

Flame Race

Posted on March 20th, 2011
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Commander Michael “Hawk” Skillor stroked the panels of his Hercules assault/offensive fighter as if the deadly craft was a sleeping pet. The fighter’s hull was chilled by the liquid helium of coolant in the superconducting umbilicals running from below the GTD Insurmountable’s hangar decks into the powerless fighter. He then removed his shivering hand from the icy Hercules’ hull and soaked up the sweat streaming down his forehead and the back of his neck into his jump suit which was warmed to an oven by his excited blood flow. Images of the last battle still churned and blazed through his mind. He almost felt like fainting...

“General alert,” echoed the monotone, attention-catching voice of the operations official currently serving watch over the intercom. Hawk rid his mouth of the abrasive GTA Issue dental cleanser and patiently listened for the inevitable news and instructions to follow. “Fifteen minutes to destination,” continued the official. “No hostile subspace incursions reported; all turret squadrons to battle stations. Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta fighter squadrons to the main hangar immediately to prepare for launch. Repeat, turret squadrons...” Hawk rinsed his mouth of stinging cleanser residue, quickly slipped into his jump suit, grabbed his flight helmet, and darted out of his quarters.

The red of the combat lighting lining the high ceiling of the main launch tube only intensified Hawk’s anxiety as he waited in his Hercules-class heavy fighter for flight control to give the go. The maelstrom of blue subspace still swirled before him as he and the three other fighters of Alpha squadron sat perched on the magnetic catapults of the launch bay. The relative silence of an anxiously waiting deck filled with flight crew and fighter pilots was suddenly interrupted by the helmsman: “All crew members to acceleration couches...Beginning deceleration into normal space in two minutes.” Hawk watched as the multitude of “free-floating” people scrambled for an open spot on a nearby anti-inertia couch designed to absorb the intense force generated by the ship as it slipped from the warped universe (relatively speaking) of subspace into the black ocean of normal space.

Two minutes later, the blue swirl just outside the atmosphere-preserving shield of the launch port disintegrated away. Hawk felt himself lurch forward for a good many seconds as the Insurmountable began its deceleration. He smiled as his radio relayed the groans of other relatively unaccustomed pilots. Many years of service as a pilot before anti-inertial devices were invented molded a tolerance of sharp force shifting into him. He was a little bit less forward in admitting that the state-of-the-art inertial dampening system integrated into his Hercules fighter helped, as well.

After the Insurmountable had finally completed its deceleration, flight control clicked in on Hawk’s radio. “Roger, bridge, we have green. Alpha squadron, we are launching you in three...two...one...” Hawk suddenly lurched in the opposite direction as the magnetic catapult fired his fighter up to full speed in seconds; he soon found himself surrounded by the black of space.

He looked starboard to see the huge, lumbering bulk of the Insurmountable, and suddenly realized he had forgotten to take his balance pills when his brain frantically and dizzily tried to reorient itself based on the constantly changing forces acting upon it. The quick remedy was popped from a pill case in his flight suit, and soon he led his squadron to a position just outside the GTCES - Insurmountable’s four cruiser escort squadron.

Just behind him flew three relative unknowns to Hawk. Lieutenant Commander Paul “Shard” Nicolai manned Alpha two, a transfer from another system. Lieutenant Anthony “Firebird”

Fielder was Alpha three, also brand new to the Insurmountable. Alpha four was the only familiar one to Hawk - Lieutenant Sarah "Banshee" Mendoza, who had served on board the Insurmountable since Hawk had been made leader of Alpha squadron several months ago. Still, meters of bulkheads on their immense homeship often divided the two as they had never served in the same squadron, much less on the same assignment, until now.

Hawk sighed as he began the routine squadron checks. "Sequential status report."

"This is Alpha two," replied Shard, "status green."

"Green here two," said Firebird.

"Alpha three, good to go, sir," Banshee answered.

Hawk finished the last of his systems checks before replying. "That makes for the four of us..." He switched to fleet frequency. "Alpha one to flight control, we're reading all green." "I get goosebumps every time I see her from out here," Firebird remarked suddenly. Hawk looked back towards the Insurmountable, her distant boxy shape still belittling even the big escort cruisers. "I guess you haven't seen a Demon-class Shivan destroyer, huh lieutenant?" Hawk questioned as he slowly readjusted the throttle to better follow the fleet. He heard Banshee laugh lightly as they both recalled a recent encounter the Insurmountable made very briefly with one of the massive Shivan destroyers before hurrying out-system to cry to Command.

