

Callsign

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"Sir, we're not going to be flying those...are we?" Commander Sylvester "Sly" Keehn sighed and looked down at the polished metal floors of the GTD Stronghold's flight deck. The reflections of four brand new GTF Ulysses "Bat" fighters stared back at him for a brief moment before he looked back up James "Grinner" Mauser. He gave the man a brief nod, fully expecting what would come next.

"Sir, no disrespect to Vasudan engineering or the alliance or anything, but I'd like to come back alive," Grinner continued.

"What happened to our Hercs, sir?" This was Eric "Berserker" Pride, a man who had earned his call sign because he never lost his cool.

"What's wrong with the Ulysses?" Tommy "The Finger" Riley was fresh out of the Academy, his training had been rushed because of a desperate need for Terran pilots. He'd been weaned on the Bats. Probably had never even flown the aging Apollo fighters.

"What's right with it," Grinner turned on the rookie, fixing him with a stare. "No armor, shields aren't good enough and it don't hardly carry any weapons."

"It's also fast an' maneuverable. It can keep up with the Shivans." Tommy straightened his back and looked Grinner right in the eye. The kid didn't back down, that was good.

"Our Hercs are in for repairs." All eyes turned back to Sly who settled himself on the wing of one of the Bats, hands resting on it's glassy surface. "Our new captain may have pulled us out of a bad situation with the "Hole" (The Hammer of Light) but we got chewed up in the process. Requisitions is still waiting on a replacement for Loner's ship and parts are very hard to come by. Captain Morgan," his men chuckled at that but Sly stopped himself short of laughter. Their new captain was worthy of respect. "She has her hands full just getting parts for the Stronghold.

"The fact, boys," he clapped his hands together dramatically, "That half the fleet is making do with Apollo and Valkyrie fighters. Would any of you rather have those?"

Grinner shook his head solemnly. The Rookie just smiled. "Now listen up." Sly dropped down off the Bat's wing to face his men squarely. "We pulled some easy duty with this one so the Bats won't be a problem. We got an escort run. Only two jumps involved, then we resupply with at the Bastion and head home."

"What's the escort?" There was no sign of emotion on Berserker's face. He was all business like usual.

"Elysium class, four of 'em."

"Eggshells!" Grinner followed that with a string of obscenities that would make a marine drill instructors proud. The boxy Elysium transports had earned the nickname "eggshell" because they were that fragile. And with only one severely outdated ML-16 laser to defend it the things relied heavily on fighter cover just to stay alive.

"Sir, are we the only fighter wing running escort for those things?" Was Berserker showing a trace of concern?

"Not exactly. Beta and Delta are pulling diversionary missions. There are two known Shivan cruisers active in these systems. B and D are going to try to pull them off our backs with a hit and run. That's all I can tell you. Security reasons, you know the drill."

"That's B.S. an you know it, sir." Grinner banged his fist against one of the Bat's hull. "Those cruisers are gonna be all over us."

"Then we'll do the best we can," the Rookie said. "We have to."

"Great, the kid has confidence." Grinner slapped one hand against his forehead as he turned and walked a few steps away.

"So do I." Sly pointed at the nearest Bat, a big two painted on it's side, "Grinner, you're number two, you got my wing. Rookie...."

"They call me The Finger, sir."

"I call you Rookie until you earn yourself a callsign."

"Why they call you that anyway, kid." Grinner had paused in pulling on his helmet to find out what everyone had wondered.

"I won a lot of poker games in the barracks," the kid shrugged.

"A card shark, huh. Better watch out, Sly, he's after your 'sign." Grinner pulled his helmet on and climbed the ladder into his ship's cockpit.

"Not likely. You're number three, Rookie. Berserker's got your wing."

"Sir." The Rookie hesitated. Standing up to a squad mate was one thing, defying a unit commander was another. "Sir, being the newest...shouldn't the most experienced man have the lead?"

"I want to see what you can do, kid. Call it a test run. Now mount up. We hit the Big Black in ten."

