

Last Skirmish with Vasuda Ships

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Combat Report: Last skirmish with Vasudan ships

In the infinite voids of space, only a limited number of worlds are inhabited. The Vasudan scum push out as fast as we do, establishing new colonies and placing people on worlds with suitable atmospheres. Today – if day has a meaning in the timelessness between stars – my job is to scout a world suspected of being the subject of a colonisation effort on the part of the Vasudans. There's certainly been some unusual traffic here recently, according to intelligence. My designation is Alpha 1; there is no Alpha 2, nor a Beta wing. In this dark void, pressing against my cockpit canopy, I feel alone. The scanner confirms my emotions.

Entering the system I maintain a low profile, placing an outlying gas giant between my fighter and the target world, keeping prying eyes from noting my approach. Skimming the edge of the gravity well the ship's autopilot keeps a grip on the changing forces brushing my fragile craft and makes minor adjustments. Cutting back the throttle I reduce my visible reactor exhaust, at the cost of time taken on the approach. Tapping a few modifications to the power distribution I further reduce my power requirements by draining the lasers. This mission, like all of my previous scouting missions, I intend to come back from and so it is stealth first. As the engine thrum dims I can make out a slight scraping noise against my hull as small particles of dust, attracted by the gravity well, brush my vessel's armour with light fingertips. The telltales stay green, though – I wouldn't expect it to be otherwise. Clearing the dust, and starting my final approach I settle into the mental vacuity that accompanies long periods of interplanetary flight. Time passes...

Slipping into a more alert state of mind, I bring the reactor up a few points and initiate a sensor sweep of the surface. The computer happily complies, starting a search for signs of habitation. I tense and untense my leg muscles in an attempt to clear the cramp that has developed there. The world hangs in space like a perfectly spherical opal, starlight giving the atmosphere a pure shine. The vegetation on the surface would be a darker shade than Earth's, I suppose, giving it the grey/black colouration. The dark continents are cut by the glinting shine of starlight on water – rivers and lakes. Even the harshest volcanic world is startlingly beautiful from this height.

"Sensor contact detected," states the computer matter-of-factly, startling me out of my reverie. Three Vasudan fighters have crested the lip of the moon and entered my sensor field. Wired into action, I yank the joystick over and hide my reactor's shine from their eyes. Eyeing the navigational screen, I start to assess a clean escape vector – but the missile-lock buzzer goes, shattering my hopes of avoiding a dust-up. Pushing the throttle up to combat speed, the reactor whine builds, and I tip the joystick again, twisting out of their sights. The missile lock telltale dims. All too soon we are in gun range.

Laserbolts sear across my vision as the leading two open fire, and I twist again and again, avoiding their heat. The third is lagging a little but I judge him to be within range, and finger the trigger to spoil his day for him.

"Weapon energy reserves depleted," reminds the computer. Cursing, I realise the first mistake has been made by me and not my opponents. I drop a pair of dumbfires into his vector and break away, a cold sweat sticking my flightsuit to my back. The stick is alive in my hand, my reflexes overriding my brain's need to intervene, and I work the power distribution controls. The reactor pitch climbs another note to take the load, and my hand flicks back to the throttle, dropping it suddenly. Turning tighter at slow speed, I make a hard turn and throttle up again. Laserbolts cut the space I was just in. The flaeshield on the canopy cuts in for a moment, struggling to fight the bright incandescence of

the exploding enemy fighter – obviously the dumbfires found their mark. Two to go, but they have me ranged and they're sticking in formation. I'm going to have to break them out of that before I can take them. I kick in the afterburner, gaining a little distance before they do similar and start to close again. The distance is enough, though.

I haul the throttle back to zero and spin the fighter through a stomach-churning 180 degree spin. The stars whirl outside and the planet flashes from the bottom of my view to the top of my view, and then I'm pushed back in my seat as I kick in the afterburners again. Entering a corkscrew to be harder to tag, I charge headlong at my opponents. My lasers reach out, as do theirs, and I am not so lucky this time. The energy impacting on my armour has a less gentle touch than the dust did earlier, but the armour holds – the joystick bucks in my hand as I am hit once, twice, three times. The left-side telltale dims and a shower of sparks explodes from the power panel.

"Come on baby," I mutter to my fighter, "Keep it together." My voice sounds rasping and harried to my own ears. My guns hit home too – these troops are not veterans, as is obvious by their direct approach to head-to-head engagement, not even varying their vectors – and sparks and debris shower from one of the enemy ships. It doesn't seem to be a fatal strike, though. I flash through the pair, one ship either side, so close that I almost imagine I can make out their faces through the canopies. My attention isn't focussed on them, though, and I cut the throttle again, turning right to put my better side to them. I drop in behind the already damaged craft and fire again. The Vasudan's engine doesn't like the ML-16 blasts and chooses to vent its dislike in a very vocal manner. My ship is buffeted by the shockwave and I turn my right side to face it – the armor indicator turning yellow. I fight the stick back under control and turn to face my final opponent. His ship is pristine, undamaged, but I have managed to catch him from a rear aspect and I skirt his reactor wash with my fighter, reaching out with my weaponry again. The ML-16s release one burst, two, then die. His armour is blackened where the blasts hit, but he's still up and running.

