

## Flame Race

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# Flame Race: The Race

Chaos was before him. No explosions, no flaming metal, no arcing currents of exposed electricity. No frantic cries over the radio, no splattered blood on turret glass, no unfortunate pilots and crewmen flailing about in the vacuum. Just utter, frenzied chaos.

Two Orion-class destroyers hung still a kilometer ahead with dozens upon dozens of GTA and PVA fighters alike swarming around it and lining up in formations. Sixteen Terran and Vasudan cruisers hovered nearby, their stillness a stark contrast to the surrounding fighters. Occasionally he would see a squadron of missile frigates, small cargo ships rigged with missile launchers and guns to become effective strike gunships. All of it contrasted the empty space before them, empty of anything worth looking at - much less worth shooting at. Yet everybody watched, anxious, nervous, scared. It was chaos.

He received a thumbs-up from his ship's pilot sitting above him. "This is battle reporter theta, in position now," he said through his craft's radio, calmly taking his turn in the cascading chorus of confirmations indicating the readiness of each ship or squadron. It was one of those rare occasions when the GTA actually allowed reporters in battle. Normally a needless distraction piloted by reckless and arrogant story-hungry journalists, news ships were not allowed in battlegrounds during battle. But the GTA felt this impending battle was something worth documenting. That it would be something the rest of the Terran-Vasudan alliance deserved to remember. Besides, the reporters allowed at this battle were too scared witless to be reckless and arrogant, no matter how hungry they were.

The calm in his voice was yet another contrast. His mind was a maelstrom. 'The Shivans are coming,' the reporter repeated to himself as other pilots and ship commanders announced their readiness over the radio to the fleet command ship - the GTD Insurmountable. 'They'll appear right there, six kilometers ahead right on that spot.' The reporter took note of a distant star that happened to be directly on his line of sight to the coordinates through which the enemy was supposed to emerge from subspace. The Shivans were heading straight for Vega IX and its fleeing population of over twenty million, and the subspace area corresponding with the designated normal-space coordinates was where the route towards Vega IX became shorter when traversed through normal-space than through subspace. Their trip through subspace ends right there, on that little bluish dot of a star.

As he waited in anticipation of the great, cataclysmic event, he found himself rapidly reverting from his professionally unemotional reporter's attitude. Into his recorder he not only uttered descriptions of the events before him, but prayers and blessings for his friends and family spread in distant star systems, as well as for the pilots and crewmen before him, and himself. His stomach heaved uncomfortably as he pondered the irony of his journalistic ambitions winning him the rights to cover the "story of the decade": "The Fall of Vega." He vaguely remembered grinning in the face of rival reporters. But then, in a piercing, screaming wash of emotion as he realized the true, dire circumstances, he angrily scolded himself for being so greedy for glory.

Then he realized that it was not his emotions that were screaming. It was his subspace interruption alarm. The excited voices on his radio silenced. He looked up. His breathing began to accelerate, his heart seemed to explode through his pressure suit, and his eyes widened like crystal moons emerging from behind the shadow of the planet they orbited. The little blue star had disappeared behind the vast and blinding expanse of an opening into subspace. Without moving his head, his hand quickly reached for a switch on his console. He flipped the switch, and his first transmission probe was launched. The probe joined several others from other news ships as they

glided into subspace and sped off faster than the speed of light and radio waves to listeners that waited safely out-system. A new, unused probe was promptly shifted into the old probe's place and the recording cache began dumping information into it, just as the first Shivans began to emerge from the great gap in the sky.

It was a Shivan destroyer, Demon-class, that was slowly crawling out of the brilliant light six-thousand meters ahead, as well as the tiny specks of Shivan fighters, silhouetted against the glowing backdrop of the opened doorway between two universes. The trembling reporter checked his video recording controls and then slowly played with the turret controls in front of him to face the coming Shivans. The news ship's cameraman-turret worked just like a gun turret, with the exception of recording equipment in place of weaponry. Just then, the silence amongst the non-Shivans ceased.

Fleet commander Admiral Gregory Larisle was screaming orders for his ships to advance. Squadron leaders echoed the call, and soon the great sea of metal lurched towards the coming enemy. The reporter's head slammed into a bulkhead as the ship jumped forward and followed the bold, Vegan fleet. He abruptly tightened his harness as the pilot added throttle.