"On the contrary, sir...I didn't quantify my goosebumps," he replied. Hawk smiled.

"Cut the chatter, Alpha," barked flight control. Hawk suddenly realized he was replying to Fielder's inappropriate remarks while under the fleet frequency. "Fighters incoming, sector thirty-three. Alpha, break and intercept. We're steering starboard to broadside them and to launch remaining fighter squadrons. GTCES, move to..."

"You heard control, Alpha," Hawk said as he eyed his radar. "Reading four light blips five clicks starboard. Cut to sector twenty and follow me to intercept, acknowledged?" Three excited pilots confirmed his orders and followed awkwardly behind Hawk as he cut speed, spun starboard, and fired his afterburners towards enemy Shivans. The Shivans were apparently just becoming aware of their presence as they twisted off of their original course to engage the incoming Alpha squadron.

"Make sure you're on fleet frequency, guys," Hawk reminded the others as he locked his radio in the appropriate frequency. Although still a good two minutes away from any action, he was hearing a constant stream of orders bouncing throughout the fighter squadrons and fleet capital ships. The elongated dark forms of the eight Lilith class cruisers under construction in the shipyard in the distance slowly rolled into view as Hawk adjusted course. He became a little awestruck, never before having wandered so close to a Shivan capital ship without having drawn their attention, and more importantly, their turret fire. "What the hell..." he heard control remark, but it wasn't until his ship's subspace interruption detection alarm began blaring that he realized that control wasn't talking about the Shivan cruisers.

"We're reading hostiles, fresh from subspace, incoming just starboard of the Insurmountable!" yelled a frantic flight control officer. "Scramble the alert! Scramble the..." His voice disintegrated into static. Hawk watched in horror as explosions burst from the Insurmountable's side and as Shivan bombers glided into normal space from subspace a good three clicks behind him and his squadron.

"It's a damn trap!" someone shouted. "All fighters fall back in defense of the Insurmountable!"

Hawk's wingmen were already peeling out of formation and back towards their homeship before he could order them to do so. He snapped himself out of shock, cut throttle, swerved around,

and pumped the life out of his ship's afterburners.

"Damn it, our fighter bay has been severely damaged," reported a worried tactical officer aboard the Insurmountable. "All squadrons watch those bombers!"

Missile trails sliced through space in the distance as Hawk finally approached firing range of a Shivan fighter. God damn, all of them heavy assault fighters and bombers, he observed to himself as he cycled through enemy targets. His targeting computer read nothing but Shivan Basilisk-class heavy fighters and Nephilim-class super bombers. Shard banked just meters in front of him, trying to get a good target, but the fast Shivan fighters were weaving constantly out of his reticle.

Taking note of local enemy positions, he flipped into dual-fire mode to utilize both of his Hercules' missile bays at once. "Shard, reading five reds making a run on the homeship, a hundred meters port."

A few seconds later, "Roger, sir...I have visual confirmation. From this vector, I can't get a good angle on them."

"I think you can cut in front of them to scramble their locking mechanisms and draw their fire away from the Insurmountable," Hawk said. "I'll try and get good plugs on them."

"Breaking now, sir," Shard confirmed, and in a wash of incinerated afterburner fuel, he sped off towards the advancing Shivan bombers.

Hawk rolled through lancing enemy fire as he maneuvered for a good angle on the bombers. He pulsed his Hercules' Prometheus energy weaponry into the pack, but only managed to split the bombers' attack formation.

"Acquiring the port-breakers, Alpha one," interjected the leader of Beta squadron, who's small Ulysses-class superiority fighter slid past Hawk's starboard side, swerved towards the splitting bomber squadron, and showered the confused Shivans in Avenger-cannon fire. One Nephilim burst into flames under the fire, spun away from its wingmen, and exploded.

"Good kill, Beta one!" shouted Lt. Nicolai as he ignited a second bomber in a swarm of Hornet missiles. Hawk dug into a third bomber as the Beta leader rolled off to engage a Basilisk that swooped past. The Shivan Nephilims awkwardly wove out of their attack pattern to reassemble themselves after the abrupt incursion. Thanks to Beta one's spontaneous tactics and superb shooting, they became easy kills for Hawk, Alpha two, and the Insurmountable's turret gunners.

