

## For Love of Life

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Eizo Ishihara was just stepping into one of the Aquitaine's many mess halls to meet up with some of his fellow pilots when the general alert began blaring. A few people glanced out through the thick, armored window and nearly forgot to breathe. Sparing a few precious seconds to take a look for himself, Eizo watched in shock as a Sathanas-class juggernaut finished pulling itself from subspace. Shaking himself out of his stupor, he barked a quick warning before rushing out of the room. Before the alarm could change to the soothing voice of a computer that would provide updates and instructions, Eizo was already scrambling for the stairs leading down to the flight deck. Knowing that most corridors would be closed down in the event of a hull breach, he took a few of the lesser-used routes and started to raise his tech on his communicator. A few angry buzzes emanated from the device before the gruff voice of his tech came on line.

"What's going on, Eizo?"

"A Sathanas just jumped in."

"Shit. What d'ya want me to load?"

"Bombs, lots of them, Helios if you can."

"Alright, but don't you even want a set of Infyrnos?"

"You heard me. Screw the missiles. We need to smash that thing fast before it can take us out."

"Okay, but I'm not much of a tech without a ship to work on."

Eizo grinned, but since Ted couldn't see it over the comm, he laughed and told him to make it snappy.

Sliding down the last flight of steep stairs, he burst onto the flight deck and nearly collided with one of the crewmen directing the ordnance carts and other carryalls around the fighters and bombers. A quick rush of apologies and he was off again, rushing over to his Boanerges heavy bomber. Spotting Ted, he rushed over to watch a few armorers muscle the last few bombs into their racks.

"Looks good Ted; all warmed up?"

"Yeah, now get your ass up there and go get those shivans!"

Eizo quickly ran a practiced eye over all the access ports and weapons bays to make sure nothing was loose or out of place. A phrase from one of his old teachers back at the academy popped out from the back of his mind: "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots." True enough, and Eizo had made it into a mantra he used while running down the checklist to prep for launch. Having satisfied himself that all was in order, he turned and climbed up the ladder as fast as he could. Dropping into the cocoon of a cockpit, Eizo pulled his extra flightsuit from behind the seat; it was common practice for pilots to stash a suit in case they had to get ready in a hurry. Throwing the protective garment over his off-duty shirt and pants, Eizo plopped into the seat and began fastening himself in. Ted suddenly appeared at the top of the ladder, pulling the helmet over Eizo's head before helping to strap him down.

"Good luck, Eizo. Bag a big one for me!"

A quick handshake between them before Ted scrambled back down the ladder and into the safety of one of the nearby passages. Bringing the fusion engine online, Eizo tuned into the general frequency shared by all pilots and the air commander for the ship.

"Delta Three, online. What's the sitrep?"

"Prep for immediate launch. The objective is simple: Take down the Sathanas's beam cannons, like usual, then blast it to dust."

"Aye sir. Requesting permission for immediate launch?"

"Granted. Good hunting!"

Eizo checked around the small bay to make sure it was clear of personnel, then beamed a quick all-clear to the tech in charge of this bay. Within seconds, an alarm began to echo throughout the hangar, while red rotating lights around the room began to bathe the four bombers in an eerie glow. The sound of heavy pumps managed to penetrate the cockpit as the air was sucked out of the hangar, before the heavy armored doors slid open silently. Even as the doors reached their midpoint, Eizo was throttling up to inch forward, itching to take the fight to the enemy. The door finally yawned wide enough, and Eizo shoved the throttle to its upper limit, hoping to clear the doors before any possible ships could take up a camping spot just outside the bay.

"KUSO!"

A curse in his native language as he jerked the stick, his hull scraping armor off a shivan Mara-class fighter. The smaller fighter was knocked about by the collision, so it wasn't able to bring any of its weapons to bear, but Eizo was less worried about himself at the moment.

"Command, this is Delta Three. Hostiles are beginning to take up positions next to the flight decks. It looks like they're trying to ambush our fighters as they launch."

"Can you confirm, Delta Three?"

"Ah, roger. I just bounced off a Mara as I was coming out."

"Acknowledged, Delta Three. Thank you."

Since the Mara had yet to regain control, Eizo pulled power from his weapons banks to boost his engine output. Pouring it on, he closed the distance between himself and the looming juggernaut. Seven clicks out, he figured he'd be able to disable at least two of the main cannons on the 'claws' on the bow before it could begin firing on the Aquitaine.

Time passed quickly, and Eizo kept scanning the stars and his scope for enemies. It looked like the Shivans had launched the moment they appeared, since most of the ships were circling the Aquitaine behind him. Only a single wing of Basilisk remained to guard the mighty Shivan capitol ship, so for the moment, he could breathe easy.

