

## Flame Race

Posted on March 20th, 2011

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# Flame Race: Good Day's Work

*New Venice; Vega IX*

Dozens of strange devices were thrust in her face by anxious humans that surrounded the walkway down from the shuttle docking ring as Ketan stepped out of the shuttle. She froze, wondering what they expected her to do. 'They are all so short,' she commented to herself, 'but very loud.' All of the humans were screaming at her, but from what she had seen of humans in the past, it didn't look like they were angry.

One thing that had her fascinated were their facial expressions and how they seemed to be interacting with one another. Although they all seemed squarely focused on her, it looked like they were in competition with each other, pushing each other out of the way, vying for attention...

"I implore you deity, not inquisitors," said Ketan's human guide as he stepped out of the shuttle behind Ketan. "I despise these people." The man began pushing the crazed people away, speaking to them.

'As wonderful a device as the translator is, the humans hardly make any more sense when talking through it than when talking without it,' commented Ketan to herself.

"Inquisitors?" Ketan asked her guide out loud as fellow Vasudans and their corresponding human guides shuffled slowly past her and met similar aggressions from the strange people with the weird devices.

Matt smiled as he pushed away the last reporter. "Yes, Ketan, reporters," he replied to Ketan, turning to the large Vasudan female. "They're here to get the latest scoop, er, news about the last battle against the Shivans."

Ketan turned to the reporters as they pushed themselves towards frantic guides and their confused Vasudan followers. "Their reasons seem justified enough, but must they be so aggressive?"

The human shifted his shoulders, a gesture Ketan has learned to associate with uncertainty. "Hardly anybody wants to answer their questions. Civilians are justified to have such knowledge, but there are rules against inquisitors asking questions to warriors that have returned to rest."

"Those rules do not apply now?" Ketan asked.

"They do not apply here, in this space port," Matt corrected. "Reporters are free to ask questions in space ports and space stations while the battle is still fresh in the soldiers' minds. But once the soldiers leave the spaceport, reporters are not allowed to bother them while they are in shoreleave unless the soldiers in question request the reporters themselves." He smiled, satisfied with his explanation as the pair walked slowly down the crowded hallway towards the exit. "Still, even in space port, no soldier is obligated to answer reporters' questions, so don't feel pressured into having to answer their persistent demands."

"I can hardly understand what they are asking, anyways. They all talk so fast" Ketan replied. Matt laughed as the two stepped out of the terminal and into the street where a tram was waiting with doors open.

"And they wonder why nobody answers their questions," Matt added, and his mouth curled. 'A smile,' Ketan remembered as they stepped into a crowded tram car and the doors slid shut behind them. 'But I still don't understand what he means by that.' She shifted her head in the Vasudan's

physical method of expressing uncertainty. 'It will be good to settle down in the Vasudan section of this strange, confusing city,' she concluded silently, and the tram sped off.

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'God, every day this leave becomes more and more like heaven,' Hawk found himself declaring loudly in his mind as he swirled the few ounces of flavorful alcoholic fruit drink in his mouth before letting the cool liquid run down his sun-warmed throat. Everywhere he looked on the beach, something gorgeous stood, walked, ran, swam, blinked, flew...And Banshee was looking pretty damn good, clothed only in a two-piece and her inherent Mexican tan, lying (asleep?) on her towel just a few feet to his right.

Stretched across the horizon before him, a beautiful and powerful natural soporific caressed his senses. Exotic Vegan birds played with the warm, soothing ocean breezes. Various tourist planes cut across the blue-orangish sky. Pleasure boaters glided across the relatively gentle low-tide waves. People frolicked across the beach, played ancient earth ball games, hover skated, or whisked up and down the dunes in tourist buggies while laughing hysterically with carefree joy. Even the Vasudans seemed to be having a good time -- Hawk could hear the massive aliens' hoarse cough-like sound that he now recognized as laughter. It was like a scene from one of those old, cliched holovids sitting on dusty shelves in the Insurmountable's recreation room library. A serviceman making his rounds along the boardwalk swiftly refilled Hawk's drink, and Hawk took in a relaxing current of the chilled fruit blend before turning back to watch the next scene. Vega's piercing bluish light, although perpetually veiled in a haze of particles, remnants of the nebular cloud once completely engulfing the young star and it's system, rained brilliance and warmth that demanded all on Vega IX to relax.

He was feeling a little bit guilty. Admirals Larisle and Holwin had surprised him earlier when they ran into each other in the crowded bar of their hotel. The threesome had become good friends before the Shivans had appeared, during the early stages of the Great War. At the bar, they traded war stories, joked quietly about Vasudans that were chattering unintelligibly at nearby tables (unusually engineered to best suit the Vasudans' strange squat/sitting style ? positions that looked almost painful to human observers), got thoroughly drunk, and managed to promise a friendly, outspoken Vasudan and to each other that they would endure a Vasudan "opera" (or at least that's what the Vasudan's translator said). How could they say no to a seven-foot tall (and almost as wide) alien, anyways?