The escort monitor on Hawk's HUD read a seriously weakened starboard side hull integrity on the Insurmountable. His squadron monitor began to wink red as fighters of various squadrons sustained heavy damage. The subspace interruption klaxon squealed again as more Shivan fighters poured out of subspace.

All of a sudden, the destruction warning sounded on Hawk's console, indicating the frightening increase in sustained damage aboard a capital ship. "Sir, the Bulwark!" Hawk heard someone shout as he turned just in time to see the mighty hulk of the GTC Bulwark blossom in a huge and blinding explosion. Leftover red-colored Shivan gunfire rocketed through the flaming debris of where the Bulwark once floated, and it only took a second for Hawk to realize their origin.

"Those cruisers are armed!" someone observed out loud. Hawk felt the battle temporarily freeze as he watched the big pieces of the dead Bulwark slowly spin away from where they used to form the big Leviathan-class cruiser. The battle was abruptly unpaused by the Insurmountable's tactical officer.

"Alpha squadron, monitor four hundred meter space from the Insurmountable," he ordered. "We're sending Delta and Gamma out to attack the Shivans' jump-in point. And all fighters, stay the

hell out of range of those Liliths' guns!"

Hawk pulsed his afterburners as he radioed his acknowledgment. "Alpha squadron, regroup in sector..." He took a moment to examine his radar and navigation computer. "...nine. We'll take immediate alert posts around the starboard side of homeship."

"Acknowledged, sir."

"Copy that."

"Diverting now, sir."

Suddenly, the impending impact klaxon on board the Insurmountable began blaring over the radio. "Reading four high-yield Shivan bombs incoming, sector thirteen and closing at one hundred fifteen meters a second..." The four Nephilims that had just jumped in had apparently overridden their missile locking system and fired off their megabombs without waiting for target lock. 'Either that, or the Shivans have invented a lethally effective new locking system,' Hawk thought nervously to himself as he adjusted onto an intercept course with the distant but approaching bombs.

"I got it!" yelled a young pilot of Gamma squadron. Hawk watched the pilot's Apollo-class fighter shoot past, the afterburners full ablaze, and slide around the speeding Shivan missiles, dropping a handful of chaff pods in the process. A missile buckled under the fire of the Insurmountable's frantic gunners and erupted in a large explosion, and yet another ignited upon impact with a chaff pod. Their combined explosions knocked the other three off course a bit, but not enough to render them unthreatening.

"Ventral turrets, focus on the missiles," Hawk heard Admiral Larisle, the commanding officer aboard the Insurmountable. Turrets on the belly of the mighty destroyer spun around and fired constant volleys of gunfire onto the incoming missiles.

"Reading five bogies, two-o'clock...Four hundred meters!" shouted Banshee. Hawk kept a keen eye on the Shivan missiles as he fired throttle to maximum.

"Roger that, Banshee...cover me," he replied. "Shard, Firebird, go out to sector nine and get as many missile locks as you can from a good distance. Break on my mark...Mark!" Hawk's controls rattled beneath him as his wingmen simultaneously roared up to full speed and afterburners. As he monitored the incoming transmissions of other squadrons, he noticed the battle gradually shifting off of the battered Insurmountable and onto the fighters of fellow squadrons. Screams of dying pilots were now more obvious than ever.

All of a sudden, Shivan gunfire tore into Hawk's Hercules' starboard shield, and a missile cut deep into one of his ship's four engines. Afterburner fuel ignited, sending his fighter into an uncontrolled spin. "Damn it...I've lost flight control..." Hawk desperately began realigning power to stabilize his spinning.

The offending Shivan Basilisk rocketed behind him and began to turn around for another run when it crumpled under the impact of Hornet missiles from Banshee. Hawk sighed deeply. "Thanks Banshee..."

Hawk could tell she was grinning through her helmet as she replied, "Just watchin' your ass as ordered, sir..."

Before she could finish, a massive shockwave interrupted her transmission and ripped through Hawk's ship, knocking him into the side of his cockpit. The next thing he knew, his ship was rolling to the starboard and the engines were dead. Moments later, Banshee's Hercules spun past, half of the ship engulfed in a fireball, followed by a sea of huge chunks of fiery, sparking debris. Hawk's head was still spinning as his ship finally slowed from its spin. He was breathing

hard, and it took him several seconds to regain his bearings. When he finally reoriented himself, he attempted to re-ignite his engines only to be greeted by the cold scolding of his ship's auto-repair droid that was busy fixing a damaged fuel system.

