

The Price of War

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Author: Travis "Hunter" Howard

The enemy came at me from all directions. Madly, I changed vectors to swerve slightly port of the attacking Shivans fighter craft. Igniting the afterburners, I targeted the nearest Scorpion-class fighter as it appeared on my HUD. Lighting the afterburners again, I managed to within fifty units before squeezing the trigger on my GTW-15 Avenger Cannon, discharging a volley of rapid laser fire.

The Scorpion's shield shimmered under the laser assault. Carefully, I lined the wounded fighter in my targeting crosshairs. Suddenly, the fighter activated its afterburners, rapidly trying to put distance between its attacker and myself.

I could tell that this guy was gonna piss me off. I switched my GTM-9 Interceptor missiles to duel fire. There was no escaping these babies! Opening the throttle to close the distance again, I maneuvered for a missile lock.

I didn't even see the one behind me. The Shivan missiles struck my GTF Valkyrie hard. I fought to control my craft, but I was spinning out of control. Alarms sounded in my headset as I found myself being raped with Shivan Mega Lasers. Flight control went down...followed by weapons...followed the subsequent ending of the Gauntlet simulation. I hadn't even finished the first wave. As the simulator cockpit opened, I reached for my helmet straps; tugging at them furiously. That was the third time this week! Angrily, I tossed my helmet to the nearest sim operator and headed for the showers.

The cold water was refreshing, although it didn't curb my anger any. How could I let myself fall prey to something like that? If that ever happened during a real battle, I would have been dead...or worse, I could have gotten someone else killed. I would never forgive myself if that happened. I tossed my flight suit over my shoulder as I finished buttoning my uniform jacket.

Throwing the towel in the laundry bin, I stalked out of the locker room and into the corridors of the Space Station GTI Vega.

"Stand to!" someone roared. Brooding to myself, I almost missed the call as the officer walked down the corridor towards me. Awkwardly, I snapped to attention and raised my hand to my brow in salute as Commander Janae Mois strode past. I let out a sigh. That was too close. He could have easily had me reprimanded for not following protocol! Perhaps I was letting myself down too hard. Maybe some more time in the simulator would improve my performance. I made a mental note to book more time for the simulator in the morning.

I reached my quarters and quietly slid my ID card into the lock. The door lock clicked and I opened the door. Throwing my flight suit on the bed, I sat down at the terminal and noticed I had new mail. Two messages. Damn, I was popular. I pulled the first one open and began reading. It was from Sara.

I had met Sara Roberts while training at the GTA Pilots' Academy on Earth. We had the same classes together, we worked out together, and we even hung out with the same friends together. We started dating our sophomore year, and by our senior year we were inseparable. I would do anything for her. I would fly into a stream of Shivan Mega

Laser fire if it meant to please her.

Her beauty was astounding. Her long, fire-red hair accentuated her star-like blue eyes and radiant smile. She had this laugh that just had to make anyone smile. She would walk into a room and, instantly, it would light up with her presence. She seemed to have that effect on everybody, but me especially.

After reading Sara's message, I opened the other transmission. It was from GTA Command, Personnel Division. I was being transferred to my first posting. The news shook me like a Shivan Destroyer. Moments later, Sara was on my comm screen. I told her of the grim news.

"Nick," she said, smiling. I sank deeper into my chair. "Don't worry. I'm sure we'll see each other again. Look, I'm being transferred out, too. My ship, the Saratoga, leaves..."

I sat up so suddenly my head spun. "What ship?" I stammered.

"The GTD Saratoga," she said again, slower. I looked at my transfer papers again just to make sure. I couldn't believe my good luck.

"Sara," I exclaimed, "that's my ship!"

I stepped through the airlock of the massive Destroyer as a crew member came to attention and threw me a crisp salute. Putting my bags down, I returned the salute. The crewman took my bags and motioned for me to follow. Shortly, I found myself standing in front of another officer. The lieutenant junior grade pips on his collar gleamed off the shuttle bay's low lighting. Immediately, I saluted my superior.

"At ease," he commanded. Ritualistically, I placed my hands behind my back, squared my shoulders, and spread my feet apart in the "at ease" position. The lieutenant blushed for a moment before realizing what he just said. It was obvious the guy was as much a newbie as I was. All the more comforting.

"I mean relax, ensign." I did. The officer looked over my transfer papers before signing off on it and handing them back to me, along with more paperwork.

"Your quarters are on deck thirteen," he said, handing me an ID card. "Welcome to the GTD Saratoga, Ensign Taggart."