But as fate on Vega IX so cruelly played out, after leaving the bar and his two friends to get some sleep, Hawk bumped into Lt. Mendoza all suited up (as suited up as one can get for a trip to the beach) and ready to hit New Venice Coast. The next thing Hawk knew, he was on an inter-city tram, sitting next to an excited Banshee that was telling Hawk something about playing some ball game with some "Southern Prominent Quintile Vasudans" (some sort of Vasudan faction of province) as the tram sped to the beach, a good twenty minutes away.

Hawk looked at his watch, lying unstrapped on a little, glass end table Banshee had thoughtfully brought with her. It was nearing Vasudan-opera-time. 'Well, I'm off, Banshee,' he'd say, only to realize a minute later that such words didn't get any further than his own imagination. Eventually his watch ticked on, and then past his promised rendezvous time with Larisle, Holwin, and the frighteningly tall Vasudan. 'God, I can see them now,' Hawk said, chuckling quietly to himself. 'They'd have my ass court-martialed for this if they could...They'd bring out the axe themselves if they had the authority...' Hawk's thoughts trailed off when a serviceman plopped another drink on the end table. 'God bless this planet...'

"Yes, we had a great time...Thank you," Greg Larisle spoke slowly and clearly into the Vasudan's translator. The Vasudan whose name Larisle could hardly pronounce, much less remember, tried very hard to duplicate a human smile, bowed, and then disappeared into an exiting

crowd of excited, babbling Vasudans, and some more culturally tolerant humans. Larisle sighed deeply and massaged his forehead, as if he had just jumped out-system of a huge fleet battle, and looked back and forth down the large, busy New Venician street.

‘That was the by far the stupidest damn thing I’ve ever done,’ the frustrated Larisle thought to himself as he stared helplessly at the surrounding mess of towering skyscrapers, colorful tourist shops, and dozens and dozens of cars, freighters, and buses. His eyes squinted in the warm, bright afternoon sunlight. ‘God, did it stink in there,’ Larisle said silently to himself of the innards of the opera house as he took a look at the weird building. It was surrounded by similarly designed Vasudan structures that spanned about four hundred meters in either direction down the street. More “down-to-earth” human offices and commercial outposts stood erected on adjacent blocks in the distance. It was strange for anybody walking down streets of a hybrid Vasudan-Terran city, checkerboards of all-Vasudan and all-Terran zones. A majority of the Vasudans in the opera house, including the one that had invited them, were of (what the translator called) an “Eastern Quintile Order,” one of apparently many nationalities of the Vasudan empire; to add to the eccentricity of the city design, other Vasudan nationalities and their equally unique architecture spanned yet other blocks.

‘I don’t care what they say, those people stink!’ Larisle then persisted in his mind. “Where the hell is that son of a bitch,” he finally muttered out loud.

“What did you say?” Larisle turned to see Holwin working his way out of the strange, and large Vasudan opera house to join him.

“I said where the hell is Mike, John,” Larisle answered loudly. He then frowned slightly as he watched Holwin pry something out of his ears - earplugs. Holwin threw the small pieces of molded rubber into the maelstrom of feet and food wrappings that is the sidewalk.

“Pieces of shit didn’t work in that blasted opera, anyways,” he complained. “Hell, when I get my hands on that clerk...” he snapped about the human sidewalk store clerk that had sold him the plugs. “What were you sayin’, Greg?”

Larisle shook his head and continued looking up and down the street. “Do you know how to get back to the hotel from here?” he asked John without diverting from his scans of the street.

“The tram will know the way, Greg.” So the two took a seat in a crowded, street-side tram stop. Occasionally, some fellow Insurmountable shoreleavers walked past, dressed in casual clothing, and cheerfully greeted their commanding officers. Larisle and Holwin tried to act just as happy to return their salutes.

A few minutes later, a four-car-long inter-city tram glided in from around a building and descended to a hover next to the stop. Its doors slid open, and the two officers followed around a dozen other human and Vasudan tourists as they filed on board.

“Admiral!” a young voice intoned enthusiastically. The two admirals turned to find young Lieutenant John “Firebird” Fielder standing next to them, his arm around an attractive young woman (around Fielder’s age, it looked like) with a holoivid star smile.

It took Larisle a second to remember his name: ‘I know he’s a pilot for Alpha squadron...’ “Lt. Fielder, isn’t it? You’re one of Hawk’s wingmen.”

