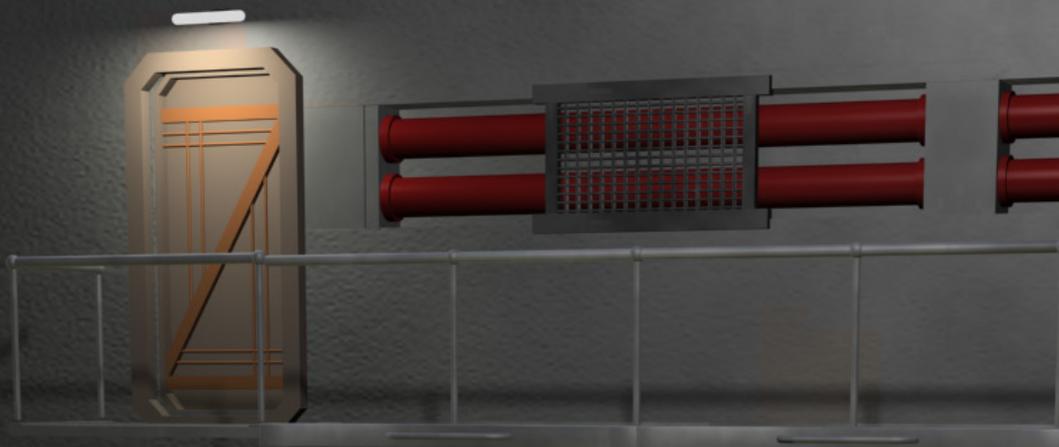
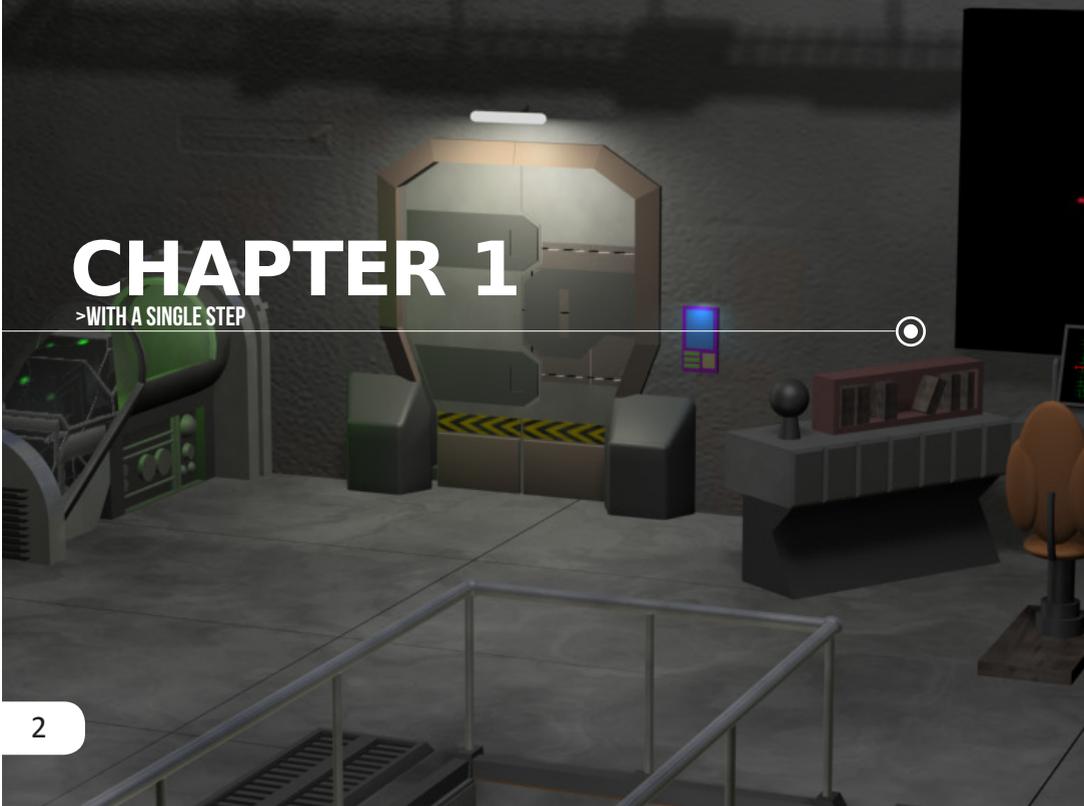


PROLOGUE



CHAPTER 1

>WITH A SINGLE STEP





**FLIGHT DECK, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
1203 HOURS (CST), 2669.161**

“The Confederation must be worse off than I thought if this is the rubbish the brass is letting in the cockpit now!” bellowed a prim and polished looking senior officer, pacing in front of the assembled young pilots.

“If any of you survive your first training exercise, I will be at a loss for words!” he continued.

2nd Lieutenant David Markham found himself wondering what they had done to deserve this treatment. No sooner had he and the twenty nine other freshly minted Lieutenants from the Confederation’s various officer candidate school programs stepped off the shuttles, been called to attention, and heard the words “at ease” than what he could only assume was his new wing commander had launched into an obviously well-rehearsed tirade.

Apparently, David and his fellow graduates had not only pulled duty in what had to be the backwater to end all backwaters that was the Oberan System, but it seemed they would have the pleasure of serving under at least one superior with a planet-sized chip planted firmly on his shoulders. The only thing the older officer needed was a riding crop and he could easily have played the part of the cliché, hard-assed, arrogant, second-rate commander in every bad war holo-vid David had ever seen.

“My name is Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell. I am, regretfully, your Wing Commander for the duration of your stay aboard this vessel,” the officer announced.

A grin spread across David’s face, as the slight stress the older man placed on his rank and the insignia of a Lieutenant Colonel shining on his uniform betrayed what could be a partial reason for the man’s sour attitude.

“You have been placed under my charge onboard this ship to better prepare you for the fight against the Kilrathi,” Mitchell continued. “In the thirty-five years since the beginning of the Kilrathi War, the Confederation has never been in such dire need of well-trained pilots.”

“Then what the hell are we doing on this bucket of bolts?” whispered Thad “Champ” Cooper, the undisputed spoiled brat/jock of David’s OCS training program. A few pilots within earshot of Thad snickered in agreement at the comment.



David sighed as he took in the flight deck of the TCS Wellington, finding himself in the regrettable position of agreeing with his fellow pilot. The Yorktown-class light carrier was a nearly century-old dinosaur, a throwback to the days before the Kilrathi War when carriers were used mainly for light reconnaissance duty and space-to-planet ops. From what he could tell from the non-existent paintjob, missing access panels, and bare conduits, this ship could very well have been one of the first off the assembly line. The newest heavy carriers in the Confed Fleet were generations more advanced, and even the existing attack carriers were refitted and updated with modern technology.

The Wellington and her sister ships were not so lucky, usually residing somewhere near the bottom of the upgrade and resupply list. This old girl appeared to have just been pulled out of mothballs, its decades old equipment looking quite ancient when compared to the F-27L Arrow fighters undergoing maintenance on the deck. David's attention returned back to his terse superior as Mitchell stopped pacing.

"Over seven hundred pilots, a lot of them friends, fought and died valiantly in the Battle for Earth; pilots who were worth ten of each of you," Mitchell suddenly spat out. He himself seemed surprised by the sudden outburst. After smoothing the front of his uniform and appearing to regain his composure, the wing commander of the Wellington resumed pacing, as well as continuing his remarks.

"To fill the ranks, the brass has instituted drastic measures. The Officer Candidate School programs of academic institutions throughout the Confederation have been kicked into high gear. Your classes have been accelerated and the usual flight schools and 'on-the-job training' that was to be your next steps to truly becoming officers has been combined into a two month, if you'll pardon the term, 'crash course' onboard a Confederation Naval vessel. Following that two month period, if anyone is left alive, officers will be permanently assigned to the frontlines, where they will no doubt fight fiercely, but briefly."

David found his mind drifting to the events of the past few months, realizing now where another portion of Colonel Mitchell's seemingly immediate contempt for them stemmed. The Battle of Terra had almost sounded the death knell for humanity. Prince Thrakhath and the Kilrathi Fleet had come within seconds of turning Earth into a lifeless, uninhabitable wasteland. Despite the fact that the Confederation was made up of hundreds of worlds and a few races, that one blow would have effectively cut out the heart of the Terran Confederation. All those assembled on this flight deck could do was watch and wait at their respective OCS programs on distant planets, light years away from assisting those fighting for their survival. If it hadn't been for Admiral Tolwyn, a hastily-assembled fleet of still-intact warships, a bunch of crazy and damn brave Marines, and the sacrifice of over seven-hundred pilots, David knew he would not be standing on the flight deck of this ship today, being insulted for circumstances he could not change.



"You few," Colonel Mitchell continued pacing in front of the formation, oblivious to the growing resentment the assembled pilots were already harboring for their new CO, "who have somehow been labeled the top prospects in your respective OCS classes, have been singled out to engage in your two months of training onboard a real Confederation carrier in a real wartime setting, instead of the usual escort warship. To increase the odds that you rookies might live to see another day, you will be separated into three junior squadrons, each containing a few veteran officers on rotation from the front who will act as your superiors. Also, this carrier will be under the watchful eye of the Hellscream Hellcat squadron. These veteran pilots will protect you and the Wellington for the duration of your training."

