casualties as well; ever so now and then one of the many ships bearing the proud Imperial Eagle was overcome with hostile fire as many of its opponents were, and crumbled under the force of the attack launched upon her.

Throughout the entire battle, the starbase aided in the defence of the Emperors fleets by utilising its Phase Cannons.

As two Type-47s were overcome by the sheer firepower of the *Preda Kann*, the automated defences of the base locked upon the attacking vessel, and fired their Phase Cannons. A bright blue-white beam of photons and assorted forms of energy pierced through the empty space, on its way to its target. Just as the *Preda Kann* fired another volley at one of the Terran vessels in its vicinity, actively destroying it in the process, the phase-beam hit the outer hull of the Egaran warship, slicing through the metal composites as if they were merely butter, driving its own destructive force from deck to deck and eventually exiting the vessel on the exact opposite side. The *Preda Kann*, a vessel roughly the size of an *Invincible* drifted through space for just a few seconds, as if the ship was an organic life form, temporarily incapacitated by the devastating force that had just struck its very being.

“The engines are dead sir, and one of the Cruisers is coming about! They are going to ram us!” “Damnit!! Do we still have our tractor beam?” “Tractor beam is still operational sir!” The bridge was a mess, several people lay on the various consoles, on the floor or somewhere in between, hurt, unconscious or worse.

“Good!” said Dennis with a somewhat raised voice to make sure his crew heard him over the sizzling sounds of gas escaping from the now perforated conduits that were supposed to lay just above the ceiling of the bridge. The *Desta Kann* had done extensive damage, and while they had managed to turn one of the Cruisers into a derelict heap of scrap metal, floating in the direct vicinity of Dennis’ ship, the other vessels had been able to concentrate their fire on just one opponent, instead of three.

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“Lock onto the derelict Cruiser and reroute controls to my console!” Dennis shouted, his voice just slightly higher pitched than normal, as he leaped across the bridge, back to his chair.

The Egarans must possess not only an incredible sense of timing, but also cannot be without a serious love of melodramatic actions, since just a fraction of a second before Dennis was to land on his chair, their weapons fire again impacted on the ship's hull. Because of that Dennis did not land in the middle of his seat, as he had planned, but was thrown slightly off course and landed on the left arm support, which proved to be quite painful, since he bruised a couple of his ribs in the process of falling down.

Quickly he got up again, and sat down in his chair, shaken and somewhat stirred.

Controlling the tractor beam from his arm rest console, he was able to move the derelict Egaran Cruiser, which was now trapped in the force field generated by the tractor beam, into the path of the second Cruiser, which was steadily moving towards Dennis.

As the Cruiser approached closer and closer, hurtling through the nothingness of space, its path was suddenly being blocked by a derelict sister ship. The Commander of the Egaran warship screamed his last ever orders: “Evasive manoeuvres!!!” just moments before his ship smashed itself, bridge first, into the unexpected obstruction, causing its hull to be ripped to shreds, but not before the last of the energy field emitted by the shield emitters imploded on impact, sending all the energy of the field through the circuits of the emitters, into the ship's systems. Within the blink of an eye, nearly every system on the ship overloaded, causing circuits and conduits to explode, triggering chain reactions, some of which led to the implosion of the fully charged energy batteries of the ship's weapons. This in turn had as result that the weapons themselves exploded, adding to the general wave of destruction sweeping through the ship. At the same time the reactor core was blown up, causing not only the ship itself, but also its sister to be ripped to shreds, which were immediately catapulted into every possible direction, away from the brilliant flash of light that marked the outer perception of the entire chain of events.

With both the Cruisers finally destroyed, the Destruction X turned its attention to the *Desta Kann*, which now faced the full wrath of Dennis for inflicting damage upon his beloved ship. In the mean time several other vessels had come to the Captains aid, and together the Terran warships unleashed a figurative hell upon the Egaran warship, quickly deciding its faith, which proved to be quite similar to that of the two Cruisers.

Eventually, after two harsh days of fighting, *Boötes* was again under Terran control. Dennis and Armageddon enjoyed a well-earned drink in the officers' mess on the *USS Beware* while the base technicians and engineers were busy repairing the damage to its various systems, not to mention the outer hull. The entire base was filled with damaged ships, among which also the *Destruction X*.

As Armageddon and Dennis were swapping stories about their victories of the last few days and having a good laugh at the expense of their defeated enemies, a Councillor walked in the spacious room, and sat down at the bar.