"Thank you sir," I said, saluting again. The lieutenant returned the salute and I spun on my heel and briskly walked out of the shuttle bay.

My first posting. A Galactic Terran Destroyer. I couldn't have been happier.

"General alert. This is a general alert. All hands to general quarters."

The pulsing yellow light and warning siren woke me from my slumber as the ship's intercom sounded the scramble alert. Frantically, I whipped out of bed and into my flight suit. Within two minutes, I was entering the flight briefing room. Several other pilots were already there; in a circle around another officer. I recognized the senior officer as Lieutenant Commander Perry, one of Saragota's squadron leaders. Sara was there, as well. She smiled as she saw me approach. Slipping into the circle, I joined in

on the briefing.

"Less than ten minutes ago, the Cruiser GTC Rigel jumped into the system, claiming to have been chased by Shivan forces. Right now, the Rigel is floundering about ten kilometers starboard of the Saratoga. She has suffered major engine damage and her hull is critical.

"The GTC Drake, one of our escort cruisers, has altered course to intercept and protect the Rigel, but she won't get into range for another fifteen minutes. This is where we come in, I'm sure you've all guessed by now."

The other pilots nodded. On the flight deck, several elevator lifts came to life, bringing with them six spacecraft. I noticed at least four of them as the light fighter I was using in my simulations, the GTF Valkyries. The other four looked to be the assault fighters GTF Hercules.

Sara elbowed me. I didn't realize until then that I hadn't been listening.

"...provide support until the Drake can get to her," Commander Perry was saying. "Beta Wing will be under to command of Lieutenant Horak and will include Lieutenant Junior Grade Brian Furey, Ensign Sara Roberts, and Ensign Nicholas Taggart. Fultz, Gale, and Klein will be with me in Alpha. Any que—" Perry's voice was drowned out by the sudden awakening of the ship's alert intercom and alarm klaxons. The yellow light that signified Condition Yellow suddenly changed to a blaring Condition Red.

"ALL HANDS TO BATTLESTATIONS! REPEAT, ALL HANDS TO BATTLESTATIONS!"

Perry grabbed his helmet and addressed us one last time. "This is it! Good luck everyone! Let's show the Shivans not to piss us off!" Perry dismissed the lot of us. I grabbed my helmet and turned towards Sara. Our eyes met in a fleeting moment before we parted to our fighter craft.

I quickly noticed that Beta Wing comprised of the Valkyries. It suited me all the better, as I had the most practice with this particular fighter craft. However, as I climbed into the cockpit and closed the canopy, I wished I had booked more time in the simulator before shipping off.

My headset came to life with the voice of Saratoga's flight control officer. "Prepare to scramble alerts one and two on mark." Below me, flight crew members rushed under the fighter craft, disconnecting power cables and fuel pumps.

I brought my GTF Valkyrie's systems online and checked my ordinance. They had outfitted Beta wing with twin Avenger cannons and GTW-2 Hornet missiles. The best setup for a defensive mission. The Avenger cannons would provide continuous rapid-fire while the swarming Hornets, set to duel fire of course, would quickly dispatch enemy fighters.

Lieutenant Horak gave the order for Beta Wing to launch. I slowly brought my throttle to two-thirds and departed Fighterbay One. My nav computer indicated new coordinates as my radar picked up several other craft.

The four blue icons flying in a diamond formation I could recognize as Alpha Wing. I quickly pulled into the tail-end of Beta's diamond as we veered towards our objective. One flashing blue icon indicated the GTC Rigel, while the numerous red icons approaching it were definitely Shivan.

In the distance, I could spot the GTC Rigel. Even from this range, over seven thousand units away, I could spot a trail of debris behind her as Rigel tried in vain to make a run for Saragota. I punched up the targeting information and examined Rigel's damage.

One entire drive cone was dark. That meant she was running on only half speed. A Fenris-class cruiser like the GTC Rigel could only do twenty as it was. Now she could only do ten. I also noticed that five of her original eight laser turrets were destroyed, as well as her Fusion-Mortar turret. So she was crippled and defenseless. What a start.

We accelerated past the GTC Drake as she continued making best possible speed toward the struggling Rigel. Alpha Wing began to spread apart and form outward. Lieutenant Horak spoke over squadron frequency.

"Alright boys and girls, this is it! Alpha Wing is making a run for the Rigel in order to protect it from enemy bombers. Our orders are to protect Alpha Wing as they clear the area of all threats to the Rigel. Copy?"

"Copy that, sir," I responded. A tone sounded in my headset as my Valkyrie's radar picked up the nearest enemy fighter in range.

"Break and attack!"