"Real wartime setting?!?" Thad muttered under his breath. "The lowest-born Cat privateer wouldn't set one matted paw in this sector."

Again, a few pilots within earshot of Thad chuckled at his comment, but David's jaw began to tighten. Like every officer candidate throughout the Confederation, David had worked hard to get where he was. He and other graduates here today had spent long hours pouring over Kilrathi psychology texts, knew fighter technical specifications backwards and forwards, and had basically lived in the simulator room. Thad was the exception to this rule. Confederation OCS class ratings were a matter of public record. A brief examination of these reports would afford no reason why 2nd Lieutenant Thad Cooper deserved to be here among the top graduates ... except maybe that his father, Senator Henry Cooper, just happened to be on the board of the Senate Committee for Military Expenditures.

Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell's closing remarks broke through David's growing annoyance. "You will find bunk assignments and to which squadron you have been assigned in the computer system. Each of you will need to report to your squadron CO by 1500 hours. Flight Ops begin at 1600 hours."

Colonel Mitchell came to a stop in front of the formation and gestured to the Arrow being wheeled to an elevator across the flight deck, an annoyed look etched on his face. "And ladies and gentlemen, these fine pieces of machinery cost millions of credits each. Please make sure you bring them back in one piece." He began to climb the steps up to the Flight Control Center. He reached the top of the stairs, looked out into the crowd of young officers and slowly shook his head in what could only pass for disgust.

"Dismissed!" Mitchell shouted before turning and stepping into Flight Control.

With that, the flight deck erupted as the assembled pilots began speaking all at once, quickly moving towards the shuttles, each attempting to be the first to find their gear.



“Compassionate guy,” the familiar female Lieutenant next to David observed with a smile.

He turned towards the slim speaker, the only female graduate of his OCS program to join David and Thad on the ship.

“Real motivational speaker,” David grinned. “I’m ready to follow him to the gates of Hell. How about you, Angela?”

2nd Lieutenant Angela “Panzer” DiMarco’s smile turned a little more sinister. “Yeah, and I think I’d kick him right through once we got there ... Champ, too,” she answered.

David laughed to himself as he found his duffel and headed for the nearest computer terminal to find his bunk assignment. An old broken-down ship, stationed in the dead-end of space, and led by an arrogant and callous wing commander ... an assignment doesn’t start off any better than that.



SLEEPING QUARTERS, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
1423 HOURS (CST)

After a few wrong turns, David had finally found the sleeping quarters his new squadron occupied. As he finished stowing his gear in the locker bearing his call-sign, he glanced at the wall-mounted chronometer. His assigned meeting time with his new squadron CO, Major Baws, was fast approaching and a new ship assignment, no matter how old and well-known the ship was, did not make finding ones way around very simple.

As the blast doors of the squadron sleeping quarters opened to reveal the pilot lounge, David wondered with a chuckle what designer had thought it a great idea to place pilot's bunks in such close proximity to a ready source of alcohol. He then remembered just how old the carrier he was aboard was, which probably meant there weren't three rooms, save the bridge, flight deck and engine room, which still housed the original designed purpose. Floyd, one of David's OCS classmates, just returning from his visit with Major Baws, had informed them that their sleeping quarters were reserved for the regular fighter squadron on the Wellington during combat duty. David shrugged to himself. If it was good enough for the big boys he guessed it would be good enough for him.

As David picked his way through the scattered sets of tables and chairs in the lounge, a regretfully recognizable voice rang out above the lively Rockero music piped through the speaker system.

"Yiiiiick!! You'd think a ship as ancient as this one would have an equally ancient scotch onboard," "Champ" Cooper hissed from his seat at the bar. "I can't tell if I'm supposed to drink it or throw it into the fuel tank of my fighter!" he concluded loudly.

Champ obnoxiously laughed at his own cleverness as the less than amused bartender moved on to serve the next patron. David slowly shook his head and continued towards the elevator. Along the way he spotted a familiar face sitting at a table of pilots obviously having some words about their annoying cohort at the bar.

"One day that jerk will finally get what's coming to him, I just hope I'm there to see it happen," 'Panzer' DiMarco commented from her seat at the table, her slightly disturbing smile spreading across her face.

David chuckled and clasped his friend on the shoulder as he passed.



“Just make sure he’s not in your gunsights when you see it happen, Angela,” he kidded. “It’d be a damn waste of a frontline fighter craft and I’ve heard a court martial isn’t a walk in the park, either.”

The pilots gathered at the table chuckled at the comment as David continued towards the elevator doors.

Panzer turned halfway around in her chair. “I make no promises,” she called after him, her menacing grin a bit more playful this time.

David returned the smile as the elevator doors closed, blocking out the new round of laughter erupting from the table.

David rapped his knuckles against the metal door leading to his squadron CO’s office. He found it strange that the door did not have a chime to announce the presence of a visitor.

“Enter,” came the terse reply from within.

As soon as he opened the door he understood why the “office” had no way to announce guests. The space must have been a small storage locker in another life. The thin officer behind the tiny desk took up most of the room in the “office” and the presence of a visitor and a chair for them to sit in made the room positively claustrophobic.

“Markham?” the thin man inquired.

“Yes, sir,” David replied, saluting. “2nd Lt. David ‘Sandman’ Markham”.

“Sandman?” the older man asked as his eyes darted toward a small dossier that took up the entire surface area of the desk.

A sheepish grin crept onto David’s face.

“Well, technically, sir, it’s ‘Kitty Sandman’,” he replied.

The thin officer leaned back in his seat, hands folded behind his head.

“I know I’m going to regret this, but I’ll ask anyway,” he admitted. “Why?”

Sandman prepared to launch into a story he had told too many times already in his short career. He recalled how he had grown up on a planet renown for its never-ending beaches and this, coupled with his tendency to consistently arrive late for his first class of the day, earned him the nickname ‘Sandman’ from his fellow



officer candidates. The callsign stuck till it was time to formalize their monikers just a few weeks ago. A Lt. Sanders already flew under the callsign 'Sandman' and Space Forces' policy would not allow David to use it. Therefore, as a joke, someone suggested 'Kitty Sandman', referencing David's ability to put Kilrathi to bed permanently in the simulator. Thinking highly of it at the moment, David had gone ahead and decided it a good idea to use the nickname. It was apparently funny at the time, but weeks later, David was already regretting the choice.

"Well," the older officer began, "I have to admit ... 'Kitty Sandman' is really a horrible callsign for a pilot and, unfortunately, right now it's your official one."

"Yes, sir," David replied, growing even more self-conscious about his ill-chosen moniker.

"But it is also a mouthful," the older officer continued, leaning forward onto his desk. "So, Lt. Markham, I hereby dub you plain 'Sandman' for everyday use. Do you have any problems with that?"

A smile quickly returned to David's face.

"No, sir, I do not," he responded proudly.

The officer gestured for David to sit down, to which the young pilot complied.

"Now that I know way too much about your past, we can get down to business," the officer began. "My name is Major Kenny 'Kettle' Baws. While we seem to be sharing, my callsign comes from the fact that I apparently have a small temper problem," Baws smiled slightly at the comment. "Otherwise, I'm not that bad of a guy."

"You have been assigned to the Diamondbacks junior squadron, commanded by yours truly and assisted by Second Lieutenants "Ninja" Crisologo and "Assassin" Chaplin. Both of them have the same rank as you, but they're veterans of the Battle of Earth, so listen to what they say. I also serve as executive officer of the entire flight wing under Lt. Col. Mitchell, whom you met just a few hours ago."

David's facial expression must have betrayed his immediate dislike for their wing commander, as Major Baws snickered before continuing.

"I know he seems like a pompous hard-ass," the Major began, "but he's very old school. He believes you boys have something to prove to him before he considers you worth his time ... a sentiment that I actually share on some level."

Baws' eyes clouded over. The distance behind them seemed well beyond the



years of the older officer, who actually seemed very young for his high rank to David.

“Most of the instructor pilots onboard the Wellington participated in the Battle of Terra,” Baws spoke from somewhere far outside the room. “They watched and listened as friends were cooked alive in their cockpits, often unable to lend the slightest bit of support or assistance.”

Baws’ focus ripped back to the present and the young officer sitting across from him.

“What we lived through instantly initiated us into a brotherhood of sorts,” Baws continued the lecture. “This is going to seem unfair to newbie pilots such as yourself at times, but the bar of acceptance into the pilot ‘community’ has been unintentionally raised. You must prove yourself before anyone on this tub, or any ship in the Confederation for that matter, will take you seriously.”

Baws casually leaned back in his chair again before continuing, a slight grin replacing the stern expression that had been rooted to his face a few moments before.

“That would be partially the reason for Colonel Mitchell’s less than enthusiastic greeting this morning. Of course, the brass passing him over for promotion to full bird and a fleet carrier wing command of his own probably doesn’t sit too well on his stomach, either.”

David returned his squadron CO’s easy grin. He believed he was going to enjoy being a Diamondback.

“Anyway,” Major Baws shook his head, straightening himself up in his chair and grabbing the folder on the desk, “your advanced training schedule is going to be Hell on you for the next two months. Flying three sorties a day, everyday with me, one of my two instructors, or a combination thereof, you will be learning how to survive while dishing out some serious pain in a few of the Confederation’s top fighter aircraft.”

Baw’s shifted some documents around in David’s personnel file, looking for a certain page.