While he was dead in the water, he turned back to the Insurmountable, drifting fifty meters above him. A Shivan megabomb had reached its target and had torn a significant hole near the stern. Flames licked at the rushing air, and large bolts of electrical current rushed across the vacuum to complete broken circuits. The dying bodies of Insurmountable crewmen waved their arms in desperation, only to eventually rupture in the unequal pressures and fall limp in the cold void.

The squadron monitor read massive fighter casualties following the bomb impact, including the collective destruction of the entire Gamma squadron. All around him, Hawk could see nothing but torn metal and flame. Shivan and GTA ships alike drifted, dying or dead, in the sea of debris.

"Status," Hawk called into his radio. "Status!" Faint voices were drowned out in static until the repair droid finally managed to restore his transceiver. Still, his cockpit radio transmitter was irreparable by his repair droid. Damn it, Hawk complained to himself, wishing he could massage his aching head through the thick plastic of his flight helmet. The engines soon clicked and whirred back to life. He pushed a button to call for the repair ship and slowly glided back into the sheltering debris.

"Confirmed, Alpha one..." replied a nearby Centaur-class support ship. "On our way." He turned to see Banshee's injured craft, surrounded by support ships spraying fire control gas over a blazing ruptured hydrogen line. He breathed a sigh of relief when her fighter, as repaired as it could get, soon began speeding off again.

"Alpha one...Alpha one, do you read?" It was Shard. The wingman slowly pulled up next to Hawk's ship, and the lieutenant peered across the ten meters of vacuum into Hawk's cockpit. "Hawk, you there?" Hawk turned to him and tapped his helmet to indicate a damaged transmitter. "Gotcha', sir...Can you call repair?" Hawk nodded and gestured a thumbs up to indicate things were under control.

"Roger that, Alpha one," and the lieutenant commander veered off to rejoin the battle. He watched the support ETA counter anxiously as he waited for the support ship to arrive. Fighters in the distance exchanged energy and missiles. All sorts of chaos screamed through his radio, but finally the battle seemed to slow down now that Hawk was able to more easily comprehend each moment as it came to him. Then the support ship clamped onto the service port on the top of his ship, and in just under a minute later, his ship was speeding back into combat.

Hawk changed to the fleet frequency only to receive static from the Insurmountable. His hand showered sweat as he frantically tried to adjust frequency to a clearer one. Finally, he regained his homeship's transmission. He was hardly calmed by Admiral Larisle's desperate voice as he barked orders to his bridge crew. "...fifteen degrees port, full thrusters..." More static. "...adjust flow starboard on my mark..." Screams. "Bow batteries focus to these coordinates!" Hawk threw a glance in the direction of those coordinates and eyed a wave of Shivan Nephilims releasing their devices of destruction, just meters away from the mighty destroyer. Two bombers buckled under the shower of the Insurmountable's unrelenting immediate-relief turrets, but the damage had been dealt.

Hawk screamed to a nearby pilot for cover as he hastily took aim and dug his trigger finger into the maneuvering stick - but to no avail. His Hercules' Prometheus volleys disintegrated hundreds of meters short of the speeding bombs. Hawk heard the Insurmountable's impending impact klaxon blare to life over the radio. "...five incoming, zero-three-seven, sector eleven...thirty meters a second..." Hawk pulsed his exhausted afterburners as he watched the drama unfold before him - dozens of starboard and ventral batteries and close proximity turrets spun around and rained their shots on the incoming enemy missiles. One missile was deflected by an interceptor explosion and plowed into one of the Insurmountable's main transmitter dishes. "...-ening, evasion pattern

tango...four degree- -ort, fu--last to the af-..." The GTC Interstellar glided slowly ahead and took position between regrouping Shivan assault fighters and the speeding threat of the glinting rockets. Interstellar's port turrets pumped volleys at the missiles as Ulysses fighters of the Gamma GTFS rolled past and dumped Avenger pulses in desperate contribution to the effort. One missile exploded short of the Insurmountable's hull, its flame engulfing a nearby Apollo of the immediate alert Delta wing. Hawk slowly exhaled, realizing the loss could have been much worse. He then throttled back, and spun to starboard to engage a threatening Shivan Basilisk...