When the opening to subspace finally closed, two Demon-class destroyers had come from its mouth, as well as an uncountable number of Shivan cruisers and fighters. For a few moments he was awestruck by the magnificent feats of alien engineering that loomed in the distance. He lined up the camera with the big destroyers, and began expressing his amazement into the recorder. "They're huge...Unbelievable...Awe-inspiring...Like nothing I could have ever imagined..." The long, streamlined hulks draped in bizarre, undulating darkness, like fantastic sculptures inspired by the dreams of a madman, seemed to hang there for an eternity; their forms the ominous, hanging relics of an iniquitous museum. But then, like in the madman's dream, they suddenly sprung forth into ghastly expression.

The reporter abruptly swerved the turret around as the first clash of weaponry occurred. Two kilometers away, the reporter saw missile trails cut through the blackness, and soon energy weapons fire ripped through the void, as well. The bright plasma of ML-16s lanced across emptiness and into the opposition. Likewise, the strange, pulsating red of the Shivan guns jetted the other way. The hundreds of fighters spun and rolled out of their originally organized formation like angered wasps, as radiant beads of energy sliced in every direction. Shields melted away, and explosions began sparking on both sides.

A sudden roll off course by the pilot caused the reporter to gag. A flurry of GTA and Shivan fighters rocketed past, afterburners blazing, just meters away, exchanging deadly energy. The reporter excitedly swung the turret around to face them, his head spun and the machinery and hydraulics screamed under the multiplied g-forces of his maneuvers. He began to feel the "rookie's thrill" of battle.

The thrill disappeared in a deafening clap and blinding flash that killed the ship's engines and sent it reeling out of control. The main lighting winked off, leaving only the red of the combat lights and the white flashes of sparks that rained out of damaged electronics. Then the sounds of the battle abruptly silenced; the ship's aural synthesizers had gone dead.

He called to the pilot, but got no response. Feelings of anxiety and vulnerability quickly overwhelmed him. Now all he could see in the battle was twisted metal, blossoming explosions, and ferocious flames, that rushed like an agitated herd of horses across the gashes in the sides of capital ships and licked at escaping gases. It was an ocean of hell, its fiery tidal waves quickly sped to engulf him. Sweat build-ups in his thick hair flowed down his body in large splashing streams. He jumped in surprise as a pair of dueling fighters roared overhead and shook the ship. "What the hell am I doing here..." he stuttered to himself as he threw frantic glances to and fro like a two-year-old attending the family doctor for the first time. The violent explosion of a Shivan fighter knocked him

back into his senses.

Slowly, he reached for the turret controls and gripped them tightly, as if hanging onto a tree branch that delayed a fatal drop. He then took a deep breath, checked the recorders, and continued doing his job as his ship drifted helplessly through the bedlam.

Far away, he saw mighty warships blossoming in silent explosions, the reward for several long minutes of tenuous pounding by anxious fighter pilots, or indifferent Shivans. Shockwaves permeated the space as gunners intercepted bombs that threatened the mighty destroyers of both fleets, which were slowly advancing towards each other and discharging energy at each other. The reporter began to feel like the best, most focused journalist in the world as he shouted into his recorder and twisted his turret around to take in every bit of the terrible battle he could.

A speeding Shivan fighter abruptly caught his attention, and his shouting grew into frenetic screaming as it lined its shots up with his ship...

The craft crumpled in fire as a swarm of hornet missiles pierced its side and burst out the other in blossom of flame and debris. Two Hercules fighters followed through the kill and spun around to engage other nearby fighters.

It took a minute for the reporter to recover from the scare and hear the calls of one of the Hercules' pilots over his radio. "Yes, I'm here, but my pilot's dead," the reporter replied to the pilot's inquiries. The pilot cursed as his fighter rocketed beneath the slowly spinning and disabled news ship, guns ablaze. Another Shivan ignited under the gunfire, and the immediate surrounding area was finally empty of any enemy craft.

The two Hercules began to head back for the battle, but the pilot continued to talk, apprehensive and shaken with worry. He introduced himself ? Commander Michael "Hawk" Skillor ? and his wingman ? Lieutenant Sarah "Banshee" Mendoza ? and the rest of his squadron ? Lieutenant Commander Paul "Shard" Nicolai and Lieutenant Anthony "Firebird" Fielder of the GTD Insurmountable's lead Alpha Squadron. He told the reporter that he had to stay focused to his task ? to keep recording every last second, that every moment must be immortalized as fully as possible, that this battle must be remembered as vividly as his recording devices could make it. The pilot was obviously overwhelmed in fear that the glory of his fellow humans and Vasudans that afterburned to their deaths would be forgotten. The reporter knew every last human and Vasudan successfully escaping into subspace from Vega IX because of the Vega fleet's heart-aching and courageous diversionary tactics would remember with endless, sorrowful gratitude every pilot and crewman of the Vega fleet.