As the Juggernaut grew larger in his canopy, the surviving wings on the Aquitaine began to approach. They must have taken care of the fighters, it looked like beta wing wasn't in any shape to fight. Alpha wing had fared better; three of their Perseus' were blasting towards the Sathanas at high speed, passing Eizo quickly. The remaining shivan fighters returned fire, but were held off by the

more agile Alpha wing. As Eizo armed his first bank of Helios bombs, he watched one of the lights on his radar change to an empty red circle. It looked like he was the last of the bombers. Command suddenly came on the line.

"Delta Three, this is command. One of the Maras we took down was playing possum. Once our fighter escort went after the Sathanas, it went kamikaze on our flight deck. We've managed to put out the flames, but the rest of Delta wing is down. We've called in for reinforcements, but the closest destroyer won't get here for another twenty minutes. You've got to take out those cannons or we all die."

"Roger Command. Tell the rest of the fighters to clear the fighters and flack turrets for me, will you?"

"Acknowledged, Delta Three."

Finally, Eizo was close enough that his targeting system began to lock onto the closest beam cannon. Not wanting to waste a shot, he waited as Alpha swept through the Basilisks and started blasting at the flack turrets. Now within one kilometer, Eizo kicked in the afterburner to give the Helios a little more speed before he turned it loose. The heavy guided missile lumbered towards the bow of the Sathanas, while Eizo banked away to arm his next group. The Sathanas took note of this, and quickly ignored the darting fighters in favor of the smaller, but much less agile bomb. A sudden hail of laserfire, flak, and anti-fighter beams swept the bomb from space, creating a massive blast that rocked and rattled the Boanerges. Passing his eyes across the instrument panel, Eizo was pleased to see that nothing had been damaged by the nearby detonation, though his shield was down quite a bit.

"Delta Three to Alpha wing, I need you to get in close and smash those turrets!"

Silence. Either the blast had disrupted communications, or...

Another search revealed the problem. It looked like the Shivans had gotten lucky, and had shot down three of Alpha's interceptors. The fourth one was just now breaking apart, a victim of the blast.

Eizo drew all the power from his weapons and his engine to quickly boost his shield, before transferring nearly all of it back to the powerful engine. Hauling back on the stick, he pulled the Boanerges back onto a course that kept the beam cannon out of his forward screen. Without the powerful lock that guided the bomb towards the target, the Shivans would have a much harder time tracking it. Once again pushing the throttle to its limits, he dove at the Sathanas, holding down the trigger for his one bank of HL-7s. He closed to five hundred meters, then diverted energy back to the shields, launched his second and third Helios bombs, and broke off his pass with afterburners on.

This time it was the Sathanas' turn to shudder and shake under the power of an anti-matter explosion. Flames, fed from the escaping atmosphere within the ship, broke out in several places, but cut off too quickly for Eizo's taste. It meant that the shivans had quickly closed blast doors and were still in the fight. And another volley of fire from the ship confirmed it, as explosions and light surrounded his small ship. The groan of metal giving way told him what the instruments were quick to announce: Hull breach, light damage to propulsion, heavy damage to the shield generator, and moderate damage to the targeting array. Again cursing the shivans and their refusal to die, he stopped the bomber as fast as he could, grinning as the shivans overshot, and he turned around to face his tormenters. Taking his engine to the limit of its performance, a jolt of rage ran through

Eizo's blood, but was quickly beaten down by a sense of clarity. If the shivans could do it, why not him?

"Command, this is Delta Three. Any word on those reinforcements?"

"Fifteen minutes, Delta Three. You are the only thing standing between the Sathanas and the Aquitaine."

"Alright, I've got an idea. If it works, the shivans will be pretty pissed at me."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Ah, I'd really rather not think about it."

"Roger, Delta Three. The crew of the Aquitaine is depending on you."

'Just what I need,' thought Eizo, as the Sathanas drew even closer. Spotting the well-armored flight deck of the massive ship, he nudged the Boanerges more to the left, and held down the trigger. Beams of light ate away at the thick plating protecting the doors, but failed to break through. No matter, as long as the bombs get through. Once again, the sense of peace filled his heart, and Eizo Ishihara opened the comlink to Command again.

"Command, this is Delta Three. Write this down, will you?"

"Alright, Delta: go ahead."

"Prowling enemy stalks,  
red-black death feared by all foes,  
small ship kills."

"Delta Three? What is this?"

"My death, and the death of our enemy! For the Alliance!"

The careening bomber smashed into, and through, the armor plate that protected the fighter bays of the Sathanas. Slewng wildly about, the collision nearly knocked Eizo unconscious, but he hung on through sheer determination. Smiling through the blood on his forehead, he mashed his thumbs on the triggers for both banks.

In a massive fireball, the initial explosion touched off the remaining Helios bombs in Delta Three. The combined explosion filled the massive fighterbay, and grew even further to crush half the decks of the juggernaut. The fusion engine went critical and vaporized the rest, including everything within three-quarters of a kilometer from the blast. The Aquitaine stood down from alert and awaited reinforcements and a new complement of fighters, bombers, and pilots.