“Ah,” the Major finally concluded, finding the information he was after, “looks like you are one of the few who gets to begin their training immediately.”

An unconscious grin spread across David’s face. It had already been far too long since he had been strapped behind the stick of a fighter, simulated or otherwise.



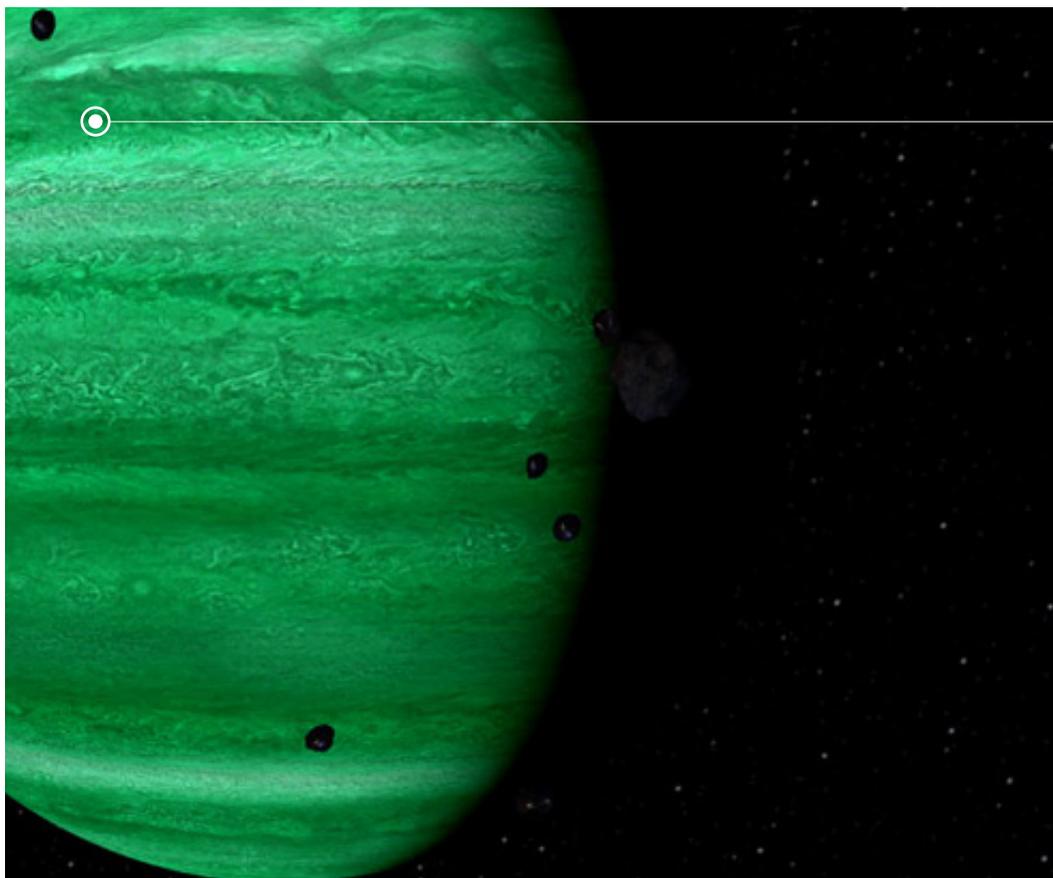
The five days of transport and shuttle rides through the void of space had been torture.

“You’ll be taking your first training hop with me in an Arrow at 1600 hours,” Major Baws concluded, “You had better get your gear ready. I’ll see you in the briefing room in half an hour.”

“Yes, sir!” David loudly responded, a little too loudly he found for such a small office.

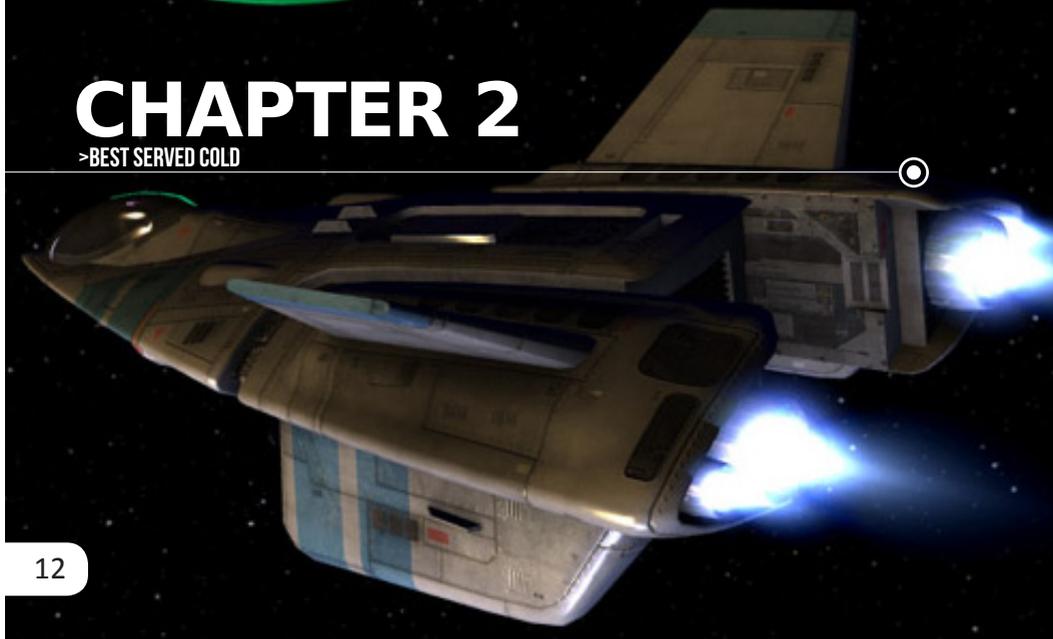
Baws winced and smiled. “We’ll soon see if you can keep up that enthusiasm throughout your entire training schedule,” he challenged. “Dismissed.”

The young pilot actually made his way out of the office door before cracking a huge, giddy smile. 2nd Lieutenant David ‘Sandman’ Markham, newest member of the Diamondback squadron of the TCS Wellington, all but ran towards his locker, ready to take on his first mission in the long-running Kilrathi War.



CHAPTER 2

>BEST SERVED COLD





**FLIGHT DECK, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
0631 HOURS (CST), 2669.162**

David awoke the next morning, a premature end to a mostly sleepless night. He slowly sat up from his bunk and, mindful of a few of his still rousing squadmates, quietly opened his locker to retrieve his duty uniform. Being among the few pilots who had taken their first training flight the previous evening, he and his stirring squadmates really had nothing to do till the second sortie of the day. David had been alone with his thoughts for the Majority of the night, though, and he at least needed a change of scenery to try and clear his head before he climbed back into the cockpit again. As he continued to dress in the semi-darkness, David found his thoughts drifting back to the origin of the distress he had felt throughout the night.

The Arrow fighter had performed better than anything David had piloted before in the OCS program. His mind raced back through his experiences behind the stick of a fighter. His first flight had taken place in an ancient Scimitar trainer, his instructor for the exercise barely taking his hands away from the relic's flight controls. David had quickly graduated from the museum piece to an older Sabre variant, one whose turret had been specially modified to accommodate an instructor or performance evaluator. After qualifying in both fighters, most pilots in the OCS were looking forward to their solo flights. David had been dreading it.

Every one of his previous training flights had been perfect. He had passed every test the flight instructors and combat veterans had thrown at him and scored some of the highest marks ever recorded at his OCS program in the process. In addition, though, every one of his previous flights had been cold and robotic, each flawlessly flown but devoid of any joy whatsoever. David had gone through all the motions, went through every checklist, and double-checked every indicator. He remembered how he had basically worked himself up over the millions of things that could go wrong in the complex war machines in every flight. Each time he had successfully landed after a training exercise, he had always felt sick to his stomach, overjoyed in the fact that he had just not screwed up.

Finally after many months of anxiety-filled takeoffs, landings, basic maneuvers, and skills assessments, David and the other OCS trainees were ready to remove the training wheels and take a fighter up without an instructor looking over their shoulders. David remembered the customary butterflies breaking free in his stomach as he stepped out on the tarmac and caught a glimpse of the shining silver Ferret parked on the runway. He recalled the nearly immobilizing terror that gripped him as he had slowly lowered himself into the cramped cockpit of the tiny



fighter.

He had been amazed, though, as slowly through the pre-flight checklist, the desire to just not fail was beginning to melt away. By the time he was airborne, the feeling was all but replaced with excitement and anticipation of what was to come next. His pulse quickened as he left the atmosphere and his senses came alive, not allowing a single sensation to avoid detection. David laughed at the cliché, but he could swear he could feel himself becoming one with the nimble little patrol fighter. He had to do little more than think of what he wanted to do and the craft responded in kind. For a few minutes, it seemed like the universe existed just for him and the whole galaxy was his playground.

Any further solo training was cut short as David's accelerated OCS training had come to an end. A few weeks later, he found himself walking down the dimly-lit, shabby hallways of the Wellington, trying to find the mess hall.

Even as Markham found the dining area, he remained lost in his thoughts. The Arrow he had put through its paces the previous evening had been an absolute dream to fly. The responsive light fighter's handling and maneuverability surpassed even that of the Ferret. If that agile little fighter had responded to David's every thought, then the Arrow actually anticipated his every intention. The sleek fighter had cut through space like a laser knife with every maneuver he had performed.

