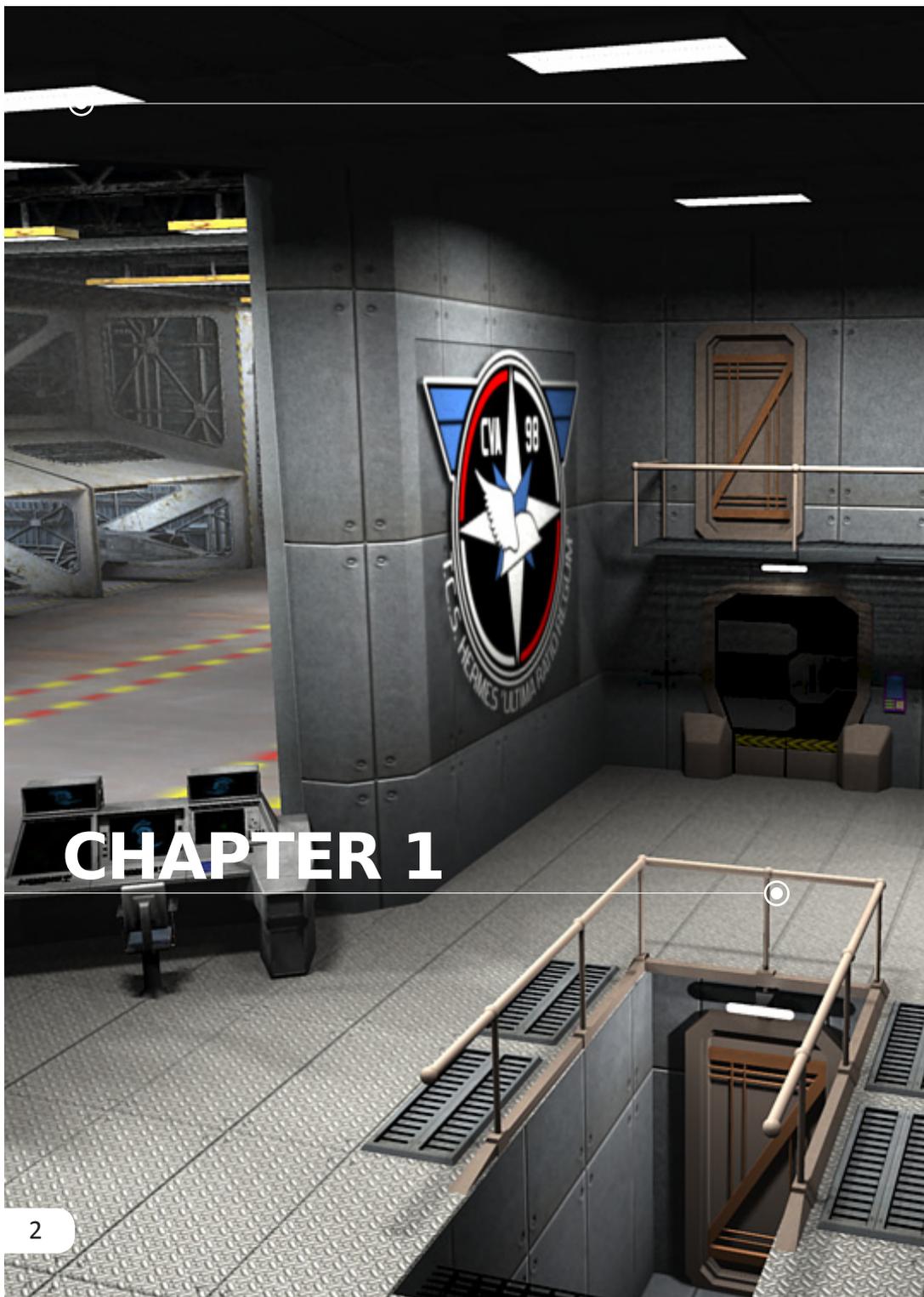


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CHAPTER 1



SHUTTLE 326 ON APPROACH TO TCS HERMES, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM 1536 HOURS (CST), 2669.221

“This is your Captain Crazy Jane speaking,” the shuttle pilot said over the intercom, “As you may have heard, there has been a change in plans. Fort Jackson is in no shape to accommodate us seeing as it’s just been blown to pieces. We are currently en route directly to the Hermes. This is currently a combat zone, so if you all would do me the favour of sitting down, buckling up, and shutting up, I’ll see if we can get there alive.”

The revelation that Fort Jackson had been destroyed had roused Second Lieutenant David Markham, call sign Sandman, from his dark musings. Just one more twist in the insane story that has been my life these last few months, he thought. Sandman and his fellow shuttle passengers were supposed to have had a brief stay at Fort Jackson before being transferred to the Hermes. Now, they were forced to go directly to the Hermes while she was under siege, possibly right in the middle of a fierce fire fight.

Sandman looked around at the other people in the shuttle. Together, they were the eleven newest pilots in the Hermes air wing. There was Ninja and Assassin, his old instructors turned close comrades. His previous squad leader, Major Kenneth Baws, was the only senior officer among them. The others were pilots who had survived other skirmishes while their motherships had not. We’re all warriors without a home, Sandman thought.