But he took in a deep breath and knew that he would be damned should he not honor the brave soldiers' lives himself. "Yes, sir!" he called boldly into his radio. The reporter thought he could see tears well up inside Hawk's eyes as the two Hercules drew closer to the heat of the battle. "Thank you, and Godspeed..." said the commander hoarsely, and the connection clicked off.

The reporter was breathing heavily as he spun his turret around to face the battle, now a good five kilometers away. He felt sick that he could not stop his ship from drifting away as a result of the explosion that rocked the craft and killed the pilot. But he tried hard to focus, continually moving his turret and adjusting the zoom level of the camera to compensate for the uncontrollable motion. Still it was hard for him to do those brave people honor without being closer to the action. He felt frustratingly helpless as second after second ticked by and more and more people undoubtedly shriveled in flame as he sat drifting away.

Just then, the engines clicked to life, the success of a hard-working repair droid that the reporter had forgotten about. His heart jumped as the ship began to roar forward. It was pointing in the wrong direction, however, and was rapidly speeding further and further away from battle.

The reporter quickly patched control of the turret to the main cockpit and then unfastened his

harness. He pushed himself in the zero gravity up through the short entrance corridor and into the ship's cockpit where he found the pilot lying cold and limp, his chest soaked in blood and littered with sharp shards of metal. The reporter turned away, closed his eyes, and bit his lip to avoid vomiting. He had seen many dead bodies before, but he would never get used to seeing another. He took in a long few breaths through his nose, turned back around, and began to unstrap the pilot from his chair.

The trembling journalist groaned deeply as he pulled the pilot's body from the seat. The body bounced off the walls and slowly drifted down into the corridor. The reporter lowered his pressure suit's visor, strapped himself into the pilot's seat, and pushed a series of buttons to open the airlock. Air whistled and rushed out of the ship, carrying the body and various loose objects out into space. The reporter was shaken violently by turbulent, rushing air as he promptly shut the airlock. Calmly and slowly, he grasped the control stick in front of him. The ship rocked back and forth as a result of his actions. Relieved that the maneuvering thrusters were still working, he pulled back on the stick, the ship rattling and plastering him into his seat, until the radar blip representations of the ships in battle, now all blended together due to their distance, centered on the radar screen. He slammed the afterburners...

A minute later he noticed sounds gradually becoming louder as he neared the battle. The booming sounds of explosions and the thundering sounds of ship engines echoed through his ears. The aural synthesizer was fixed, and the computer-generated sounds of battle were pouring in over surrounding speakers.

Finally, his ship rumbled through the bordering edge of debris that was expanding outward from the center of the battle. He could see both sides of the battle were still going strong. Both destroyers of both sides were still alive and running, although they were now within a precious small thousand meters of space to each other. There was still a countless number of fighters darting around, and even a few Leviathan cruisers were still drifting about, firing volleys that sparked big, but seemingly harmless eruptions in the Shivan destroyers.

He let the battle do the talking, not saying a word as he pointed the turret camera forward and rocketed through the dancing fighters and their gunfire. Explosions from all around rumbled through his ship as he slowly circled the entire battle and tried to catch every spectacular thing he could with his ship's small camera. He silently asked God to keep him, his ship, and camera alive long enough to see the last, bold human or Vasudan go up in flame before the Shivan guns.

Just then, a red beam from a Shivan fighter sliced through a part of his ship's thrust vectoring wings. He turned to see a pair of advancing Shivan fighters ignite in a salvo of energy from a turret of the GTD Citadel. The reporter realized it was not all up to God to get him through this ? he had to keep focused.

The ship lurched forward and he bounced uncontrollably in his seat as he pumped the afterburners. A Valkyrie, engulfed in a fireball, spiraled and then disintegrated in fire. An Ursa was knocked off its bombing run by Shivan turret fire and erupted in a brilliant flash of light. A group of battered support ships was rearming a small, equally battered squadron of Ulysses in the distance. A group of heavy Shivan bombers that had gotten through strong fighter resistance accelerated past a dozen meters ahead and recoiled as they fired off a cluster of megabombs at the Citadel.

The piercing sound of impact warnings wailed over his radio. Men and women screamed orders. Turrets on the Citadel spun around, and discharged a relentless stream of energy at the incoming bombs. Nearby fighters swarmed towards the bombs, firing chaffs in their paths and lining their guns up with the speeding missiles. The battle reporter watched, mouth gaped in awe as some of the bombs buckled under the sedulous gunfire...