Hawk's eyes and attention suddenly opened to the calls of a nearby hangar crewman. The young mechanic politely suggested Hawk keep away from his Hercules as it powered up. Liquid helium, even if shielded by several meters of metal, could still cause dangerous drops in body temperature if in close enough proximity to a careless fighter pilot. Hawk nodded in acknowledgment and got up to move to another area of the hangar...

...The last missile crumpled under the pressure of turrets firing just inches away. Its explosion tore a flaming hole in the Insurmountable's starboard side, but vacuum barriers were quickly lowered and the damage was negligible. The dozen Shivan bombers falling behind the impenetrable wall of Lilith class cruisers to rearm, however, were hardly as negligible, and neither was the massive damage suffered by the Insurmountable. For one, she was limping her way out of the battle on only one operational engine, and damage to the fighter launch bay caused by the initial ambush was further intensified by increasingly threatening Nephilim runs. Still, the Insurmountable and her cruiser escort, minus one Bulwark, were still churning, and they redirected fire as fighter squadrons reassembled themselves for more organized attacks on advancing Shivan fighters.

"Alpha wing, reform in sector thirty..." Hawk said into his radio as he slowly readjusted his course and fired afterburners. A Shivan Manticore attack fighter, swallowed in a fireball, jetted past several dozen meters ahead and erupted; its hunter, a Valykrie, rolled into view and afterburned away. "...We'll get a good angle on the Basilisks in fifty-three, two clicks starboard." A chorus of acknowledgments assured Hawk that his entire squadron was still alive as he watched the three Hercules fighters from various directions converge on their assigned coordinates. "Insurmountable, time to alert?"

Static was Hawk's reply for several seconds. Hawk began to realize the stupidity of his question when he finally got a reply. "Alpha one, it will be at least another four minutes until we can get this damn launch deck cleared," the exhausted flight control officer of the Insurmountable replied. "With the catapult unaligned, and the auxiliary emergency tubes obstructed by debris, we're looking at seven, maybe ten minutes tops before we can get another alert squad out there." Hawk exhaled noisily as he heard the deck officer bark a series of orders to other officers. "I'm sorry, sir...But those Shivans ain't firin' spitballs, and they sure as hell know where to place their shots."

Hawk heard Firebird groan and complain at sound of such discouraging news. "Keep at it, lieutenant...Alpha one, out."

Just then, the subspace interruption warning flooded Hawk's cabin with beeps as a huge GTA destroyer slipped out of subspace and into the battlefield with cruiser escort. "Shipyard Strike, this is the GTD Citadel serving relief and cover fire for your retreat." Groans were replaced with cheers as Hawk watched the Citadel and its cruisers take a pivotal defensive stance a click starboard from her sister Insurmountable. He watched, awestruck, as around twenty Shivan assault fighters arched back with the sudden appearance of a majestic Terran destroyer barring their course. Fiery blossoms of orange erupted in the distance as the Citadel's batteries rained energy and missile fire on the enemy, and superiority fighters began to pour out of the Citadel's bays. "Please organize your withdrawal now..."

Hawk told his wingmen to stand by as he was fed new orders by the Insurmountable. He radioed his confirmation, and relayed the orders of providing cover for the retreating strike fleet to his wingmen. The four Hercules swerved into a river of afterburning GTA fighters as they rocketed towards incoming Shivan squadrons. The Insurmountable and its GTCES, as they slowly spun away to prepare for the jump out, released turret fire into the distant but advancing Shivans. Hawk watched with building excitement as fellow fighters, both Terran and Vasudan, roared past with the Insurmountable a battered, massive metal fortress just a dozen meters port. He smashed the afterburners and armed his Hornet missiles...

Hawk, exhausted, finally arrived at the Insurmountable's crew lounge only to find it the exact opposite of the peaceful setting he had been anticipating. Although large girders and sheets of torn metal and glass lay charred on the floor, the lounge was full of crewmen and pilots eager to lose the horrific past few hours in a good drink.

"What was your trick this time, Leon?" Hawk asked the bartender as he took a seat. "Nude waiters and waitresses?"