I ignited my afterburners and peeled after the enemy fighter I had targeted. A Dragon. This would not be easy. Still persistent, I maneuvered for a lock. I fired one volley of twin-Avenger fire.

Missed.

A second barrage.

Missed again. This was becoming irritating.

As I lined up for my third shot, a swarm of Hornet cluster missiles exploded against the Dragon, sending it spinning. Matching its speed, I fired my guns at the wounded Dragon, destroying it in a brilliant explosion.

"Don't forget you're not the only one out here," came a voice over the intercom. Lieutenant Junior Grade Furey. "Call if you need help. Remember your wingmen!"

"Thanks sir," I responded sheepishly. "Sorry sir."

"No problem," he said before jetting away after his next target. I set my sights on a target more up to my level: an SF Scorpion. Setting my Hornets for duel-fire, I locked the target.

The next part was easy. Just fire and watch it die. The six-missile Hornet swarm broke from my fighter's missile salvos and raced towards the Scorpion. Five of them hit, sending the enemy fighter spinning in a new direction. The Scorpion did a complete three-sixty before detonating.

"I got one!" I exclaimed. I couldn't believe I had just said that, but I had said it nonetheless. I reminded myself not to get too overly-excited. It would look bad to my superiors.

My headset came alive again. I was beginning to get used to it. "This is Beta Three! I'm taking serious damage here! I can't hold out much longer--!"

Beta Three? Oh my God! SARA! I disregarded all other dangers as I raced to Sara's aid. She had two Dragon fighters on her tail. I could see that Beta two, Lieutenant (jg) Furey, was already busy dispatching one. I took the other.

The Dragon was persistent. It was difficult to keep it in my HUD. Still, I would defend Sara if it meant blowing this entire Shivan force to kingdom-come.

A missile detached from the Dragon and headed for Sara's damaged, sparking craft. It hit with deadly force, sending Sara tumbling through space.

"I'm hit! I've lost flight control! I'm co—p—ar—t! Mayday! May—da—!" Sara's transmission disintegrated in static as her fighter erupted in a show of impressive fireworks.

"No!!! Sara!" I screamed, not realizing that I was on squadron frequency. Grief transformed into fury. I targeted the nearest fighter and blew it apart with devastating rage.

Enemy after enemy died by my twin-Avengers and what was left of my Hornet missiles. I just didn't care anymore. They killed Sara, and now I was going to make them pay. Dearly.

"Beta Four," my headset called, "disengage and rearm. Then drop back and protect the GTC Drake as it makes its approach to the Rigel."

I was surprised the Rigel was still there. Lieutenant Commander Perry's Alpha Wing was doing better than I thought. Now it would be only a few more seconds before the Drake's laser turrets would be in range, and then Alpha and Beta Wings would be relieved by Gamma Wing's Apollo-class fighters and the Drake.

"Copy that sir," I grumbled. Now it was time to finish the job Sara had given her life to accomplish. And for her sake, I would!

I called the Centar-class support vessel to rearm my fighter as I dropped out of the battle and reduced my speed. A minute later, my fighter shook as the support ship clamped down on my craft and opened the salvos for rearming. Shortly thereafter, I was cruising back into battle again.

It was all but over. We had won, but I paid a dear price for it. I continued to fly the rest of the battle before the Drake's turrets came to bear and began firing upon the enemy

fighters. Shortly afterwards, Gamma Wing arrived.

I sat down at the bar and ordered the hardest liquor on the list. The bartender looked at me funny before slowly getting me a glass.

"Girl dump you, pilot?" He asked. He was damn lucky I didn't deck him right there. I stared at the post-mission report in my hands. The mission was a success, but I didn't tend to think so. Sometimes I wondered what this is all worth.

A long time ago, Sara had told me that following a dream was the best thing to happen to a human being. I tended to agree, but this time...this time the dream got her killed. I had always wanted to become a pilot, and here I was. First mission, and I had already failed to save the one that I loved. Her voice rung in my ear, as if she was still beside me. Don't give up, she said. I thought to say something but realized I was in a crowded Pilot's Lounge.

Don't give up. Don't give up.

The reprimand I had received for using personal grief on squadron frequency was of no concern to me anymore. Sara had died because of my inadequate dogfighting skills. Silently, I vowed never again to let that happen. I would train day and night. I would be prepared for whatever came my way. I was a pilot in the GTA armada, and it was damn time I started to act like it.

I found myself staring out the window for a good long while before the bartender gave me my drink. Slowly, I brought the glass to my lips. I drank in remembrance of days long past. I drank for the future yet to come.