“Captains...” the rugged tall man had a low boom in his voice, and spoke slowly, as if he was choosing his words carefully. “You have performed well these few days, and you have served your Emperor well. You will be rewarded generously for your glorious victory.” He said as he slowly turned towards the two friends whose full attention he was now enjoying.

“Thank y-” said the two Captains in unison, paused both for a moment and silently decided Dennis would speak first: “Thank you Councillor, but we merely did our duty to the Empire and the Emperor. It is an honour and a pleasure to defeat those that defy the power of the Empire!” Dennis smiled while he looked into the grey eyes of the Councillor. The man now sitting in front of him – Dennis had turned towards the visitor at the moment he was spoken

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to – had a handsome face and a strong chin. The first few wrinkles had started to appear on his forehead, and his temples were turning from dark brown to grey, which gave him an appropriate distinguished look.

“The Emperor wishes to inform you that you have been granted the honour of owning an estate of your choosing, anywhere in the Empire, both of you, as well as a commendation and the Golden Eagle.”

Dennis was too shocked to respond, so instead Armageddon spoke: “Thank you again Councillor. We humbly accept the offer of the Emperor. Hail the Empire! Long live the Emperor!” he said in a loud voice as he got on his feet, holding his glass high, toasting with an imaginary second one.

As the Councillor left the mess hall, Dennis could still not believe the honour that had befallen him: an estate, completely his own. He could not wait to tell his wife and children of this news. What a surprise that was going to be for them! With that in mind, he and Armageddon once again toasted to the victory over the Eragans.

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Simple and Clean

"Sir we have arrived to Megrez" - said the Navigation Officer.

"What's the status of the system, anything left?" - S117 asked.

"Not really, just some Rifts.....one of them is trying to communicate with the Orfine fleet and his asking why they are with them" - the Officer said.

"Did Womble answer already?" - S117 asked.

"Yes Sir!" - the Officer answered.

"Ok, thanks for informing me, I'll be arriving to the bridge soon." - S117 said turning communications off.

The Longsword and the Dagon fleet were making their way to Megrez Command which seemed to be Offline due to heavy damage, the Rifts tried to stop them but the Dagon were fast and deadly and took them out without getting killed. The Orfine fleet remained at the entrance, in hyperspace, some Hive were making their way to Megrez and were surely after the Orfines. S117 that had already arrived to the bridge quickly ordered that the Dagon should go help the Orfines and so they did, the Hive fleet were only ten Scarabs and they were easily destroyed, though there were some Dagon casualties.

"Open a channel with the main ship on the Orfine fleet please" - asked S117.

"What does my little human friend want?" - Womble asked

"Well we are here, have anything to do before we go?"

"Sure I do" - said Womble pointing to a Fortress making his way to Megrez Command.

"I'll watch it then"

The Fortress was slow but thanks to some upgrade made by the Dagon scientists the ship was moving a little faster, the bombs though were still the same so it would take some time for the base to go down, but thanks to the Slah'ke, the base was nearly down and three or four shots at it would finish the job, and so they did, took five shots but it still went down.

"Ok people get ready to hyper, this time we follow the Orfines, charge the guns though, I'm tired of those fleabags".

The Calm Before The Storm

Trekking along the jagged rocky outcrops of Drammal towards the Union base Chad stopped about one kilometre from their destination and gave the squad their final orders. He split the twelve strong attack forces into two groups. The first of which contained eight Orfines carrying heavy and long ranged weapons, namely four heavy Mass Drivers on tripods, two Mag-rail sniper rifles a fast Repeating Rail Gun and one Terran tactical Fusion Mortar placed under the command of a lean sinewy Orfine by the name of Captain Tux.

Chad disapproved of the Terran obsession with nuclear weapons; they were too dirty and indiscriminate for his tastes. But on this occasion the sheer power of the small nukes were needed and these Fusion Shells were fairly clean, the two or three needed to breach the light shielding and walls of the facility shouldn't create noticeable radiation considering the heavy armour they were all wearing.

The other team headed up by Chad were carrying lighter weapons designed for corridor to corridor fighting. Once the primary team started the assault Chad and the three Orfine with him plan on scaling the walls at the other side and entering the base that way.

Chad had just about finished giving the orders to his troops when he received a transmission from the pilot of the Photon that had brought them down here.

"Sir Leader of Darkness is requesting to speak to you, should I patch him through?"

"Go ahead" Chad heard the subtle change in background noise suggesting that he was now talking directly to the brood and not his pilot.

"And where the hell are you Genus?!" Chad demanded. "Didn't I tell you to land and meet us at these co-ordinates?"