"Weapon energy reserves depleted," states the computer again, and one glance at the power panel is enough to confirm why – the readout is red in each and every place I'd prefer it wasn't. The reactor is fast on its way to going critical and furthermore it seems to have jammed most of its output into the engines. The whine builds again to a screech which runs razor-raw across my ears. This is what we in the dogfighting profession term a 'minor setback' in our combat reports. I close on the enemy fighter, running up its rear – I don't have much choice. Wishing I had more sophisticated missiles than my remaining dumbfires (the supply sergeant is going to pay for that one if I get back...) I start tossing the glorified rockets at my opponent. The first ones go wild but as the distance closes I find my mark. As the other fighter cooks off I am reminded of how my instructor drilled into me not to get too close to an exploding fighter. Whoops.

"Reactor core critical," points out the computer, and a chunk of the enemy fighter's debris smashes into the front of the canopy, starring the surface with a webwork of cracks but failing to penetrate. My head is snapped against the chair behind me, rattling my brain, and I fight to stay conscious. I lose. The last thing I hear as the blackness overwhelms me is "Ejecting reactor core," and a loud clonk. Darkness.

[Author's note: Portions of the rest of this story have not been polished to my satisfaction; sections of the remainder read like a plot synopsis. If I find time to polish it before the end of the submission period I will resubmit as appropriate; if not then consider disregarding the remainder of the story. This portion is included mostly for completeness]

I awaken an unspecified amount of time later to a bright light in my eyes. My head feels like someone has spent an industrious twenty minutes beating me around the head with an iron bar. Other parts of my body, particularly my right leg, have received similar attention. For some

inexplicable reason I appear not to be dead. The light is the system's star, pouring in through the shattered canopy. The view is relatively uninspiring from here – low, rolling fields covered with some sort of vegetation, which appears to be arranged in neat rows. Definite signs of agricultural harvesting; seems intel was right about colonisation here. Punching at the console, everything is completely dead. Unstrapping myself from my pilot's chair I manage to pull myself onto the console before two things become apparent. Firstly, my right leg is broken, and fairly seriously judging by the slight sensation of agony that rolls up my spine. And secondly, I am not alone. The starlight is blocked out by the silhouette of a tall, thin figure with rounded head and unusual – to my eye – proportions. A Vasudan. This is the first one that I have seen in person and boy, are they ugly. I fumble for my sidearm but the holster is pegged closed. The Vasudan waves a vaguely agricultural implement in my face and I stop moving. It says something in its raspy tongue.

"Sorry, ugly, I don't speak the lingo." It speaks again, and I shake my head with broad movements. It tries one last time and, judging my incomprehension, reaches into the cockpit and pulls me bodily out. My leg complains at the rough treatment but I bite down on a shout, unsure of its reaction to something that sudden. It plonks me down on the shattered exterior of my craft. It seems that I impacted engine first and left a furrow that stretches as far as I can see. The metal skin of my ex-fighter is blisteringly hot and I squirm along the surface and down to the ground. The air is fresh and earthy, and not immediately fatal to inhale. I lie on my back a moment before I realise I'm under scrutiny from my ... captor? It motions with its hand, fingers extended, lifting the palm. I don't move and it repeats the movement, then grabs me under the arms and hauls me to my feet. My leg gives way from underneath me, and this time I do shout as I collapse. Consciousness fades again, starting with the greying of the edges of my world but swiftly vanishing like a blanket dropped over my head.

When I awake again I seem to be in some sort of dwelling. My head feels like it's on fire and my leg similar. I know enough to know I'm delirious, but not to stop my mind running rampant. It's probably better that I don't recall much of the next few days. I know I was moved by ungentle hands; these ones belonging to Vasudans wearing some sort of uniforms. A cell was my home for a while, and more Vasudans poked and prodded me with things I had no way to recognise. I was so hungry that I ate and drank what they gave me, with little regard for what it might be. Sometimes my body rejected their offerings; other things I guess we had in common. Eventually I was eating semi-regularly and my mind was more intact and capable; though I wasn't happy to recover, given my situation.

I lost count of the weeks, if weeks pass – it might just be days. Perhaps months. Today is another day, and starts like any other, with a greyish paste and some water. Today seems to be different, though, because I'm given my flightsuit, complete with bloodstains and rank scent of elderly sweat, and dragged out of my cell. Travel, in the rear of some sort of wheeled vehicle, and then I find myself being lead into what appears to be a troop transport ship. Unlike my vague memories of being moved before, I'm not restrained at all. Odd. I eye my environment for some mode of escape but the airlock seals behind me. Nowhere to run inside a ship. Then comes my first shock... there's a jump-capable runabout in orbit, definitely human in original. We dock, and I'm met at the door... by marines! I've never been more happy to see a human face. Then I'm in the capable hands of medical personnel...

The next few hours are the weirdest of my life. It seems that during my month of incarceration, the Vasudans and us humans have been attacked by a new threat, and that there's a new foe – one we are banding together against. It takes quite some assimilating. I'm used to fighting Vasudans. But it seems I have a new challenge now...