Fifteen minutes later Sly's wing cleared the Stronghold's fighter bay. Sly took the lead, punching his Bat up to full speed as they rushed toward the line of rectangular ships a few thousand meters off the Stronghold's port bow. Their dark gray metal was almost invisible against the blackness of space. If not for the targeting computer in the lower left hand corner of his head's up display he would have missed them entirely.

At seven hundred meters he called up the lead eggshell, "Morning, Captain. Alpha 1 reporting for escort duty."

"Copy that, Alpha 1. If you don't mind, we'll get this show on the road," Kappa 1 answered almost cheerfully. Someone must have been on the ball, too, because the engine lights kicked in a few seconds later. Normally it took those things a few minutes to get their engines going.

Sly keyed his comm frequency over "Rookie, you and 'serker fall back and take the rear. I've got the front."

"Copy, lead." The Rookie cut his speed, falling neatly into formation with the rear eggshell. So far

the kid was up to speed but the real tests were still to come. With a little luck and Berserker's guidance the kid just make it. On the other hand, most pilots don't survive their first few missions so Sly wasn't holding his breath.

It took all of fifteen minutes for the convoy to reach their first jump node. The nodes were nothing really special, actually invisible to the naked eye they existed only as energy patterns that a ship's sensor could read. The sensor then displayed a green outline of the node on his heads-up-display letting a pilot know it's exact location.

One by one the convoy ships slid into the node, their jump thrusters automatically beginning to come on line as they entered the energy field. "Everybody ready?" A chorus of affirmatives answered him. "Alright, stay loose. Don't let the tunnel get to you. Go."

Sly flipped the jump switch cover and flicked it up. Then he let go of the stick and allowed his ship to take control. There was a brief feeling of motion, unusual in space without gravity to hold him back, then it seemed as if a tunnel of blue light opened before his ship. He flew right into that tunnel, trying hard to ignore the shifting patterns of it's walls.

A cold settled over him, sinking into his bones so deep that he though nothing could ever warm him. Space all around him was a shifting blue-black tunnel. Voices called out to him without words. The air rippled around him and he felt utterly alone. Was this what death was like? An incomprehensible cold and loneliness that he could not shake?

All at once the tunnel disappeared and the motion suddenly ended. For a moment he thought the whole thing had been a dream. Then he saw a dozen other ships flicker back into real space around him, exiting through blue tunnel points of their own.

"I hate subspace," Grinner shouted his ritual announcement.

"Kid, you alright?" Berserker's question made Sly twist in his seat toward the Rookie's ship. The kid was still floating, dead in space. "Kid, answer me." 'Serker's ship inverted so he could look down out of his canopy into the Rookie's ship. "Your vitals are good, kid, just calm down."

"I'm alright." The kid's voice was shaky, but alive.

"First time solo?"

"Yeah. I didn't know it was like that."

"Nobody did until they invented a fighter that could go solo. Just relax, don't think about it too much and you'll be okay."

"I'm okay."

"That's good kid."

"Let's get back into formation." The kid cut his speed, falling into place with Berserker only a second behind.

"Not bad for a Rookie." 'Serker's voice came over a private channel into Sly's cockpit.

"We'll see what he can do when it comes to combat." Sly kept his voice cool but he was more than a

little impressed by the kid's conduct. "Stay close to him, you know the drill."

"Copy that, sir."

A flick of the wrist cut off the comm switch. Once again Sly was alone in the cockpit of a multi-billion dollar fighter, only a metal cage and some sort of transparent steel separating him from the void. Only his sensors told him that anything was out there.

Something was out there. Months ago the Shivans had come out of nowhere with their death black ships and weapons like no one had ever seen before. Terran and Vasudan guns had been virtually useless against the shields every Shivan fighter carried and those black ships sported weapons that rendered the old Apollo and Valkyrie fighters virtually obsolete. Suddenly the Terran and Vasudan forces were forging an unprecedented alliance as they fought for the very survival of their races.