"My sincere apologies lord Chad" the Brood replied with no hint of being intimidated or flustered by Chad's outburst: "I was simply so awed at the subtlety of your approach that I totally forgot about it."

Chad could feel his nose drying up again as the Brood continued:

"I am however roughly twenty metres above your head now, and I was wondering what it is you would like me to do in helping you?"

Chad was slightly gob smacked at the thought of a fifty tonne ship floating above him without him noticing but managed to carry on without tripping over his words

"Co-ordinate with the pilot who patched you through to me, as soon as my team begins its assault on the eastern wall of the compound I want you and him to begin harrying runs on that wall until you receive a signal to stop from Tux"

"That shouldn't be a problem; I'll have your pilot relay my frequency to him, Leader of Darkness out"

After turning off his com piece Chad turned to the other eleven Orfine crouched in a rough semi-circle under a particularly large outcrop of the blue rock that dominated the surface of this planet.

"Ok hounds, you all know the plan. Tux, begin the assault in exactly two hours from.... now. Good luck everyone, may Varak's spirit watch over and I'll see you *all* inside that compound."

With that the squad split up and moved out.

Kiku Hidden

Adeptprophet, Slah'ke Union Kiku of the Leo sector and Commander of the El Nath installation peered out of his window and the cold blue jagged outcrops of Drammal and shuddered. The landscape had more than a passing resemblance to the traditional description of Tosaga, the realm of eternal infidel torment or as the Terrans would put it, the lowest circle of hell. Adept could picture the frozen broken bodies of unbelievers strewn across the erratic, razor like rock formations as so many religious paintings had shown them across the years.

Adept knew that the research they were doing here was vital and couldn't be done anywhere else, and some of the stuff the tech guys were coming up with the Invader knowledge was definitely impressive. It's just that he was a *warrior* and sitting here babysitting a base that their enemies didn't even know existed whilst others were dieing in blazes of glory for the honour of his gods was just so frustrating.

He sighed and turned back to his desk and was just sitting down at his computer terminal when a dull roar and accompanying vibration of everything around him coming seemingly from all directions at once encompassed him. Dieing away after a few seconds it was swiftly followed by the main battle siren of the base. Adept bared his razor-like teeth in what would seem to any none Slah'ke to be a growl, but in fact was a small smile. He walked over to his bed and picked up two short swords and a delta ray pistol, perhaps today would be a little more eventful than most.

Burned Be The Ground

The first mortar shell pinged out of its launcher exactly two hours from when Chad had given the order. Tux watched it trace out its lazy arc across the slightly-too-blue Drammal sky and idly wondered if any lizard had seen it yet. As it slammed into the compound's shield releasing the small thermo-nuclear fireball contained within, Tux gave the order to fire at will and all of a sudden the air around him was filled with the heavy static generated by the mass drivers and the thrumming of half kilogram slugs being fired two a second from the repeating rail gun. The feeble Union shield gave out quickly under this sustained fire and just as Tux was giving the order to fire the second mortar shell a new sound was added to the cacophony around them. The sharp cracks of high powered gamma cannons ploughing into the rocks around them signalled the Union's reply.

The fight continued like this for around ten minutes with only one Orfine casualty one of the young snipers, GorGor, a Private in the O.A.A.-Marines, took a gamma burst to the chest and now lay smoking to one side while the mortar loader took up his gun and continued picking off lizards. Then without any sort of warning two ships shimmered into existence high above the Union compound but tearing towards it at terrific speed. The Photon in front dropped its particle bombs and the venom following released a ball of poly-acid.

The results were devastating; a large section of the eastern wall broke off and was then covered in an acid so strong that Tux could see the still standing section of wall slowly shrinking even from two hundred metres. The gamma ray fire around the Orfine troops dropped off to only a trickle as soon as the two ships struck. The ships weren't recloaking after firing though, and for some reason no fire seemed to be directed up at them. All of a sudden something shrieked over their heads from no-where heading in the direction of the two quickly distancing fighters. Tux turned from his Mass Driver just in time to see a union Tashak-ma accelerating after Leader of Darkness and his own photon at a rate which would make a prism look sluggish. By now the fire around them had dropped off to nothing and Tux ordered the two snipers to advance towards the base and check for any more resistance.

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Writing Credits

Jake0807 – Prelude, story idea and concept

DeadShot – the storyline of Captain DeadShot

EskimoChad3695 – the storyline of General Chad

John A. Howard – the storyline of John A. Howard and assorted storylines

S117 – the storyline of Captain S117

Womble – the storyline of General Chad