This was the origin of David's sleepless night. Even though the lithe Arrow surpassed the Ferret in just about every regard, Markham had just not felt as free and caught up in the moment as he had while taking his first, and only, solo flight. The adrenaline rush was still there, as well as the quickened pulse and heightened senses, but the emotional elation he had felt when dancing the Ferret through the cosmos was missing. At moments, he had actually felt bored, yearning for something he could not quite put his finger on. At first, he had chalked it up to the Ferret being his "first love". One of his first flight instructors, a wise old veteran with a biomechanical arm, had told them that they would never enjoy flying another fighter quite as much as whatever they had completed their first solo flight in. He had likened it to their first love, the one they would supposedly never forget.

As David sat almost alone in the mess hall, picking through what the cook was trying to pass off as an omelet, he entertained the possibility that it was more than just that. The Arrow training had been David's first flight since reporting to duty as a Space Forces officer, his first with a higher purpose than just the joy of flying or learning the basics of operating a fighter craft. Had the dire straits of the Confederation war effort and the role he was about to play in the saga taken a little of the wonder out of flying for David?

The calling to action of inexperienced pilots, like David and his OCS comrades,



was just one indication of the Confederation's desperation. In addition to the remainder of Thrakhath's fleet, which had come within a cat's whisker of annihilating Earth, Confed intelligence reported that the Kilrathi had commissioned their new clan fleet. Even with the new wave of heavy carriers coming online and the escalated production of new fighter and warship designs throughout ConFleet, the Kilrathi Empire still held the numbers advantage in almost every class of fighter and warship, including an overwhelming upper hand in carriers.

The questions and concerns continued to churn inside David's head as he left the mess hall. Not quite sure where to go, the young officer began walking around the old carrier he was calling home, searching for answers he was beginning to think would not come easily. Had the events of the past few months stolen a little more of the innocence fledgling pilots enjoyed?

Granted, growing up during the Kilrathi War had not afforded much in the way of 'childhood innocence'. Every schoolboy and girl knew that there was a race of cat-like warriors somewhere in the galaxy bent on wiping humanity from existence. Despite this, David could remember that during officer candidate school, he and his classmates had enjoyed a setting a little detached from the current war situation. His university studies and even most of his OCS program had dwelled almost purely on the theoretical. Physics, Terran philosophy, aerodynamics, mathematics, and literature had been a large part of his early college curriculum while Kilrathi psychology, engineering, and basic flight training, including basic fighter tactics, had dominated the syllabus at the OCS program.

While all of the subjects had indeed been directly applicable to David's future involvement in the war, each had been academic exercises at best, their relevant application seemingly years away. With the Battle of Earth sapping the strength of the Confederation war machine and the rushing to service of the OCS students, David could understand how a little of the detached luster he had enjoyed from flying could have faded.

The roar of a fighter's ion engines powering up snapped David out of his reverie. In his wonderings, David had found his way to the Wellington's Flight Control Center. He stepped through the blast doors to find the Flight Boss and his control officer, busily bringing in fighters from the day's first sortie. David quickly moved out of the Flight Control and down the stairway to the flight deck. Pausing at the bottom, he watched as an Arrow gently glided through the flight deck's atmospheric force field, was caught by the automated tractor beam, and gently touched down on the deck. Looking down the length of the carrier deck, David spied another Arrow fighter parked away from the busy recovery operations now taking place near the rear of the ship.

David began walking towards the solitary fighter, apparently the victim of a late downcheck by a crew chief. As he approached the nimble little war machine, he



continued his musings. He had to admit, no matter what the cause, the escapism of just flying would probably never ensnare him as it had in his first flight in the Ferret. David arrived beside the Arrow, taking in the sleek lines and fierce shark mouth graphic painted on the forward gun mounts. He found himself subconsciously returning the caricature's smile, thinking back to the thrill of pulling the trigger on the energy cannons gleaming under the fighter's nose. The few minutes he had spent in mock combat with the picket corvette had taken him to a new level, in a way, well beyond that of his first Ferret flight. The thought of twisting and turning, trying to keep the corvette in his sights while avoiding its return fire, broadened the already large smile on David's lips.

Could this have been the missing element? Could this be the yearning he had found missing from his pure flying experience? Markham tugged on the ordinance sitting in the missile cart next to the fighter. He had to admit that he yearned to become the pilot he had been training to be, circling the skies with his Kilrathi counterparts in magnificent duels. He soon found himself running his hand along the fighter's fuselage, feeling the slightly pitted armor and running his fingers through the joints in the plating.

"You really, really need to find a good woman," a female voice goaded from the direction of the recovery operations. Startled, Markham quickly turned to see a sly smile stretched across the face of "Panzer" DiMarco, her helmet slung under her arm and her shoulder length hair a bit of a mess.

David fumbled for a retort.

"You'd better hurry up and climb into your flight suit," she continued quickly, obviously delighted in catching him without anything to say, "Mitchell wants all pilots ready for the second training sortie in twenty minutes."

Recovering quickly, David walked out from beneath the fighter, and began the trek back towards Flight Control and the briefing rooms. Panzer fell in step beside her friend.

"You are right, Angela. I really do need a good woman," David finally responded, turning towards her and resuming the banter, "Too bad there aren't any aboard this tub."

"Took you long enough to come up with that one, didn't it?" she prodded.

"Perfection takes time," he fired back as they passed a few more fighters fresh from the vacuum of space. A handful of other pilots began trailing them, headed towards the briefing rooms, comparing notes about their experiences on their first training exercises.



“You wouldn’t know a good woman if she bit you in the ass, David,” Panzer retaliated.

“I know a few good women on the New Reno pleasure planet who would do just that for the right amount of credits,” “Champ” Cooper offered, interrupting the conversation. Markham and Panzer turned in disgust to see Champ jogging the last few steps to catch them, the omnipresent ‘better-than-thou’ smile locked on his face.

“Speaking of asses,” Champ continued as he matched the two friends’ pace, “I hear you’re getting another chance to kiss up to the squadron CO, Markham.”

“Everyone has to fly with someone, Champ. I need to get suited up,” David said, trying to gracefully excuse himself before Champ could say anything else. “I’ll catch you later, Panzer.”

Shooting Angela an apologetic look, David broke from the group and made his way to the locker room to change into his flight suit. He could hear Champ behind him, apparently oblivious to Angela’s last comment, recounting one of his less-than-reputable exploits to her.

David may not have found the root of his problem in his sleepless night or in his morning’s reflection, but he may have found a quick fix. Opening his locker, he began to imagine himself locked in mortal combat with a Kilrathi pilot. His pulse quickened as he pictured himself and a furball dancing all over space, twisting and turning until finally the Kilrathi rested in his sights. He smiled at the thought. David knew he wasn’t a cold-blooded killer, and he was beginning to realize that Nietzsche’s words were not just quotes in a text book. In war, one had to take special care not to become like those they were fighting against.

“But,” David thought to himself as he reached for his flight suit, “maybe a little vengeance now and then is good for the soul.”



CHAPTER 3

>AND REALLY BAD EGGS





**LIFT BRAVO TWO NINE, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
1806 HOURS (CST), 2669.165**

David stepped onto the lift and requested the appropriate level. It had been three days of routine training since his flight had run into the pirate raiders. The other escort flights that day had reported intermittent contact with unknowns on their long-range scanners, but no further conflicts had erupted.

The incident with the pirates had given David some notoriety among the Wellington's complement. He had received many congratulations since the scrap, the kudos coming from OCS graduates and veterans alike. Both young and experienced pilots had echoed David's wish to follow up the attack on the pirates, but both had also agreed that orders had to be followed.

David had to admit, the attention was flattering, but he also had to acknowledge that the encounter had left him with mixed feelings. It had felt great to finally see combat; jinxing missiles and lining up high deflection shots on hostiles had been an experience far beyond any he had previously had. The actual cause of his troubles was the identity of the enemies he had put in his sights. David had been waiting for much of his adult life to fight the Kilrathi, but the enemy he had been forced to engage were not felines of any kind.

The pirate craft could have been flown by Varni, Firekkan, or half a dozen other races, but the comms traded throughout the engagement pointed toward humans as the most likely culprits. David could not begin to fathom what could possibly turn someone into that kind of scum. Literature and history had taught that conflicts of the Kilrathi War's magnitude were actually a unifying force for a race, the menial squabbles of the past being put aside so that everyone could serve the greater good. David could not understand how anyone of any race could willingly attack supply lines that were effectively keeping the Kilrathi from ruling the known universe.

David knew that, throughout history, there was always a portion of society that would try to profit from war, to take spoils whenever possible, but he found that personally witnessing the practice and fighting against it were two entirely different concepts. David shook his head. His definition of 'enemy' was already changing. It had to be altered to include not only the Kilrathi, but also anyone actively involved in damaging the Confederation war effort. The 'grey' area of war that had been the topic of many lectures from veteran pilots during his time in the OCS program was something that David could never quite grasp. Yet, this murky region of conflict was already showing up in his first few missions as an officer.



David frowned at the thought that this might be the first stone cast, a forbearer of things to come. He quickly tried to force those thoughts from his mind. It did very little good to dwell on subjects which one had no control over, even though the practice was much easier said than done.

Luckily, the lift doors opened a few levels before his intended destination, breaking David away from his internal musings. A hunkering, bald OCS graduate stepped onto the lift, a casual grin breaking across his face as he recognized the occupant.