Leon Hoffman was a round, cheerful, middle-aged man, and the only man aboard the Insurmountable other than Admiral Larisle and second officer Rear Admiral Holwin that every person on board knew. He grinned at his pilot friend as he polished the last of his treasured shot glasses and put it back with his many others on a shelf behind him. "No tricks this time, Mike... They all came on their own," Leon replied as he threw glances across his crowded lounge. "Although that suicidal Dragon might have something to do with it." Leon pointed to a spot on the ceiling.

Hawk turned to eye the twisted hulk of a Shivan Dragon superiority fighter that had apparently smashed through the lounge's two-foot-thick reinforced observation window and managed to nudge its way uncomfortably into the ceiling a dozen meters above the drinking crewmen.

"That can't be safe..." Hawk noted quietly.

"Oh sure it's safe," Leon replied. "Techs checked it out earlier, said it might even do better at holding up the ceiling than the girders that are already up there."

Hawk turned back to Leon and smiled. "You can't keep it there," he observed.

"Oh I don't know," Leon said as he eyed the Shivan fighter. "I think it adds to the personality of the joint." The bartender then turned back to Hawk and threw him a grin that just dripped sarcasm. "The techs'll be haulin' the bastard out of here in a few hours, so let's enjoy the company while it lasts, all right?"

Hawk gave his friend a reassuring nod.

"What'll it be?" Leon finally asked.

"Just a beer," Hawk said as he toyed with dead circuitry that branched out of a burnt menu panel. Leon covered the circuitry with a piece of ceiling debris.

"Don't touch that, it's dangerous," he said as he turned around to pour Hawk his beer. "Haven't been gettin' many beer orders today, Mike."

Hawk sighed. "I got enough of a hangover when one of those Shivan megabombs hit."

Leon chuckled as he handed Hawk his beer mug. "I was runnin' out of liquor, anyways." Hawk grinned before taking a big gulp out of his mug.

"Afternoon, sir," someone chimed from behind Hawk. It was Lt. Mendoza.

“Lt. Mendoza,” Hawk greeted as Banshee took a seat next to Hawk. “Glad to see you’re all right!” Now that he finally had the opportunity to see her on less frantic terms, Hawk came to realize just how attractive young the black-haired woman was, even while still in her jump suit. She was an especially welcome pretty face after seeing nothing but sweaty crewmen tiring over the damage across the Insurmountable.

“I aim to please, sir. Coffee, please,” Mendoza told Leon. Leon bowed slightly and went off to fetch her drink. “Please, sir,” Mendoza said politely, turning to Hawk. “I prefer Sarah.” Hawk let go of his beer mug to extend his hand.

“Well, I prefer that, too,” he replied, smiling. “You can call me Mike.” The two shook hands, and Hawk returned to his drink. “Is it really afternoon? I feel like I just woke up.”

“Fraid so, Mike,” Sarah replied, not the least concerned with breaking ship protocol as she avoided any “sir”s. “But don’t worry - we all feel that way.”

“Not me!” interjected Leon as he handed Sarah her coffee. “I haven’t slept a wink all day.”

Hawk raised his mug in appreciation. “And thank God for that!” The other two laughed.

“So does anybody here know where we’re off to next?” Sarah said, changing the subject. “Way out-system, I hope.”

Hawk shrugged, silently hoping for the same. “Leon, you usually manage to pry this kind of info out of the higher-ups,” he then said to the bartender.

Leon gestured assuredly to an inquiring crewman at the other end of the bar, then turned back to Hawk and Banshee. “Larisle hasn’t been down here since before the battle,” he replied. He then frowned. “It’s up to GTA Command here in Vega, and lemme’ just tell ya’ - they ain’t exactly the most fun-loving of guys. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some tending to do,” and the bartender was off.

Sarah spun in her seat to look out the large, shattered observation window and into the dizzying expanse of subspace. She took a sip of her coffee. “I hope that doesn’t mean what he makes it sound like.”

“Oh it does,” Hawk said rather discouragingly as he turned around to face the window across the room, as well. “Don’t worry...It’ll be my turn to watch your ass,” he then said. Sarah sneered at Hawk for a brief moment, and then the two pilots turned back to the abyss outside the ship and stared silently at the maelstrom of subspace. They hoped their future wouldn’t be as unpredictable as undulating currents of subspace, but privately frowned to themselves in worry, knowing that it probably would be.