As the shuttle flew a holding pattern around the carrier waiting for landing, Sandman couldn’t stop looking at the Hermes. He admired the entire ship from bow to stern. The Hermes was sleek, modern, and even beautiful. It was much easier on the eyes than the dilapidated old Wellington had been, and much more heavily armed. He thought of only one thing: that this carrier was made to wage war. This carrier had teeth that the Wellington had never dreamed of. Maybe this carrier had a chance.

The sarcastic voice spoke again over the shuttle’s loudspeakers, “Touchdown. Thank you for flying Crazy Jane airlines. You’ll find the exit to the left of this craft. And if you are mad because you didn’t get peanuts on this flight, don’t bother filing a complaint, because we don’t care.”

“Door opened, don’t let it hit you in the butt on the way out” the shuttle pilot said as she equalized the internal atmosphere with that of the flight deck and opened the



shuttle hatch. The doors opened with a mechanical whine culminating in a thunk as the mechanism locked into place. The ever familiar sound of techs hammering on fighters drifted through the open door. Sandman was surprised by how soothing he found the sounds to be. They were like music to his ears.

“What are you guys waiting for? Come on,” Major Baws ordered. The new pilots stepped out of the shuttle, followed by the rest of the crew members being transferred to the Hermes.

There were two officers waiting for them as they disembarked. Both were still in flight suits and held their helmets in their arms. The first was a tall, sturdy man with a face that looked like it had been sandpapered many times over. His flight suit bore silver eagle insignias, designating him a full Colonel. But it was his eyes that were his most distinguishable feature; this man had the killer-instinct eyes of a true Been-There-Done-That combat veteran. This man was a living weapon.

“Major Kenneth Baws and company request permission to come aboard!” Major Baws and the rest of the new pilots stood at attention and saluted.

The Colonel returned the salute. “Welcome to the Hermes. I’m Colonel Shane Walker, your Wing Commander.” Sandman noted the drawl and the twang of the Colonel’s voice. It was from an area in North America called Texas. “My condolences about the Wellington. I did some time on her back when I got my wings.” The Colonel paused for a moment, as if to savor a bit of nostalgia. So, thought Sandman, he was battle hardened but not beyond human feeling. How hard was it to hold on to one’s humanity after so much killing?

Walker continued, his features tightening into a scowl. “I hope you will forgive the lack of a standard greeting, but I just got back in. This will have to do for a welcoming for now. You may have heard rumors of heavy losses in our frontline units.” His expression made it cut-and-dry clear what he thought about rumors, rumor mills, and those who listened to them. “I will not dignify those rumors with confirmation or denial. However, you pilots are now the newest members of the Hermes Air Wing. You are front line pilots. You bear the weight of protecting Confed’s home worlds. I expect you to act as such. I want people here who are going to be a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.”

Walker strode down the line of new pilots in silence and looked each of them in the eyes briefly, evaluating what he saw. Sandman made every effort to meet his gaze without flinching. Walker’s eyes were unreadable; Sandman couldn’t tell if he looked upon him in approval or disappointment. Time would tell.

“Be sure to be at the pilot’s briefing in five hours. Several of our fighters have already returned, and we have the bulk of our fighter wing due to land soon. We’ve



just had a rather nasty encounter and there are plenty of loose ends that still need to be tied up. Don't expect to have a lot of time to settle in. We're going to liven up the situation around here very soon."

Walker gestured to the man who stood at his side. His bald head and bookish appearance was a stark contrast to the grizzled and slightly dangerous visage of Colonel Walker.

"This is my deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Klier. He has the squadron assignment for you new guys."

The Lieutenant Colonel took out a datapad and began to read the unit assignments.

"Second Lieutenant Markham?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You are assigned to the 811th Squadron. The Blood Hounds."

Klier continued, "Major Baws."

"Yes, sir?"

"The 811th needs a new squadron leader. You are it until you are dead, or I find someone else better."

"Yes, sir," Major Baws replied. Sandman was relieved to be flying under the command of Major Baws again. He felt the kind of loyalty towards the Major that any soldier would feel after following him through hell and back.

Sandman's interest perked as Lt. Colonel Klier started to call out the names of his friends, Assassin, and Ninja. To Sandman's distress, they were all assigned to different squadrons. Sandman chided himself for his childish fantasy that all of his friends would magically be assigned to his squadron and they would all live happily ever after. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that even with the presence of Major Baws, he was now helpless in a new unit, as if there was no wingman to cover his back.

"All right," Sandman's new Wing Commander began, "Remember the briefing at 2100. Till then, familiarize yourself with your new home. Now beat it. I've just killed a bunch of Cats and I need a rest." As the Colonel turned and walked away, Sandman noticed that the Colonel didn't really care for formalities. He also got the impression that Lt. Colonel Klier would have preferred the greater formality. Those two made an interesting pair.



The group of new pilots began to slowly disperse. Sandman wished there was time to go to the lounge with his old wing mates and have a drink, but that was clearly not an option with the Hermes gearing up for another fight.