“Our local celebrity! How’s it going Markham?” the young officer asked.

“Pretty good, Hoobler,” David replied to 2nd Lt. “Hoobler” Hornaday, a member of the Starjumper junior squadron and one of Sandman’s OCS classmates, “how about you?”

“Not too bad,” Hoobler replied, rubbing the back of his neck, “I just had my butt handed to me by a Hellscream pilot, though.”

“In the sims?” David asked. His interest was definitely piqued. The veteran Hellcat squadron didn’t usually slum with the OCS graduates in the simulators.

A sly grin passed over Hoobler’s face as the lift doors closed behind him and the elevator resumed its descent.

“No,” he continued, “the real thing ... well, almost. A Hellscream was assigned as my instructor for the last exercise of the day. He had heard through the grapevine we would be starting advanced combat training soon and decided to give me a jump start.”

“Sounds intense,” Sandman commented.

“You ought to know,” Hoobler responded. “You saw the real thing a few days ago. Captain Snyder just transferred his squadron training program to my onboard computer and we went a few rounds.”

“I think the first one may have lasted 20 seconds,” he added with a grin.

David returned the pilot’s smile.

“That good, huh?” he asked.

“Better than that good,” Hoobler replied. “This guy was spooky. He anticipated everything I put that Arrow through. I mean, towards the fifth or sixth time I started giving him a run for his money, but he was always at least one step ahead



of me. I even had the speed and agility advantage over his Hellcat, but he sure knows how to put that fighter through its paces.”

The lift doors opened to a lively scene. David surveyed the lounge area from the elevator. He could definitely tell the last sortie of the day had come in. It seemed like every pilot onboard the old girl was scattered throughout the music and conversation filled room.

David patted his fellow pilot on the shoulder.

“Just you wait,” he began, “in a few months, we will be that good and we’ll rotate back to put a new batch of rookies in their places. Come on, I’ll buy you a beer.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hoobler replied, his grin growing a bit wider.

The two pilots stepped through the lift doors and began to weave their way through the tables and gathered personnel. Along the way, David was stopped now and again by naval officers and pilots he didn’t recognize, each offering congratulations on how he handled the pirate encounter. David felt a little uncomfortable accepting the praise from people whose names he could not recall, but he and Hoobler finally pushed their way to the bar.

David made a hand gesture towards the barkeep, signaling he wanted two beers. The bartender brought over the beverages as David, aware of the din surrounding him, pushed a little closer to the bar so the man could read his name patch and charge the drinks to the right account.

“Put those on my tab,” a familiar voice said from behind the two young pilots.

David turned to see Assassin behind him, his credit chip in hand. He motioned for the bartender to add two more to the batch.

“We appreciate it,” David thanked the instructor pilot.

“Yeah, let’s all buy the conquering hero a round while we’re at it,” a voice David wished he wasn’t too familiar with called out.

David looked over Assassin’s shoulder to see Champ pushing his way through the crowd to their place at the bar. He must have been at it for a while. His speech was slightly drawn out and his steps didn’t seem very sure.

“Tell me the truth, Assassin,” Champ spat out as he reached them, “did Sandman lift a finger when the fur hit the fan or did he run for cover while you, Ninja and Baws took out the pirate trash.”



David felt himself get red hot. He stepped forward, ready to lash out at Champ with the first retort that sprang into his mind.

Assassin cut him off before he could speak.

“Look, rook,” he began, “even if the after-action reports weren’t public record which you could read anytime, I can safely say his performance was well beyond that of a normal rookie.”

The intended continuation “such as yourself” was left unspoken by the older officer, but the meaning was clear to all the pilots witnessing the confrontation.

The crowd turned to see what Champ’s response would be, but the younger officer just stood still, the blood vessel above his temple now visible, unable to find any words of retaliation.

“Come on, Sandman,” Assassin finally broke the silence. He gestured toward Hoobler. “Bring your friend. Ninja and I have a table in the corner.”

Assassin grabbed his two drinks and led David and Hoobler through the crowd of onlookers as Champ fumed behind them.

“We’ll see who’s being patted on the back the next time these pirates decide to grow a pair,” Champ weakly called after them before grabbing a seat at the bar and taking out his frustrations on his drink.

“Geez, that guy is such an ass,” Hoobler commented as they again picked their way through the throng of pilots and officers. “Why do people put up with him?”

“Because one word from his daddy would break an officer’s career like a twig,” Assassin answered over his shoulder. He shook his head in disgust. “Even when we’re fighting for the survival of our species we apparently have to play politics.”

David finally spotted Ninja sitting at a far table with another older man he did not recognize.

“Hey Viking,” Assassin greeted the pilot as he approached the table, “if I had known you were joining us, I’d have grabbed you one.”

“That’s alright,” Viking responded, “I’m still finishing my own drink right now.”

“Hey Sandman,” Ninja welcomed them, “and it’s Hoobler, right?”

Hoobler nodded and turned to David.



"Markham, this is Captain 'Viking' Snyder," he said. "This is the Hellscream pilot that gave me my lumps today."

"Don't sell yourself short, kid," Viking responded with a grin, "by the fourth or fifth engagement, I actually had to work."

Assassin, Sandman and Hoobler sat down and joined the two pilots.

"So," Viking began, looking in David's direction, "you're the rookie who gave an assist to these two brilliant space jockeys here?"

"Yes, sir," David answered, "I was along for the ride."

The older pilot waved his hand in dismissal.

"Call me Viking while we're off duty, kid," he responded.

David nodded in reply taking a drink from his glass. Assassin passed his extra drink over towards Ninja.

"I hear we are taking over your Hellcats for a few sorties tomorrow, Viking," Ninja goaded the older officer. "Maybe I'll be assigned your fighter and I can leave you a little gift. Hmm, maybe a slime rat under the seat."

Viking chuckled.

"Do it and you might find the same rat in your next meal," he countered.

"You'll like the Hellcat," Viking continued after taking a drink from his glass. "Longer range, better endurance, sturdier. Heavier guns. Better avionics. More adaptable. It's definitely a step up from the featherweights you guys are taking out right now."

"Maybe," Ninja said, "I'm more of a light fighter man myself. I'd take something that will dance over a heavier fighter any day."

The thin pilot took a drink from his glass.

"Also, I couldn't help but feel the hot air coming from near the bar a few minutes ago," Ninja added.

"Yeah," Assassin said, rolling his eyes, "there's at least one in every class. Something he stumbled upon in his little rant has kept me thinking for a few days, though."

David turned towards Assassin.



“What’s that?” he asked.

“I know where you’re going with this and I’ve been having the same thoughts,” Ninja nodded in agreement with Assassin. “The pirates are going to be back.”

“How are you so sure, Ninja?” Hoobler questioned, taking a long pull from his drink.

“He can be sure because the few little details we have lean heavily towards that possibility. The first of these little puzzle pieces is actually the sector we are currently patrolling,” Viking offered.

The two OCS graduates traded puzzled glances at the veterans’ seemingly incongruous line of thinking.

Assassin leaned forward.

“You can usually make a blanket assumption of a raider’s intelligence by the space lanes they try and plunder,” he began. “You have your common-as-dirt idiot up in the Gemini Sector who enjoys a pretty free reign over the territory. It doesn’t take a lot of brains to be a pirate up there as most transports usually have to fend for themselves due to the thinly stretched Militia and Confed forces.”

“Yeah,” Viking chuckled, “I’ve heard some stories of pirates actually attacking the Perry Naval Base. Cunning pirates are indeed few and far between in that stretch of space.”

“Now,” Ninja took up the lecture, “you have our pirates who are raiding a system that is nestled firmly between the front lines of the Kilrathi War and the Inner Planets of the Confederation. You two newbies may think of this as a backwater system, but to a pirate, this is a pretty volatile place to set up shop.”

“The risk to raid convoys here may be extremely high, but the payoff could be huge. You would need to be pretty shrewd to operate in this no-man’s land,” Viking added. “These guys only attacked your convoy because they had the numbers advantage, the element of surprise and didn’t expect to see pilots of your caliber in escort.”

The older pilot leaned back in his chair.

“I definitely know they didn’t expect a carrier full of pilots with itchy trigger fingers to come wondering into their neighborhood,” he concluded with an amused grunt.

“But now,” Ninja continued, taking the reigns once more, “after seeing the amount of activity in this system, I know my interest would be piqued if I was a pirate



looking for a big score. So, I'd stay put and nose around to see what I'm up against before I tucked my tail between my legs and left the system."

David tried to follow the back-and-forth conversation that was taking place. "So how does this mean we haven't seen the last of them?" he asked.

Ninja and Assassin looked towards Viking.

He put down his glass and leaned forward with a smile.

"Oh, is it my turn again?" Viking jokingly asked.

"After you three and Major Baws returned with your report," he continued, "the Hellscreams were tasked to an extended seek-and-destroy mission. The birds the pirates flew were not jump capable, so they needed a base of some sort from which to operate. Colonel Mitchell and the Captain wanted the pirate staging area located and neutralized, so we sifted through all the dummy training rounds and loaded up the few live torpedoes we had onboard in the few Thunderbolts in the inventory and escorted them around the asteroid field looking for a small base or capital ship."

He took a long drink from his glass before continuing.

"We found nothing," he dramatically concluded.