The young boy looked a little flushed in reply, as if he was a little kid and a comic vid superhero had just called him by name, but quickly reverted to his excited state. “Yes, sir!” he answered. “Janet here is showing me around the town. First time we’ve run into each other for nearly three earth years now.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Janet,” Larisle greeted politely. “Your friend here is a pretty damn good pilot.” The girl simply continued smiling and nodded shyly in acknowledgment. Larisle

grinned. 'Must not have met many admirals,' he decided as he threw a glance at Holwin, only to discover his friend wasn't paying any attention and was eyeing buildings that blurred by through a large observation window. He then turned back to the couple. "Well, Adm. Holwin and I were just about to return to the hotel for some shut-eye, right John...?" This time John was too busy talking with a woman stranger sitting nearby (obviously an old friend), and it suddenly looked like Larisle would walk into the hotel alone. "At least I'll get some damn sleep after today."

Firebird laughed. "Well, sir, good luck! This is our stop here..." The tram drifted to a gentle stop, and the inside filled with the bustling sounds of the street as the hydraulic doors slipped open.

"Wait, lieutenant," Larisle called to the leaving couple. The two turned, their faces so young and vibrant it almost hurt for the tired admiral to look at them. "If you run into that wingleader of yours, tell the bastard to get his ass back to the hotel."

The young lieutenant exchanged grins with Janet, and then gave an understanding nod to his commanding officer. They then disappeared behind the shutting doors of the tram as it prepared to rocket to its next stop.

Now that the tram had partially emptied itself, Larisle was able to sit down. Holwin seemed oblivious to anything but the stranger with whom he was conversing. The shrill howling of the Vasudan opera singers still echoed painfully in Larisle's head as he dreamt of the infinite comfort that his hotel pillow would offer him.

#### *GTA Military Service Hotel; Main Lounge*

'Oh my God, oh my God...Please don't kill me...' Hawk felt his head reverberate painfully as it plopped onto the bar just inches away from his near-empty shot glass. Although in no real danger, it did feel like someone had flown an Ursa into his brain and was letting loose constant barrages of Harbingers into his lobes.

"Hey, it's Hawk!" he heard a young woman shout. He hardly had gotten his head up before two figures suddenly appeared, standing (looking at him?) right next to him. "Hawk?"

Hawk blinked several times at the two blurry figures, then as his focus wavered in and out, he examined his surroundings. Bright sunlight reflected off of large, glass and steel buildings across the busy street caused him groan and quickly turn back to the two people. "That you, Banshee?" he asked quietly through his uneven breath as he tried to make out the figures' faces.

The two people laughed. "Yeah, Hawk, I'm here."

"Hawk, it's me, Shard," said the other figures. "Me and Banshee were about to get some breakfast before heading off to the transport."

"We've only got two more hours before it's back to the Insurmountable, you know," Banshee added cheerfully.

Things began to fall into place again for Hawk. He cursed to himself. "Two hours?" he said to no one in particular.

Banshee and Shard exchanged glances. "You take care of yourself, sir..." Shard said, patting Hawk on the back.

"And maybe you should join us with some breakfast, too," Banshee added. The two then walked off.

Hawk threw some cred-chips on the bar and nodded at the blurry form he figured was the bartender. Then he slowly worked his way out of his seat, only to trip and fall into someone's arms.

"Whoa, Commander..." It was Fielder. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked as he

helped Hawk onto his feet.

“Never mind,” Hawk grunted hoarsely as he reached for a nearby chair to support him.

“You know, Larisle’s been raising hell waiting for you,” Fielder said. “When did you get back to the hotel yesterday?”

Hawk shrugged awkwardly. “It was sunset is all I know.”

Fielder let out a surprised whistle. “It’s already around ten-hundred, and the days here are thirty-eight hours long! Man, I suggest you avoid the admiral like a Shivan Dragon,” he warned. Then he looked around the lounge. “Did Shard and Banshee stop by here? I’m supposed to meet them for breakfast.”

Hawk managed a nod, and pointed in the general direction in which their two squad-mates had walked away.

“Thanks,” Fielder said as he began walking in that direction. “Just to warn ya’, Med’s probably gonna’ have to feed you some shoreleave killers before they let you on the shuttle, Hawk.” And the young lieutenant disappeared into the dining hall.

Hawk sighed and realized his wingman was probably right. The gate guards would force him to ingest antidepressant pills, or “shoreleave killers,” to remedy his drunken state before returning him to active duty aboard the Insurmountable. He winced as his head began to pulse with pain, and stumbled as he imagined the added chaos the pills would cause him. ‘All that, and the admiral on my ass,’ he complained to himself as he fell to the ground. This time, no one was around to catch him.