“Lieutenant Markham,” Major Baws spoke up, as if reading his mind, “Why don’t you go check out your new bird?”

Such suggestions from superior officers were usually meant as orders and Sandman reluctantly obliged. He knew that Baws was trying to look out for him, to keep him focused on the present instead of the past, so he fought down the twinge of annoyance at having to give up one final fling before moving on. Sandman went to a terminal and downloaded the fighter assignments to his PDP. He was slated for hangar spot 57.

The signs of the recent fight were clearly visible. Damaged craft of the wing were now scattered all along the flight deck and in various corners of the Hermes’ hangar facilities. Sandman saw an Arrow that was getting a new wing section to replace the one that had been shot to molten slag. Next to it, a Thunderbolt was propped upon a huge steel jack stand, waiting for a new landing gear strut. Techs poured over each of the fighters, doing everything they could to bring them back to operational status as quickly as possible. Sandman looked around to find his fighter.

“Sir, can I help you with something?”

Sandman turned around to see a tech. He was tall, lanky, and had flaming red hair. He seemed too young to David to be a tech, but then again, David probably seemed too young to be a combat veteran.

“I was looking for my fighter. I just transferred aboard ...” Sandman started.

“Ah, you must be Lieutenant Markham. I saw the info that you were going to be here shortly.”

The tech held out a hand, and Sandman shook it, surprised by the firmness of the young-looking tech’s grip.

“Mechanic’s Mate Second Class Craig Rockhold, just call me Red. I guess I’m your crew chief. I’m glad you made it in one piece. I heard about Fort Jackson.”

“Yeah, well let’s just say my career so far has been far from boring,”

“That shuttle pilot did a fine job using our strike as cover to bring you in,” the tech summed up the situation. “At the moment, I’d say we are currently in the eye of



the storm. The local Confed garrison forces lost their last capship in the last attack, and Rear Admiral Callahan just died this morning from wounds he sustained two days ago.”

Sandman cringed when he heard the news. Colonel Walker apparently had a gift for understatement. Sandman had a newfound appreciation for the shuttle pilot who had been willing to bring them in under these conditions. No wonder they called her Crazy Jane.

Red pointed down the flight deck. “Let’s go to where the Blood Hound Squadron maintains their fighters.”

He led Sandman about 100 feet down the flight deck to the ten Hellcats that comprised the 811th Squadron.

The crew chief pointed at one of the fighters, “Well sir, if you are asking about your bird, here it is. One state of the art F-86 Hellcat Five. It’s the newest C variant, designation Hellcat 309. That is one high-tech, state-of-the-art thing of beauty, sir.”

Red grinned contagiously as he approached the Hellcat, clearly proud of the warbird. Sandman’s reciprocal grin faded from his face as they got closer and he could see the fighter more clearly.

“Yeah it’s high tech and state of the art ... and shot to pieces!” Sandman exclaimed. There were horrible burns and scratch marks all around the fighter. From what Sandman could tell, it was a miracle it had survived its last engagement.

Red’s enthusiasm didn’t fade, in spite of Sandman’s clear disapproval.

“You don’t need to worry about it being an old rust bucket, sir. It’s actually a pretty new fighter. It just came off the plant a few months ago. The worn down look is just battle damage. We’ll have her good to go by the time you need to launch.”

“Well, at least make an effort to make it look decent before I go up in it”, Sandman remarked as he glanced at the name printed right below the canopy, it read “2nd Lt. Tiago ‘Bulletproof’ Garcia”. Someone had scratched a big fat ‘X’ over the name to signify that the pilot was dead.

‘Guess the Cats didn’t get the memo, did they, pal?’ Sandman thought. He reached for the ladder and began to pull himself up towards the cockpit. At the top, a wave of nausea poured over him as the stench from the cockpit hit him. There was an awful smell of copper, roasted blood, and charred human flesh.

Sandman dropped down from the ladder and gasped “What happened to this



fighter, Red?”

“A few battles ago a missile went off a bit too close and the blast punctured some holes on the canopy glass. Decompressed the entire cockpit and punctured Bullet-proof’s helmet. The poor guy’s head just exploded from the null pressure ...”

David felt his stomach rebelling against his best efforts to keep from vomiting. Gasping, he clutched his stomach and dropped to his knees, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply to try to fight down the nausea. The urge to throw up was so strong it brought tears to his eyes. He tried to focus on his breathing, and began to feel relieved when the nausea began to subside.

His relief was penetrated by a strident voice that boomed out “Well, shoot! You weren’t even in the fight today and here you are crying about it? Jeez, man, it seems like the rookies these days are getting more and more emotionally fragile.” Already feeling humiliated from his physical reaction and half-paranoid, Sandman looked in the direction of the voice to see a bunch of Hermes pilots standing staring at him. They had seen him gasping and gagging and had watched as the tears streamed from his eyes, and if their facial expressions were at all accurate, they considered the situation hilarious.