"Wait, if you found nothing, why does that mean that the pirates are still in the system?" Hoobler questioned. "It seems to me that would be a good sign they weren't here."

Viking grinned at the young pilot.

"You don't understand, Hoobler, we found nothing," he answered. "That includes no jump traces. The George Custer also reported no unfriendly contacts or jump disturbances at the Eddings jump point. No jump traces means no retreat for the pirates."

"The past few days of exercises have consisted of basic training drills within the Wellington's CAP," Assassin began, bringing the conversation full circle. "The next few days will be patrol, combat and recon drills, exercises that will draw small groups of fighters farther away from the carrier."

Ninja nodded.

"It's only a matter of time before a flight stumbles upon the pirates trying to do



some recon of their own and the bad guys will have the numbers advantage once again," he explained.

"So, the moral of the story is to watch yourselves, boys," Viking warned the OCS graduates. "These raiders are most likely crafty ... as far as pirates go, that is. These waters will become quite a bit rougher in the days to come."

Hoobler laughed.

"Don't worry," he began, switching to a bad imitation of a holo-vid pirate, "we know to sound the cannons for a Hellscream assist if we run avast any saber-rattling buccaneers, don't we, Sandman?"

David chuckled and took up the game.

"Aye, matey," he said, not faring much better with the pirate imitation, "they'll sail to our rescue and send the lot to Davey Jones' locker!"

Assassin and Ninja groaned in unison.

Viking turned to the two veterans. "Are you sure the bartender didn't give them rum instead of beer?" the older officer asked with a laugh.

"Arrrr," Hoobler cried out, "them be fighting words, mister! Me pal and me can hold our ale with the best of them."

"I can drink to that," David agreed before taking a swig from his almost empty glass.

"So can we, swabbies," Assassin chimed in, finally giving in and joining the fun.

"Who wagers you two will be walking the plank before any of the actual pilots at this table run up the white flag?" Ninja challenged.

"Well," Viking interrupted before David or Hoobler could respond, "you four have early exercises you can't be tardy to in the morning. It wouldn't do for you boys to stumble into the briefing room tomorrow on the wrong end of a bender."

David and the three other younger pilots shrunk a little at the rebuke, the older fighter jock seemingly not wanting to continue the sport.

"But I, thanks to the stand-down we received so you guys can fly real machines," Viking continued with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, "can drink till sixteen men are dancing happily on my chest. So I think another round or two for the rest of you might ensure I'm not drinking alone."



David shared a smile with the other pilots sitting around the table.

“Well, what are you waiting for, rookies?” Viking asked David and Hoobler with a grin. “Down what’s left of those beers and go get us all another round. Drink up me ‘earties, yo ho!”



CHAPTER 4

>RIP, SOBS





**FLIGHT DECK, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
1136 HOURS (CST), 2669.167**

"We are gathered here today to say goodbye to two pilots whose lives were cut all too short," Lt. Colonel Mitchell began from behind the podium.

"For Captain Morgan "Bones" Burton, a survivor of the Battle of Terra and 2nd Lt. Thad "Champ" Cooper, a recent OCS graduate, this war has finally found an end."

As the Wing Commander continued to drone on with a generic eulogy about two pilots he had barely known, David took in the assembled pilots around him. Most of the old ship's pilots stood with him in formation at the far end of the flight deck in front of the two coffins. A few naval officers were also sprinkled throughout the gathering, most notably the Wellington's Captain. The skipper, who David thought was too old to hold the rank of Captain, stood next to Mitchell, his head held low, wringing his hands repeatedly.

"Must be wondering how to tell a Confederation Senator that their son was lost under your care without flushing his career down the toilet," David angrily thought to himself as the service continued.

"Our friends are not the only Confederation pilots who have died in the line of duty," Mitchell said. "Death is a fear each of us must face everyday aboard this ship."

David looked up and down the ranks of assembled officers. He noticed the wide range of emotional expressions each of his fellow OCS graduates wore. The sentiments seemed to run the spectrum from anger to sorrow at their first personal look at death. Clenched jaws and fists were common, every young pilot trying their best to guard their true feelings. As he continued studying the audience, David noticed the older pilots didn't share the emotional involvement David and his colleagues had invested in the ceremony.

Most of the veterans just stared straight ahead while others actually seemed bored to be in attendance. David felt the anger inside burn a little hotter. How could these people be so callous, so detached from the death of two human beings? He personally hated Champ, as did most of his OCS class, but the guy didn't deserve to die. David had not ever met Captain Burton, but he was an officer in the Confederation Space Forces, someone who had been willing to sacrifice his life to keep the Kilrathi at bay for one more day. These men's deaths should not be overlooked and their funeral ceremony reduced to a formality. David heatedly turned his attention back to Mitchell, who was still reading the eulogy like he was



reciting a daily training schedule.

“But we cannot forget why we are here, and what we are fighting for,” the Wing Commander continued to deliver the tired words. “Many pilots have given their lives for our cause, and we will continue the fight in their memory.”

He placed the data pad he had been reading from onto the lectern.

“Attention!” the Wellington Captain’s command resounded throughout the mostly empty flight deck. The assembled pilots and naval personnel obeyed the order as the honor guard stepped forward and presented their laser rifles. Mitchell pressed a button on the podium. The coffins rose up from the deck and began to move toward the atmospheric force field at the end of the hangar. As the coffins passed the three-member honor guard, they raised their rifles to their shoulders and fired through the force field and into the vacuum of space. David noticed a few of his fellow graduates jump at the echoing retort of the laser rifles. The assembly followed the coffins as they disappeared in the distance, a beautiful sprawling nebula the backdrop for the deeply depressing scene.

“Flight operations will commence in one hour,” the Wellington’s Captain announced. “Dismissed!”

The gathering of pilots and ship’s personnel began to disperse and prepare for the upcoming fighter ops. David turned to follow them, thinking maybe a few hours of combat drills would be a nice outlet for his anger. As he passed a few barrels near the stairs to Flight Control, a lone figure silhouetted against the nebula outside the force field caught his eye. He watched as the figure stopped just short of the atmospheric shielding and gazed out into space.

Curiosity getting the better of him, David turned to follow the figure. He walked across the flight deck toward the person, but it wasn’t until he saw the shoulder length black hair that he recognized the woman staring out into the void.

David placed a hand on Panzer’s shoulder.

“You okay, Angela?” David asked his friend.

She partially turned towards David for a moment, but quickly resumed her gaze into the nebula. In that instant, David had noticed the redness and swelling around Panzer’s eyes.

“I’m fine, David,” she began, her voice weak, “Just wishing I’d handled some things better, that’s all.”

David had only seen this side of the female pilot a few times in the years he had



known her, but he knew that it was best not to push the subject. If Angela wanted to talk about it, she would choose so without any goading. They both stared out in space for a long moment.

"You know I don't think I ever said one nice thing to Champ," she finally continued.

In spite of himself, David had to chuckle at the comment.

"You know, Angela, he didn't give any of us too much of a chance to say anything nice to him," David offered.

A half-laugh, half-sob escaped Angela's small frame.

"No," she meekly agreed, "he didn't, did he?"

The two pilots continued to look out into the nebula, both unsure of what to say.

"You remember the time he programmed your friend's vid-comm to broadcast her conversations with her fiance to every monitor in his dorm?" David finally asked with a laugh.

She giggled out loud at the memory.

"Oh, yeah," Panzer replied, "she was mortified. She was known as 'Honeybear' Almquist for the rest of the term! Actually, she chose it as her callsign when she graduated with us." David snickered. "And she married him too, I think her last name is Hasselbeck now."

"We got him back, though," he said. "That Alcorian dye you gave me to put in his shampoo didn't come out of his hair for two months. He apparently had to go to a Confederation function with his dad with bright green hair."

Angela laughed again, her attention still on the nebula.

"God, he was such a bastard," she said, a somber tone returning to her voice. A beat passed before she finished her thought.

"He didn't deserve to die, though," she concluded softly.

David moved closer to his friend and put his arms around her shoulders. She grasped his forearm as he held her.

"No, no he didn't," David replied. "No one does. Not one person in the thirty-five years of this damn war has deserved to die."



The female pilot sighed, her shoulders drooping. "One of my instructors cornered me in the mess yesterday evening and actually asked if it 'felt good to get my wish,'" she finally responded after a few moments.

David felt the anger from before returning. It had slowly slipped away while he was comforting his friend, but the nonchalance of the veterans at the death of both one of their own and his annoying colleague was again beginning to grate on him.

"I actually didn't truly want Champ to die," she began, "but everyone who met the jackass had at least imagined one way to kill the guy."

"I didn't really want it to ... I mean, nobody ever really means ... I'm not a bad person," she finally concluded, beginning to shake from both frustration and emotion.

David squeezed her tighter before backing off and grabbing her shoulders to turn her around. She resisted at first, but complied after a few moments of half-hearted opposition. David placed his hand on her chin, pulled her head up, and looked into her eyes.

"No you are not, Angela," he reassured her, "nobody wanted this to happen, no matter how much of a pain in the ass Champ was. What happened isn't anyone's fault. This is something we all knew was a possibility when we signed up, something we all expected could happen one day."

A small smile spread across David's face.

"I guess it's a little different when it happens to someone you've known and, for the most part, hated for a few years."

Angela weakly returned his smile.