More people had died since the Shivan appearance than in the last five years of the Vasudan war. But technology had caught up. Fighters like the Ulysses and Hercules took away the Shivan advantage, while the Prometheus cannons were actually effective against their shielding. The Shivans still held the advantages but the gap was closing fast.

"Sir, multiple contacts closing on our position," Grinner's voice ripped through the silence. "Permission to engage?"

"Whatta you got, Grinner?" Sly sat forward in his seat, tapping keys on his sensor panel.

"Five of 'em, looks like Skeeters." "Skeeters" was hardly the technical name but Sly knew instantly what he was facing. Five Shivan Scorpion fighters. Those were the workhorses of the Shivan navy, fighters that had seen combat in every corner of the known universe so far. "Looks like a patrol, we should take 'em out."

"Looks like they've scanned us," Berserker's voice cut in. "They're definitely interested."

Time to earn that pay. "Rookie, you and 'serker keep an eye on the eggs. Grinner, you got my wing."

"Yes, sir, Mr Commander Sly, sir." Grinner hooted excitedly as he punched his afterburners. Sly punched his ship up to full throttle, then kicked in the afterburners. His targeting computer dropped a red box over the lead Skeeter then set a triangular red box tracking toward it, once the two met he'd have a missile lock. Until then he had only a trio of Prometheus cannons.

"I'm on number one," he said.

"Three," Grinner shouted. At maximum possible speed Grinner's Bat shot straight at the third Skeeter in line, guns blazing. The Shivan pilot broke formation as the first green blast splashed across his forward shields. Like a mosquito the ship twisted into an erratic pattern, trying to shake a missile lock. Grinner was too good for that. His missiles hit the ship just as his fifth salvo of green lasers ripped through it's shield and the whole ship dissolved into a rolling fireball.

Sly held his fire, waiting for the lead Skeeter to break into a spiraling dive before he started shooting at number two. That Skeeter broke in the opposite direction, going straight up (at least from Sly's perspective) and into Grinner's line of fire. "I thank ya, sir." He could almost hear Grinner's trademark laughter accompanying the acknowledgment.

But by that time he was concentrating on number four. That Skeeter had almost flown past in the

confusion. Sly jammed a glowing red button on his screen, dropping his ship to zero as fast as it could be safely accomplished and throwing his fighter into a flat spin that would have left him unconscious or worse had he tried it in gravity. In space it worked quite well, whipping the Shivan back into his green firing reticle.

Instantly he lit up the Skeeter's back end. The Skeeter pilot dove, twisting and juking in a vain attempt to throw Sly off his tail. Four out of five shots hit the black ship, though, draining it's shield just enough for a salvo of four hornet missiles to take it out, then Sly launched them. One, two, three, four. The missiles hit in rapid succession, disintegrating the Skeeter. Sly glanced around, the remaining two were just out of range now, closing fast on the eggshells. "Rookie, be advised. Skeeters one and five are heading your way. They're looking for an omelet."

Who could fathom the Shivan intellect? A Terran patrol that had lost even one ship would have retreated but the Shivans just kept attacking. They didn't care about the Cargo of those eggshells any more than they had cared about the natural resources of dozens of planets. All they did was kill.

He rolled his Bat over and pushed it up to full throttle, knowing he wouldn't reach the 'shells in time to do any good. On his monitor he saw the kid charge at number one, guns blazing. Just like Sly and Grinner had just done, the only problem was that only two of the kid's five shots was even a nominal hit. Fortunately Berserker made up for him, letting loose a salvo of missiles at midrange. The distance gave the Skeeter time to break to the right and down, twisting hard away from the missiles and leading the Bats away from the convoy.

Amazingly the kid didn't follow, he banked hard to the left, twisting upward and after number five. "'Serker, keep me covered," the kid shouted. He fell into line behind the surprised Shivan and began firing. The Shivan was already firing at one of the 'shells and (surprise!) the 'shells were returning fire with the green bolts of Prometheus cannons. Caught between two guns, the Skeeter tried to break, going up and left...right into 'serker's volley of missiles.