The man who was doing all the talking was a good six feet tall, largely framed and stocky, ruggedly handsome with his blond hair in a crew cut. He was wearing aviator sunglasses and an old fashioned leather jacket over his issued Confed blue uniform. The pilot bore the insignia of a First Lieutenant, accompanied by a trio of other pins. One insignia was a logo of the Hermes, and the other was a squadron logo: a vicious black canine with red eyes and blood drooling from its mouth. He noted the words ‘Fighting 811th’ right under the logo, and the bloody font ‘Blood Hounds’.

The 811th was Sandman’s new squadron, which made this blowhard Sandman’s squad mate. The third insignia on the pilot’s uniform was of a howling wolf. It corresponded to the callsign that the pilot had stitched on the right side of his jacket, “Greywolf.” A callsign for a loose cannon if ever there was one, Sandman thought.

“Just remember, little girl, outside those atmosphere screens nothing falls to the floor. So if you go bawling like that in every fight, you are going to have little water droplets filling up your cockpit and blocking your view, making you just that much easier to kill. You ain’t in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. Hey, I like that, it kind of suits our little cry-baby here, don’t you think? Dorothy it is, then.” More laughter.

“The name is Sandman ... sir”, Sandman replied, forcing himself to stand upright, although his stomach still felt unsettled. David had a tendency to operate on instinct, and instinct told him that his new tour wasn’t off to a good start. He bit



his tongue to keep himself from saying the thoughts coming to his mind, feeling certain it would only fuel Greywolf's fire.

Greywolf's eyes shifted to the battered Hellcat. "Is this mean killing machine safe to fly?" he asked in mock concern. "This might be an embarrassing question to ask, no offence, but I'm growing attached to my ass and don't want to part with it." More laughter. "What I'm getting at, Dorothy, is I wonder if you're man enough to handle the program."

Sandman was straining to keep his anger in check, "I told you, sir, it's not Dorothy. It's Sandman." Greywolf coughed up his throat in response and spat a liberal amount of phlegm on the ground right beneath Sandman.

"Do you know why no one remembers your callsign, Dorothy? Because no one wants to remember your name. You are totally and utterly forgettable. There is nothing about you worth remembering. There are too many of you newbies out here, replacing combat veterans that more than likely you puking newbies got killed in the first place. All of you fresh little schoolboys, wearing your new freshly churned butter bars and flight wings, all smiling and dreaming of saving the Confederation!"

Greywolf then started making mocking poses lampooning a normal newbie's requests, "Where are those Cats? Let me at 'em! When do we go to Kilrah? I need to go pee pee, can someone tell me where the potty is? Do you really think that is what Confed needs more of right now? There are too many wannabe pilots named Hotshot, Phoenix, Die Hard, and Sandman. Oh, yeah, there are way too many Sandmans; I think you are the tenth one I've encountered since I got my wings. The Cats have nine lives. Do Sandmen have ten?" Greywolf made a face as he scowled up at Sandman's position. "Don't fool yourself, kid, you've only got one, and it's going to be very, very short, I have no doubt. You're nothing but a replacement, and the only thing replacements are good for is making room for more replacements."

Sandman felt it was time to go before he did something he would regret.

"Excuse me sir, but I have to get going and get assigned to a new room. I'll just follow the yellow brick road." Sandman walked over to his bag and started talking to it as he picked it up, "Come on Toto, we need to get going."

Markham did an about face and left. The snickers of the other pilots echoed in his ears long after he was out of earshot. If I am Dorothy, maybe a tornado will drop a house on Greywolf. Wouldn't that be nice?



CHAPTER 2



**FLIGHT WING OFFICER'S QUARTERS, TCS HERMES
DEEP SPACE, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM
2348 HOURS (CST), 2669.221**

"Sandman checked the entry code on his PDP and punched it in to the panel by the door of his new quarters. It slid open smoothly and Sandman entered to find his kit bag lying on the floor in the middle of the room. His new roommate wasn't present, but his belongings, numerous technical manuals, periodicals, and aeronautical engineering books, were all arranged logically and neatly. All of it seemed academic, cerebral, and focused on the job. There were no distractions, no posters, pin-ups, or trinkets. The contents of the room suggested that his roommate was all business.

One of the books in the shelf caught Sandman's eye. It was the latest 2669 edition of 'Joan's Fighting Spacecraft', that was hot enough off the press that he was surprised his roommate had a hard copy already. Unable to stem his interest, he sat down on the desk, flipped the front cover open, and started reading.

"Can I help you with something?"

He immediately bolted at the sound of the voice and turned around to face the man who had just entered the room. He felt somewhat embarrassed and caught in the act of nabbing from the cookie jar - from a Captain's cookie jar, no less.

"Ah, you must be one of the new pilots who came onboard." the other man said, without a hint of irony or sarcasm in his voice. The pilot walked over to Sandman and offered his hand.

"I'm Captain Sanger. They call me Phalanx. I guess we will be roommates for the time being."

Sandman felt himself relax somewhat as he shook Sanger's hand, "David Markham, 'Sandman'."

There was a twinkle in Phalanx's eyes, "Second Lieutenant Markham, right?" Sandman nodded. Oh boy, here it comes, Markham thought. Time for the Captain to put the new kid with the sticky fingers in his place. "Well, that means you've been assigned to my squadron, what a nice coincidence."