But to no avail. The bombs impacted the side of the Citadel and ignited in a blinding flash. A tremendous shockwave slammed into the shuttle-sized news ship and enkindled nearby fighters.

Huge fireballs burst out the opposite side of the mighty destroyer. The explosion had ripped the ship in half, and the two flaming pieces slowly drifted off and disintegrated into smaller blazing metal hulks.

His ship shook as pieces of debris bounced off its hull, exposed because the shockwave had chopped the ship's shields down.

He began to feel like the battle had ended just there, the space before him empty except for tumbling pieces of twisted titanium and frenzied flames that licked at the last bits of flammable debris. But then the space quickly filled with dueling fighters, and the battle was abruptly brought back to life for him.

A familiar voice was shouting orders to other fighters over the radio. It was Hawk, screaming to his wingmen. The reporter swerved his ship around to see the beaten hulk of Hawk's Hercules speeding through the ocean of debris towards one of the Demon-class destroyers. He was calling for all fighters to attack the destroyer.

The reporter watched the glorious drama unfold before him. Dozens of human- and Vasudan-piloted fighters and bombers converged on the distant destroyer. Missiles and gunfire jetted through the void and dug into the side of the huge Shivan ship. Turrets on the Shivan destroyer began raining destruction on the advancing sea of fighters, and explosions blossomed amongst the speeding craft. But the fighters sped staunchly on, seemingly countless in number and unrelenting in their attack. Even fast support ships navigated by skillful and courageous pilots accelerated into the river of fighters, reloading missiles on the fly. Small explosions and impacts on the starboard side of the Demon destroyer grew exponentially in size as countless tons of ordnance pounded into the ship's dark, torn hull. It looked like the desperate human and Vasudan forces would soon avenge the Citadel's recent demise.

But just as the vast Shivan destroyer was gradually engulfed in flame and explosions, the dying ship smashed into the bow of the GTD Insurmountable and exhaled its last explosion, which swallowed part of the Insurmountable like a giant, brilliant amoeba. The long eruption cast a shockwave that smashed many fighters, a nearby cruiser, and set off the last of the Insurmountable in an instantaneous fiery blossom.

The final screams of a frightened crew still echoed through his mind as the fireball expanding before him slowly dissipated. Right there, the battle seemed to end for everybody, as surviving fighters slowly rocketed away from the horrible sight. The remaining Shivan destroyer and Shivan fighters still scanned the debris-filled area for targets as the confusion gradually disappeared. Not a single shot was fired for minute after minute.

Then suddenly the silence was shattered by a loud scream. Hawk was wailing over the radio, and his small, flaming Hercules was speeding towards the remaining Shivan destroyer. The reporter watched, breathless with camera recording the drama as the fighter, without firing a shot, rocketed towards its target. Other fighters soon rolled in behind Hawk. It didn't take long for the Shivans to find their targets, and several hundred meters before Hawk's Hercules hit the side of the destroyer, the craft crumbled in fire and exploded. One by one, other fighters were ripped away by turret fire. Banshee's shrill scream pierced the reporter's ears as her Hercules followed suit. The targeting computer identified Alphas two and three as Shard and Fielder went up next. Some survivors shot ineffectual volleys into the side of the destroyer before erupting, while still others, realizing the futility of their actions, attempted to jump out of the battle into some unknown area of space before they, too, burst in flames. And still a few lucky ones died upon smashing into the side of the destroyer. But their deaths did little to slow the mighty capital ship down. It was all too much for the poor reporter.

His eyes watering with frustration, the reporter pushed a switch to launch the transmission probe that had been recording the tragedy from the beginning. As the probe rocketed into subspace,

he pushed the throttle to maximum and leveled the ship's course with the Shivan Demon.

Just as the Shivan destroyer swatted off the last of the scared and exhausted enemy fighters, a distant rift into subspace opened and another small probe tumbled out ? a transmission probe. In his last waking moments, he received the probe's transmission: "LAST TRANSPORT HAS ENTERED SUBSPACE...EVACUATION SUCCESSFUL...JUMP OUT NOW...REPEAT..." Right then, a missile smashed into the ship and tore the cockpit from the rest of the craft which ripped apart in violent explosions.

The reporter smiled widely with fulfilled satisfaction as the fire quickly ate at the surrounding consoles and bulkheads. The air around him vanished in heated ferocity and his pressure suit visor shattered as he thought to himself, 'We won.' They had raced the Shivan storm of flame and countless millions had won. 'What a race,' said the brave reporter silently as his body disintegrated in the developing explosion. He thanked God one last time before the flame finally caught up with him.