"Now come on," David said, leading his friend towards the pilot locker rooms. "We've got combat drill briefings to attend in a few minutes. We have to find a certain hard-ass female pilot I know is around here somewhere. She has a date to show her instructor that a little tact and compassion would go a long way."

David's last comment drew a harsh laugh from Angela, who began the struggle to regain her composure.

"Yeah, maybe raking his balls over the coals a few times would make me feel a little better," she replied, allowing one of her devilish smiles to break through.

David chuckled as they made their way around a tractor towing an Arrow out of a fighter elevator.



“Have I ever asked you to remind me not to get on your bad side?” Sandman kidded his friend as they left the flight deck.

“Many, many times, David. Many, many times,” she responded with a much warmer smile.



FLIGHT DECK, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
1352 HOURS (CST), 2669.191
MORE THEN THREE WEEKS LATER

David swore loudly as his Arrow taxied to a stop. He hastily popped the canopy and tore off his helmet, wanting more than anything to just get out of the nimble craft's cockpit. David quickly realized, much to his annoyance, that all he could do was sit and wait for a technician to bring a gantry over to his fighter. He grew more frustrated as he unlocked his gauntlets and once again recounted the events of the past few days and of their most recent mock engagement with the veterans of the Diamondback squadron.

For four days, the OCS graduates had been participating in extensive combat drills with their instructors. For four days, multi-fighter space superiority duels had been waged all across the Oberan system. And for four days, David and his squadmates had been getting their heads handed to them by Major Baws, Ninja and Assassin. Not one junior squadron flight had scored a victory since Panzer and her team had beaten their instructors their first time out. Apparently, Angela's flight had lit a proverbial fire under the veterans onboard the Wellington. This morning's three-on-three engagement hadn't ended any different than previous training flights. While David had survived to go one-on-one with Major Baws, the veteran had reached deep into his seemingly never-ending repertoire to quickly position himself for the kill.

As if on cue, Baws' fighter, canopy already open, taxied in beside David's. David's squadron CO flashed the young pilot a small grin.

"Not bad out there this morning, Markham," the veteran pilot offered, "It's getting tougher and tougher to surprise you."

David returned his superior's smile, trying hard to hide the frustration he was feeling.

"One day you're going to reach the bottom of that bag of tricks, sir, and I hope to be right behind you when that happens," he replied.

Baws laughed, busying himself with removing his gauntlets and gloves.

A technician finally rolled the ladder up to David's cockpit. While climbing down, David noticed most of the Hellcat fighters of the Hellscream squadron prepping for takeoff farther up the flight deck. An uneasy feeling began to creep through David's slowly receding disappointment, the same feeling that had appeared



when they had first received word that the TCS Kennedy would be passing through the system and relieving them of their only combat fighter squadron, the bomber squadron, and two of the four escorts. The thought of being in, what had been a few days ago, uncertain territory without a 'safety net' was a little disconcerting. Add in the fact that the only pilots would be the two pilot trainee squadrons, and it could make one more than a little nervous.

David caught sight of Viking among the throng taking his fighter through a pre-flight checklist. He began walking down the flight deck to wish the older officer well. As he neared the activity, David noticed the Longbow bombers they had onboard being prepped for takeoff as well. He reached Viking's side and clasped him on the shoulder.

"Nice big carrier, returning to the front lines, taking most of our combat force with you ... sounds like you're getting the better end of this deal," David said with a smile.

Viking turned towards the young pilot.

"Hey, Sandman," Viking began with a grin, "you know as well as I do you go where the brass tells you to."

"I know, but do you have to take all of our strike power with you?" David ribbed the Hellscream pilot further, gesturing towards the bombers being prepped.

"And just what the hell do you think you rookies need with 'strike power'?" Viking asked, his smile widening before his expression turned more serious. "The Kennedy has taken some serious losses in the past few days and the powers that be have decided that a quick field replacement will suffice. The Wellington's resources fit the bill."

"Besides," the older officer added, "you young pups are about ready to leave the nest on your own without the 'mother hens' looking over your shoulders."

"Thanks, Viking. Losing that much heavy firepower just makes me feel a little ...," David paused, searching for the right word.

"Exposed? Naked?" the older officer knowingly finished for him.

"Yeah," David answered, nodding in agreement.

"Don't worry," Viking reassured the young pilot, "We haven't come across a single pirate raider in almost a week. The George Custer reported traces of some significant jump activity at the Able jump point."



Sandman nodded.

“So I guess Intel suspects any remaining pirate forces have decided to cut their losses?” he asked.

“That’s about the size of it,” Viking responded as he inspected his fighter’s landing gear.

“A few hours ago, the Custer was ordered to pursue and size up the situation to see if any further action was necessary,” the older pilot continued. “She hasn’t reported back yet, but I’m sure those raiders didn’t stop running in Able.”

“Besides,” Viking concluded, sensing the younger pilot was still troubled, “there are a few line ships en-route to assist in your ‘end of training’ wargames. They’re scheduled to jump in-system within a few days and can handle any hornets’ nests you rooks can stir up.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” David admitted. “I guess flying with a ship full of veterans will be a nice change to babysitting us, huh? Looking forward to it?”

“Actually,” the older officer began, “it’s a little different than you might think, Sandman. Your reputation and combat record usually just get you ‘in the door’ when you’re transferring to a new post. You basically have to prove yourself all over again to the resident pilot community.”

“In addition,” the older pilot added with a grin as he finished the checklist, “since I was trapped in Circe for the duration of the Battle of Terra, I have another hurdle to overcome in the minds of a lot of pilots to achieve ultimate acceptance.”

David shook his head knowingly, his thoughts returning to his first conversation with Major Baws.

“Well, Sandman,” the older pilot said with a smirk as he picked up a duffel and threw it into the Hellcat’s storage compartment, “I guess we now say our teary goodbyes.”

David laughed, came to attention, and saluted.

“Watch your back, sir,” David said, “and give ‘em Hell.”

Viking laughed and extended his hand.

“When you make it to the front and you find yourself in the Kennedy’s neighborhood, look me up. There will at least be one old dog you won’t have to show all



your new tricks to.”

David took the man’s hand and shook it.

“Will do, Viking,” David pledged as the first Hellcat roared through the atmospheric shield on the short journey to its new home.



CHAPTER 5

>PREDATOR AND PREY





**SLEEPING QUARTERS, TCS WELLINGTON
DEEP SPACE, OBERAN SYSTEM
0342 HOURS (CST), 2669.192**

David slumped into an available bunk in the Starjumper junior squadron's sleeping quarters. The lounge and the Diamondback's quarters had been seriously hulled during the battle with the Kilrathi. With nothing but a quick patch job separating the bunks from the vacuum of space, Major Baws had ordered David and 2nd Lt. Jeremy "Floyd" Pink, the only other surviving Diamondback OCS pilot, to grab a bed in their counterpart junior squadron's sleeping quarters.

Tragically, there was more than enough space to accommodate the impromptu move. Like the young members of the Diamondbacks, most of the Starjumper pilot's final resting place would be the vacuum of space in the Oberan system. Only Hoobler had safely landed after the Kilrathi sneak attack. Apparently, another Starjumper, Huntress, had ejected during the battle and was rescued shortly before the Wellington began making her best speed out of the area. She had been immediately rushed to the medical bay with a few broken bones and burns over a large portion of her body, effectively reducing the flight wing to David, Major Baws, Assassin, Ninja, Hoobler and Floyd.

Despite the horrible loss of their comrades, David had had little time to reflect on the recent battle. The fighter wing was not the only casualties onboard the crippled carrier. Over a fifth of the crew had sustained injuries of some kind. While some were able to carry on with their duties, most were either under medical care, occupying any free space the corpsmen could find to administer treatment, or residents of the temporary morgue. With the Majority of the casualties inflicted on damage control teams, David and the remaining pilots of the Wellington's fighter wing joined the various undermanned repair crews scattered throughout the stricken old carrier, struggling to keep her afloat. David had always prided himself on his diligent academic studies while at school and in the OCS program, but all his degree had apparently qualified him for in damage control duties was clearing debris and tracking down various replacement parts.

After ten hours of extensive labor throughout the ship, the flight deck was cleared for launch operations, a quarter of the laser turret batteries were back up to full strength, the shield generators were intermittently functional, and the old lady was limping through the system at one-fourth of her top speed.

David buried his head in his hands. Even with the heroic effort of the ship's crew, he couldn't help but feel it might all be for nothing. The engines had been hit especially hard during the attack and the old girl's fuel cells were beyond repair.



The chief engineer had promised the Captain he could squeeze six more hours out of the remaining fuel, but, after that, the ship would have to run with her ramscoops open, piping interstellar gases directly into the reactor. This would leave two hours of relatively slow travel to reach the Eddings jump point with an unknown force of Kilrathi in pursuit.

David snorted and shook his head.

If the Cats didn't catch up to them while they were traveling scoops closed and 'dragless' at a few thousand kilometers per hour, they sure as hell would after the opened magnetic scoops slowed the carrier to a proverbial crawl. With the Wellington's two escorts destroyed and the George Custer assumed lost, no matter what Cat forces were in the system, David was sure they could handle the six remaining fighters and a battered, obsolete light carrier.

A few minutes ago, Baws had ordered the remaining pilots away from their damage control duties and to their sleeping quarters for what hopefully would be a few hours rest before the Wellington was forced to open her scoops, the time that the Kilrathi were most likely to catch up and attempt to finish what they had started.