That was not what David had expected. His sense of tautness began to fade.

“Yeah, I just flew my first mission with Greywolf, Lieutenant McDermott.” Phalanx nodded at that, but his expression remained calm and neutral. I might as well fess up to having my hand in the cookie jar and get it over with, Markham thought. “These are some very nice periodicals,” he began.

“Thanks, I collected these books over the years. I kept all of my collection from even before I entered the Academy. It came in quite useful when I did my post graduate work in aeronautical engineering. I’ve kept all of my subscriptions since then. This is my fourth tour, so I’ve accrued quite a collection.”

He nodded his head in the direction of the report that Sandman still held in his hands. “I see that you’ve been reading my Joan’s, interesting read, isn’t it?”

So he’s going to let me off easy. After the constant haranguing he had received from Greywolf since his arrival, Phalanx’s kindness was almost a shock. But it was certainly welcome.

“Yes sir, it is.” he said, “Since I received my orders to the Hermes, I wanted to see the specs on the Flight IIIA Jutland-class carriers. I haven’t been able to find them anywhere else, but this Joan’s issue has them.”

Phalanx, apparently a master of economy when it came to expressing himself, simply nodded. He reached to his desk, selected another booklet, and handed it to David. “If you are interested, this my graduate thesis back on the Academy.”

‘Advanced Space Fighter Dynamics and Control Theory’ Sandman read. He curiously opened the booklet and glanced at the results section. It contained high-order math and analysis that was far above David’s head. Just reading it felt like it turned his brain to mush.

“That’s some pretty complex technical information, sir.”

“Well, yes it is.” Phalanx said, not bragging, just acknowledging the fact. “I want to get an assignment as a test pilot following this tour, so I’ve been trying to get my academic credentials in line and all of my ducks in a row, so to speak.”

Sandman nodded. Phalanx, it appeared, was the full package deal. Why was he wasting his time on a newcomer like Markham? There had to be a reason that Phalanx was being so nice to him. Sandman felt his boldness build up in him, gave a slight smile.

“You’re the welcoming committee, aren’t you?”



“No. No, I’m not.” Phalanx stated simply. “But I think a proper welcome is in order, so why don’t I show you around the ship?”

Sandman closed the thesis in his hands. “I don’t know about that, I think I need to stay here and unpack my stuff...”

Phalanx smiled, “Markham, there will be plenty of time for that. Don’t make me remind you that I outrank you by two pay grades. Just come along, will you?”



**MAIN LIFT, TCS HERMES
DEEP SPACE, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM
0327 HOURS (CST), 2669.222**

For the past few hours, Phalanx had shown Sandman the flight deck, the engine room, the galley, and the workout room. Now they were on their way up to the bridge. As they stepped off the lift Sandman was immediately impressed. In spite of the enormous amount of work being done there was a tone of complete calm and control. Sandman allowed himself to listen in on a few the conversations to learn more about what was going on.

“Captain,”

Sandman overheard the word and shifted his attention. His eyes glanced in the direction of the voice calling for the ship’s captain. The voice belonged to a lovely brunette naval officer who looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She stood up from her seat at the comm. station and carried a small printout.

“We’ve just received the latest burst transmission from Fleet HQ.”

Sandman mustered her as she walked across the room. He was quite impressed, to say the least.

“Lieutenant, perhaps I should remind you that staring is considered poor manners.” Phalanx cautioned softly, and then said with a grin, “Besides, there will be plenty of time to stare at her when she’s off duty. I think you’ll find that you have plenty of competition to deal with in that regard, though.”

“Um, are you telling me that’s our comm. officer?” Sandman said, astounded, “The one that gave me landing clearance?”

“Yes, that’s Lieutenant Commander Sweeney. I take it you’re glad you can finally put a face to the voice,” Phalanx gently teased. He then gestured to the tall, thin, clean-shaven man in his mid 40s at the center of the bridge. “And that’s our skipper, Captain Moran. He’s not the type to fool around.”

The two pilots noted as Captain Moran looked at the printout that Sweeney had given him. His eyes scanned it, quickly and efficiently. When he spoke, his voice was loud, crisp, and firm, the very model of authority.

“All personnel without proper authorization for bridge operations are required to depart immediately.”



"It looks like something is brewing," Phalanx said, "let's go."

Although Sandman had been embarrassed to be caught staring at Sweeney like an infatuated teenager, he was reluctant to take his eyes off her as Phalanx ushered him towards the lift. He hoped he could run into her off duty some time.

After the lift ride, they walked down the corridor to the recreation room.

"Here's Pilot Country." Phalanx stated, opening the door and gesturing Sandman to enter. "Good for rumors, ridiculous theories, stale peanuts, and a surprisingly wide choice of drinks."