"Number one's running." Sly watched the fighter slide into glowing blue circle as he neared the convoy. "Kappa, run those engines up to full throttle. We've got to cover a lot of ground fast. That Skeeter'll probably run straight back for help."

"Copy, Alpha 1, we'll give it everything we've got."

Sly nodded, more to himself than the captain, then he keyed up his sensor display, running it over the 'shell that had been attacked. Remarkably, the ship had no hull damage whatsoever, although it's engine and weapon profiles were not exactly stock Elysium. That could only be a good thing, whatever made those ships less fragile made his job easier and helped keep his men alive.

"You did good, Rookie." Berserker rarely praised anyone but when he did, he meant it. "Number one was looking to draw you away and you didn't fall for it."

"Number one got away." The kid's voice was subdued.

"Not your fault. There were five of them and four of us. Odds were in their favor."

"Only two came after the...'shells." The unspoken words were easy to figure out. If Berserker hadn't been watching the kid's back all five could have been taken.

"Not your fault either kid," Sly put in. "Don't think about it too much. We've all got experience that

you don't have yet. We're all alive, that's what matters."

Grinner sniffed loudly. "Gosh, sir, I think I'm gonna cry."

"Shut up, Grinner. The kid did fine. When you were in his place we got a transport chewed up because you went after number one."

"It survived."

"Maybe, but you didn't help it any."

That shut Grinner up for a while. Sly knew that nothing he said or did would keep the man down for long so he didn't bother trying to sugar coat anything he said. Grinner was a good man. He liked to show off. He liked to go in with guns blazing but he wasn't a wild man. He could still think with the adrenalin racing and his in-your-face style seemed to confuse the Shivans as much as it had the Vasudans.

It wasn't long before number one's friends showed up, though. In the middle of the system with no jump node in sight they appeared out nowhere. "Multiple contacts, all around us," Grinner shouted. "Got three Skeeters and three Forks." A trio of Scorpions and a trio of Manticores, Shivan fighters shaped like two pronged fork heads. "And you thought we were outnumbered before...picking up two Shivan cruisers."

"I got 'em," Kappa 1 called out. "Malice and Fiend."

"Such lovely names they have," Grinner commented. Malice dropped into real space behind the convoy, Fiend came in ahead. Six fighters boxed them in nicely. "I think...we may be screwed. Sir, we cleared to engage?"

"What do you think?" Sometimes Grinner was more than a little irritating.

"Rookie, take Forks. Grinner, you and I have the Skeeters."

Sly idly noted that the four 'shells were spreading out, rolling over so that their guns firing arcs overlapped. That set up a nice kill zone that he and his men didn't have to worry about protecting. Punching his Bat to full throttle, he lowered his cross hairs on Skeeter number one, turning with it as it tried shoot past before he got a missile lock.

That close he didn't really need a lock. Four hornet missiles accompanied by four shots from his cannons caught the Skeeter only fifty meters away from him. The Skeeter went into a flat spin, still coming right at him when it exploded, peppering his shield with debris.

"Good kill," Kappa two acknowledged.

Sly ignored it, burning hard after number three while Grinner worked on two. "I got one!" The Rookie's cry broke the silence for only a heartbeat, surprising Sly a little.

"Watch out, Malice is unloading it's docking bay. I mark three more Skeeters."

"Got number two," Grinner called. Sly smiled and banked his ship away from the dying number three. "That's the first wave." Then everything went down the toilet. Laser blasts hammered Sly's shields from behind and he instinctively punched his afterburners, twisting to get a look at what was

shooting at him. Seeing it didn't help him much.

"Malice is in firing range. Fiend is twelve seconds outside of it," Kappa 2 said.

Sly twisted and juked as one of the two squid like Shivan cruisers came into sight, all guns firing. "We're taking hits!" That was no surprise. The 'shells probably had a good thirty seconds. After that the guns of Malice and Fiend would obliterate them.