David snickered to himself. It wouldn't take much in their current condition. Still, David knew this crew and his fellow pilots wouldn't let the Cats claim their prize easily.

David considered lying down and closing his eyes, but he knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep. There seemed to be something about impending death that caused a man to really enjoy being awake, even if all he could do while conscious was think about his coming demise.

He looked up towards the lockers to see if he could tell which of his fallen comrades was drifting through the void instead of lying in this bunk. Huntress, 2nd Lt. Lindsey Davenport, the pilot who had been rescued and immediately carted off to medical, had previously owned this bed. Lindsey had been one of the handful of women who had broken up this "boys club" of OCS graduates. She and Angela had become fast friends since meeting onboard the Wellington.

David sighed as he stood up and walked across the room towards his friend's locker. He ran his fingers across the curling tape that displayed her callsign. Angela had always had a way of making everything seem a little less serious. Always the one to schedule a gravball tournament on the eve of finals or convince everyone a night out was a good idea after a particularly brutal simulator session, Angela was someone a person immediately wanted to like, despite her outward abrasive personality. Having Angela around made every situation seem manageable. David wished she was here now. The current state of affairs could use Panzer's touch.



He opened the locker door. Attached to the inside were several holo-images, representing a small sample of the young woman's incomplete life. One was of her when she was a young girl, encircled by her father, mother and older sister. Angela had not shared very much about her parents, just that they had passed away when she was in her early teens.

Also decorating the door was an image of an older Angela and her sister in front of the Space Forces Flight School on Sirius. Both were all smiles, Angela's sister decked out in her formal cadet uniform, posing beside a commemorative fighter statue in front of the main campus building. David had learned that Angela's sister had graduated from the Academy before attending flight school and had racked up thirteen Kilrathi kills to her credit before she was shot down a few months before Angela was accepted to their OCS program.

Farther down the door was an image of Angela, David, 'Honeybear' Hasselbeck, Champ, Hoobler, Floyd and a few of their OCS classmates in front of the historic clock tower on campus, taken shortly after their graduation ceremony. David found himself smiling in spite of the situation at the picture. Simpler, more innocent times from just a few months ago already seemed so long ago. He laughed to himself. He found it morbidly amusing that someone in their early twenties would already be looking back on the last few months as 'simpler, more innocent times'.

David turned his attention to the contents of the locker. Besides the normal pilot gear and personal effects, David found a small case he had caught Angela looking into many times. She had always hastily closed the case and put on a double layer of her "tough as nails" persona, until the day David had forced the issue and goaded her into revealing what was in the case.

David picked up the box from his friend's locker and opened it. Angela's sister's Academy ring rested in the bottom, her ace ribbons and bronze star still very carefully pinned to the top velvet pad, just as they had been the first time he had seen them. He carefully removed the ring and turned it over in his fingers as he slumped against the lockers. How many more of these would be granted to graduates? The way the war was progressing, the chances that another class would make it out of Hitheros was slimming.

The quiet in the room was pierced as the large blast doors leading to the hallway suddenly began to cycle, momentarily startling David. The doors opened to reveal Hoobler and Floyd, each carrying a few ration packs. Hoobler threw one of them across the room towards David. The young officer caught the package, but tossed it down onto Angela's bunk.

"No thanks, man," David said to Hoobler, with a half-hearted grin, "Don't have the appetite for freeze dried meat loaf right now."



“Even a condemned man gets a last meal,” Hoobler replied with an equally unenthusiastic smile. “Even if it does taste like rubber.”

David forced himself to laugh before turning his attention back to the emblem in his hand.

“What’s so interesting?” Floyd asked as he tore open a ration pack and plopped down on the bunk opposite Angela’s.

David held the ring for the two pilots to see and tossed it to Hoobler. Hoobler caught it and opened his hand so that he and Floyd could see what had held David’s interest. David watched as recognition spread across each of their faces as they realized the significance of the emblem.

“Angela’s sister,” David began, answering the question before it had been asked, “Graduated near the top of her class. Few months after flight school, she and her wingman stumbled across a flight of Grikath and Sartha on a strike approach to her carrier. She and her wingman got the warning out to the carrier group but bought it before the interceptors could be scrambled.”

David held out the open box for the two other pilots to see.

“Posthumously awarded the bronze star, for all that’s worth,” David said, an edge creeping into his voice.

Hoobler sat down on the end of Angela’s bunk and handed the ring back to David.

“She probably saved a lot of people that day,” Hoobler offered, “just as Angela did today.”

“God, this waiting is going to kill me,” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe Baws actually thought we would get any sleep knowing we probably won’t live to see another day.”

David shrugged as he moved back to Angela’s locker.

“If anything, it gives us time to rest so we aren’t fighting depression, sleep deprivation and fatigue all at the same time,” David offered with a wry smile.

“I guess,” Floyd responded, his hands balling into fists. “I just really hate running when we know there is no finish line at the end of this race. I want to turn and face those Cat bastards on our own terms.”

Hoobler gave a grim laugh.



"Floyd, I don't think any battle we could get in would be anywhere close to our terms," he responded.

"Besides," David said as he placed Angela's sister's ring in its place, "we have a better reason for running."

"What's that?" Floyd asked, skeptically.

David turned towards the young pilot.

"The longer we run, the more of this ship's systems come online," David responded. "The more ship systems that are repaired, the better chance this ship has to make it to the jump point in one piece,"

"You're still holding onto the hope that we can get out of this?" Floyd questioned.

David shook his head.

"I personally don't think we have a snowball's chance in the deepest, hottest region of Hell," David said, matter-of-factly, holding up the velvet-lined display case and gesturing to the empty bunks. "But a lot of our friends died today attempting to give this ship and her crew a chance at survival, and I'll be damned if I'm going to throw that all away as long as there's the smallest possibility that their sacrifice wasn't in vain."

Floyd opened his mouth to counter David's remarks, but, instead, plopped down on the bunk behind him.

"I guess you've got a point," he grudgingly offered.

Hoobler stood up and began walking across the room.

"Well, I don't know about you, Floyd," he said with a smile, "but I need a drink after hearing that pep talk."

David laughed.

"Hoobler, you always need a drink, no matter what the situation is," he replied.

The young Starjumper chuckled as he stopped at his locker. Rummaging for a few moments he pulled out a small bottle of amber colored liquid, a glass and a flask.

"Hoobler, were you a Boy Scout?" Floyd asked with a hint of a smile. "Because you,



sir, are always prepared.”

The trio chuckled as Hoobler handed the flask to David, the glass to Floyd and kept the bottle for himself. He began to pour Floyd a drink.

“What should we drink to?” Hoobler asked.

“Even with that inspirational speech there, David, I don’t think there’s much left for us to be thankful for,” Floyd answered, his smile growing a bit wider.

David returned the smile and raised his flask.

“To the DiMarco sisters,” he offered as he looked and gestured upwards, “making sure Confederation pilots everywhere have a home to come back to. Rest in peace, Angela.”

Hoobler grinned and raised his bottle.

“To the Diamondbacks and Starjumpers,” Hoobler joined in, “two squadrons cut down before their time.”

Floyd stood up and raised his glass.

“To indigestion,” he said, drawing quizzical glances from both David and Hoobler.

Floyd shrugged.

“Well I’m sure as Hell not going down smooth when the Cats come calling for dinner again,” he said with a grin.

David and Hoobler returned the smile.

“To indigestion,” they said in unison before downing the liquid.

All three then, also in unison, spat out their drinks, and began coughing and gasping for air.

“Speaking of going down smooth and indigestion,” Floyd finally said through the torrent of coughing, “what the hell was that, Hoobler?”

“I don’t understand,” Hoobler gasped, stumbling towards his locker, “It was twenty year-old scotch my brother gave me as a graduation gift.”

David leaned on the lockers as a coughing fit about made him black out.



“Hoobler, I don’t like your brother very much,” he managed to get out before more coughing robbed him of his ability to speak.

Hoobler made it to his locker and began throwing its contents all over the room. He pulled a slip of paper out from the bottom and collapsed into his bunk after reading it, a mixture of laughter and coughing taking hold of him.

“What’s his problem?” Floyd asked.

“Champ ... strikes from beyond ... the grave!” Hoobler finally got out before convulsing into another round of laughing and coughing.

Once more regaining control, he read the scrap of paper for David and Floyd’s benefit.

“Thanks, Hoobler. You saved me from having to drink the swill the bartender on this tub calls scotch. You might find a better use for what’s now in your bottle and flask the next time you need to move a fighter on the Flight Deck. Love, Champ.”

“Tractor fuel?” Floyd asked, incredulously.

“That would be my guess,” Hoobler answered, a wide smile stretched across his face.

David had to grin.

“Somewhere, Champ is enjoying having the last laugh way too much, as usual,” he said, his composure finally returning.

“Nevermind that,” Floyd said, his mock anger betrayed by the smirk on his face, “the bastard left us without a drop of alcohol onboard.”

Hoobler picked up the bottle of fuel and raised it.

“To Champ!” he said loudly as he threw the bottle into the waste disposal unit.

David and Floyd shared a smile.

“To Champ!” David and Floyd echoed, each throwing their “drinks” into the disposal.

The three pilots laughed as they left the Starjumper’s sleeping quarters in search of something a little less potent to wash the taste out of their mouths.



LONG LIVE THE CONFEDERATION!