The room was relatively empty, with only two Lieutenants clustered around a table. One of them was Asian and looked surprisingly young. His boyish features made him appear about 18 years old at first glance. He had a deeply cut build, and his arms and face bulged with veins, suggesting this pilot had engaged in too many high-endurance workouts. His eyes were his most startling feature. He didn't seem to look at things or people; he seemed to look through them, like they weren't even there-- like they didn't even matter at all. It was almost as if a sense of darkness hovered around him, and Sandman felt uncomfortable just being in his presence.

Following his gaze Phalanx nodded towards the man. "He's from one of the Thunderbolt units."

He then gestured towards the man. "Hey, Psychopath, what's happening?"

All he got back was a course grunt. Unfazed, Phalanx then turned back towards Sandman.

"Don't mind him. He doesn't talk much, but he's actually a nice guy once you get to know him."

"I'll bet he is", Sandman thought sarcastically. "Okay. And how many people actually get to know him?"

"Very few," Phalanx admitted. He then turned his attention towards the other pilot. "Hey Av, just reminding you and your friend there," Phalanx gestured to Psychopath, "that there's a briefing with the Blood Hounds and the Mud Sharks in two hours."

"No problem, dude,"

He seems to be more approachable than Psychopath, Sandman thought. Phalanx



led him up to Avatar's side.

"Oh, while I'm at it, let me introduce you to the new guy in my squadron. "Sandman, this is Avatarr. He's from the same squadron as Psychopath."

Sandman extended his hand.

"Ah, more meat for the grinder." Avatar said, taking his hand with a broad smile. "You'll like it here, dude."

Avatarr was about six feet tall. He had surprisingly broad shoulders and a well-developed upper body. Psychopath seemed not to be the only guy who logged too much time in the weight room. Somehow the man looked familiar to him. Sandman searched his memory.

"Hey, aren't you Bradley Alistar, star quarterback of the 2667 Academy hyperball team? You wiped the floor with Navy 43-14 in your last game of the season!"

"Yeah, that was me." the ex-QB star gave a smile. "But that's all in the past. I don't think that what I did back then helps the war effort out here, you know what I'm saying?"

Phalanx stepped in to rescue him from the awkward moment. "Well, aside from his previous sports accomplishments, Avatarr is also a bit of a Kilrathi culture expert. He knows anything and everything about Kilrathi traditions and customs. And he has also become quite a linguist; he speaks Kilrathi fluently. That's no small task, I assure you."

Avatarr shrugged, "It's just a hobby that I've had an interest in the past few years. I don't see it as such a big deal, though ONI seems to think it is. They were looking into recruiting me into their division, but I managed to convince them that I was better off flying Thunderbolts for Confed. I can be pretty persuasive when I need to be. So here I am."

Sandman had to admit he was impressed. People with knowledge in the Kilrathi language were hard to find. Many of the sounds in the Kilrathi language were notoriously difficult for humans to imitate, and the strict hierarchical nature of the grammar was said to be a lot more complicated than any human language.

"Hey, would you mind saying something in Kilrathi?" he asked.

"Sure thing, dude"

Avatarr then said a sentence in Kilrathi and although Sandman didn't know much



about the language, it seemed that Avatar had gotten all the accents and tones right.

Avatarr grinned and said, "That meant, 'Welcome onboard our ship, and we look forward to being your friend'."

Sandman smiled, "Hey, thanks!"

Avatarr held out his hand again, "No problem, dude."

Sandman shook his hand enthusiastically, feeling like he had met one of his own personal heroes. Phalanx then bid farewell and ushered Sandman on to the next part of their tour.

After Sandman had left the room, Avatarr chuckled to himself and settled back into his chair. Psychopath had been watching the entire exchange with his cold eyes, but hadn't made a sound the whole time. When he spoke, his voice was smooth and almost entirely emotionless.

"So Av ... what did you really tell him in Kilrathi?"

Avatarr's eyes twinkled, "I told him that every litter needs a runt, and that he was perfectly qualified for the position. Of course, the word for runt in Kilrathi has some connotations that I think you would enjoy a great deal. Just ask me later what Kilrathi do with their runts."

"Classic."



CHAPTER 3





**FLIGHT DECK, TCS HERMES
DEEP SPACE, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM
0751 HOURS (CST), 2669.222**

The Hellcat passed through the force field and Sandman shuddered as the artificial gravity kicked in. A pair of tractor beams snagged his gear as he touched down, decelerating the fighter and bringing him to a stop.

“Touchdown”, announced Sandman. He replayed the highlights of the mission in his mind as he ran through the engine power down sequence. He had helped take down a carrier. Sure, it had been a light carrier, but it had struck a blow against the Kilrathi’s projected firepower nonetheless. All in all, it had been a pretty good day. “Roger that, Hellcat 309. Air Boss grades your landing as a pass. Welcome back.”

The Hermes’ PA rang out, “All hands, secure from recovery operations. Flight deck pressure positive. Gravity positive, returning to full. Landing bay is secure for normal operations.” The formal announcement was followed by a line that had become an age-old tradition signaling that everything was fine, “The smoking lamp is lit.”

The techs and mechanics now sprinted towards the landed fighters, pushing ladders up to the cockpits. Not surprisingly, Red Rockhold beat the other techs and reached Sandman’s fighter first. With his ever-present enthusiasm, he clambered up the ladder as Sandman’s canopy opened up.