And there was nothing Sly could do about it.

He zeroed his thrust, throwing himself into a flat spin like before until his cross hairs centered on one of the Skeeters. Then he punched his thrusters, firing at the black ship for all he was worth. Ten shots and two salvos of missiles later the Skeeter was dead. It's pilot had been good but not nearly good enough.

"Serker, help me out. I got one on my tail," the Kid's voice called out.

"Rookie, bank hard right, full speed." Berserker's voice was calm and steady.

"Target destroyed," Kappa 2 called out. Somewhere in the back of his mind Sly realized the Kid had just lead one of those Forks into the kill zone. He'd had the presence of mind to respond perfectly to 'Serker's order and he had his life to show for it. That was 'Serker's strong point. He knew exactly how and when to react to fit himself perfectly into a battle.

"Alpha 1, we've had it." Kappa 1's voice was strangely calm. "Save yourselves."

"Negative, Kappa," Sly began. He rolled right, bringing the four transports into view just Kappa 1 began to break apart. A series of explosions tore the ship's hull, blasting it away in sections. Then, in sequence, two three and four began to break up the same way. Sly glanced at his sensors, which were telling him that the four ships were still alive. "What's going on."

"Alpha 1, you've got about four seconds to get your men clear of those cruisers." That was Kappa 1's voice, coming from somewhere in side the cloud of fire and debris his ship had become.

"Everybody, break off now. Get out of the way," Sly called. Something was going on here that was entirely new. He aimed his ship away from the Malice and punched the afterburners. Suddenly the space around him came alive with lights. His ship rocked hard, suddenly hit by a half dozen laser blasts. Those cruisers were turning their guns on the fighters now that their main targets were gone.

Then, suddenly, his ship was thrown hard. The stick jerked and twisted in his hand, nearly pulling itself from his grip. Sly himself was slammed against his control consoles as the ship hurtled end over end.

"Malice is down," Kappa 1's voice was all business. "Fiend is crippled but it's gonna need two more."

Sly pulled back on the stick, bringing his Bat back under control and into a circle. A few seconds later he saw the Malice, racked by explosions as it floated off into space. Two massive blasts encircled the Fiend an instant later, eliminating it's armor and reducing what remained of it's hull integrity to nothing. "Scratch the fiend," Kappa 2 reported.

The debris around the four ships had cleared somewhat, enough that Sly could make out the four boxlike ships floating there. Big as houses and sporting dorsal turrets, the four Ursa bombers looked like overgrown gun turrets. At once he understood. Someone had built the shells of transports around the massive bombers, disguising them enough that the Shivans would attack fearlessly. Then the trap had been sprung and the Ursas had sent the mega bombs they were built to carry at Malice and Fiend as Alpha wing drew the two cruiser's fire.

A good plan, provided his men were still alive. "Alpha wing, report in."

"Fing...Rookie here, what happened?"

"We got used kid," Grinner sounded almost resentful.

"That's what we're here for," Berserker answered.

"Any plan you can survive is a good one," Grinner chuckled. Nothing kept the man down.

"Kid did good," 'Serker said. "He got one of the Forks and a Skeeter."

"My ship's pretty messed up, though," the Kid said.

"All of 'em are. Captain Morgan," a chorus of chuckles from Alpha and Kappa at the Captain's name. "She owes us our Hercs for this one."

"Let's get home and tell her," Sly said.

"Wait," Grinner's voice was abrupt, stopping everyone in their tracks. "The Kid needs a callsign."

"How 'bout sucker?" Kappa 1 laughed.

"How 'bout Fiend," Grinner asked. "The Shivan's ain't using it anymore?"

"Sounds good," the Kid said.

"Then keep it. You want a card shark name, you gotta beat Sly at poker first."

"Let's go home, if there are no more objections." Without waiting, Sly keyed in his Subspace drive and entered the tunnel again.

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