“Welcome back, sir!” the mechanic said with a grin and helped Sandman out of the cockpit and down the ladder. “Not bad for your first strike mission off this ship, sir!” “Thanks, Red” Sandman said, trying not to sound too proud of himself. He handed Rockhold his helmet and made his way towards the exit when he overheard a conversation among the landed Thunderbolts. He remembered how smug the surviving T-bolt pilots had sounded during the mission. Their attitude about the death of their wingmate had infuriated Sandman, and hearing them talk resurfaced those emotions.

“So the curse struck again?” One of the mechanics asked as he helped the pilot known as the Psychopath get out of his Thunderbolt. Psychopath removed his helmet, which was decorated with a skull, and handed it to the tech.

“You bet it did.” The pilot responded back. “You should have seen how that nut hit the afterburners and went straight in after that escort, thinking it was going to be a quick and easy kill. Then the guy ...”



Sandman felt something inside him snap. He stalked in their direction, feeling the blood pounding in his temples. His fists clenched involuntarily. When he managed to unclench his teeth, his voice rang out in barely controlled rage.

"This conversation is totally uncalled for! It is unbecoming of an officer!" Avatarr cocked an eyebrow, bemused but apparently not surprised at Sandman's outburst. "One of your squadron mates is dead and right now you two are gloating over his death! That is more than pathetic, that is sick!"

Psychopath did not as much as blink. Avatarr's expression switched from bemused to bored, as if telling Sandman off wasn't going to be nearly as fun as continuing to mock McCoy would have been. "Well, well, if it isn't the newbie. Are you upset that we aren't weeping, wailing, and gnashing our teeth for old Pothead?"

Sandman's anger flared. "Wasn't he one of your senior pilots? He was an officer in your unit, he deserves your respect! Wasn't he one of your comrades? More importantly than that, wasn't he a person who died doing what he believed is right? He gave his life for the safety of humanity, and you mock his death? How dare you!"

Psychopath's facial expression shifted from utterly neutral to stony hard. His stare was so piercing and full of contempt it almost felt like a physical blow to Sandman. "He just wanted a kill. That ugly SOB told us to hold back from taking that tin can out, and even pulled rank on us doing it. When he needed help he refused to accept it. He's acted on this pathetic urge for glory before. His death wasn't a sacrifice for anyone or anything."

Sandman felt the need to wipe that smug, insulting look off of Psychopath's face. "What makes you so qualified to judge him? He was a human being, as real as me or you or anyone else, and now he's dead! Isn't that bad enough? Now you feel like you have some kind of right to go back and pronounce him to be a waste, a nobody? Only a fool would think they know enough to make that kind of judgment!"

"Think about it like this," Psychopath said, unflustered and unimpressed by Sandman's words. "The guy was transferred to our unit as the Exec because no other squad wanted him. His fitness reports have been severe crap, and it's been rumored that he's been using stuff like Brilliance on his off hours. He fried his brain, and his judgment was worthless. We told our squad leader about it, but he looked the other way. Don't you get it? The only worse thing than having no leadership is having stupid leadership. That was him."

"Don't give me that crap! If he was really as messed up as you say he was, then why did they still keep him on flight status?" Sandman realized that he was mouthing off to a superior officer, and began to feel some of his boldness slipping away. He knew he could get in serious trouble for what he was doing.



“Why they kept him on flight status?” Psychopath shot back. “Surely you can’t be so completely stupid as not to be able to figure that out. Let me ask you this: are we winning this war?” Sandman clenched his jaw and didn’t respond because he already knew the answer. No one liked to talk about it, but the war had not been going well for the Confederation over the past year.

Psychopath followed up, “Then that should answer your question. Confed can’t afford to throw away pilots under any circumstances. Even druggie fighter jocks like him. In case of Pothead it was being both the Exec and a joke in a jinxed squadron that no one wants to serve in. He can’t be the exec any more, but he can still fill the role of being the joke, so I guess you were right on one point: he wasn’t a total waste. He does make a good joke.”

Rather than respond to Psychopath’s last barb, Sandman was stuck on one of the words he had used. “Jinxed? What are you talking about?”

“Are you saying you don’t know?” Avatarr inquired, “Aren’t they teaching cadets to read and write before they shove them out of the Academy these days! Tell you what, ask around about the jinx. I’m sure you’ll get some sort of answer.”

“Lieutenants,” one of the other mechanics had walked up to the two Thunderbolt pilots, “Major Dellaney wants your after-action report before you go see Colonel Walker.”

“Yeah, we’re on our way. We’re just seeing to this kid’s education first.” The mechanic sped off and Avatarr turned his head towards Sandman, “Nice talking to you. Oh, and next time, maybe you should drop the Boy Scout act?” With that, the two Mud Shark pilots headed off towards the exit door. Sandman watched them go, wondering what he had ever seen in Avatarr.

Just as the duo was about to walk through the door, Psychopath turned and actually looked at Sandman. “Hey,” he called.

Sandman held his gaze and replied, as respectfully as he could manage after their conversation “Yes, sir?”

“This isn’t a popularity contest. In ten years no one is going to care who was liked the most, or who had the most kills, or what kind of hotshot maneuvers he used in a dogfight. They’re only going to care about who lived. Anyone who tells you otherwise is probably going to be the next one to die. So don’t lecture me. I’m still alive, and I am going to survive. That makes me right and them wrong.”



**FLIGHT WING OFFICER'S QUARTERS, TCS HERMES
DEEP SPACE, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM
1948 HOURS (CST), 2669.222**

After the debriefing the Bloodhounds had been on standby alert for several hours before they were relieved. Sandman's anger about the confrontation on the flight deck had been gnawing at him all day. It all came out that evening after the funeral. He told Phalanx about the argument with the two Mud Shark pilots. Psychopath's last words kept echoing in his ears. Sandman didn't want to admit it, but those words had more than angered him, they had scared him.

Phalanx listened patiently. When Sandman's rant finally began to run out of steam, Phalanx nodded his head and spoke. "Well, it certainly seems that having fresh newbies running around tends to rub them the wrong way. This really isn't about you, Sandman. Don't take it personally. Each of us has our own way of trying to deal with the reality we live with from day to day. So many of us have found facades to hide behind, and we often carefully guard ourselves from becoming close to too many people. Maybe it's because the pain of watching people die who you were close to is too much, I don't know. But, you made a difference out there today, Sandman, and I'm glad you are here."

Sandman forced a smile. "Thanks."

Phalanx nodded again, "The others will come around. Just give it some time. As I was saying, you've got to remember that you aren't on a rear-echelon ship in some backwater system anymore. We're on the frontlines now. The pilots here live their lives under siege. And whenever there's a fight, we're the first ones sent out to do the fighting and the dying. This lasts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There is no rest from it, ever. The pilots here are trying with all their might to do well, and stay alive. You're in their foxhole; they are the ones who dug it to try to stay alive just one more day. Most people don't react well when someone new comes into their house and immediately starts rearranging their furniture, if you know what I mean." Sandman nodded, understanding Phalanx's point.

"Look, don't worry about the other pilots. You are here to serve the Hermes. You are here to serve Confed. Just do your best and stay alive, alright?" Phalanx asked.

Sandman nodded, "Alright."

Phalanx clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly and then walked over to the double bunk, "We're on duty tomorrow morning, so get some sleep."



**FLIGHT WING OFFICER'S QUARTERS, TCS HERMES
DEEP SPACE, BRIMSTONE SYSTEM
0127 HOURS (CST), 2669.223**

A piercing screech assaulted Sandman's senses, tearing him from his dreams and forcing him back into reality. It was the ship's klaxon. Sweeney's voice echoed through the Public Address System, announcing General Quarters.

"Red Alert! Red Alert! All hands to battle stations! This is not a drill! Repeat: this is not a drill!"

Sandman bolted upright, hitting his head on the bunk above him. "Aargh!" he moaned.

Phalanx groaned from the top bunk, "Not again!" Sandman heard Phalanx tumble out of his bunk and land smoothly on the floor.

"What's going on?" Sandman asked, still disoriented from the rude awakening. "We're under attack, that's what's going on!" Phalanx said, as he fumbled for the light switch. The reality of the situation pierced through Sandman's disorientation "Oh, crap! I thought we had thrown the Kilrathi off our trail."

The lights clicked on, and Phalanx was already scooping up and putting on his clothing with practiced efficiency. "Hurry up, Sandman, get dressed!" he urged.

"I'm on it!" Sandman fumbled with his clothing, consciously aware of how clumsily he was getting dressed in comparison to Phalanx.

"To the briefing room, Sandman, double time!"

Sandman looked towards the door to acknowledge the call, but saw that Phalanx had already ran out. He cursed his own slowness as he zipped the flight suit midway through his chest, and then kneeled to the ground, putting his boots on his feet. There was no time to fasten them now. He would do that in the briefing room. He fumbled with the straps, tightening them just enough to keep his boots from falling off his feet as he pounded down the corridor. As he ran down the hall, he saw the other pilots dashing from their quarters, as well. Some were already fully dressed, others like him, were still putting on some layers of clothing.

The quietness of the hallways during a night shift had erupted into full chaos and pandemonium. The emergency klaxon was roaring at the highest decibel. People ran up and down the hallway. It was as if the whole ship had turned into one giant vortex of motion.



As Sandman and the other pilots reached the Briefing Room with its bird's eye view of the flight deck, the Alert-Five fighters were launching already. He heard the rumble and a screeching roar of an Arrow as it lit up its afterburners to Zone Five and rocketed out of the bay. There was no time to waste. Death was on the prowl tonight, and it was looking for them.

By now, most people had reached their posts. The constant hammering of footsteps was fading away, leaving an eerie echo of the former chaos, punctuated only by the continuing wail of the klaxon. Within five minutes, every door would be locked, every room would be secured, and every compartment would be shut, all in preparation for the attack to come.





LONG LIVE THE CONFEDERATION!