

Opening Moves

"I imagine there are several things on your mind, Captain." The Shivan said as it led Alhazred through the massive Juggernaut.

"You could say that." Locke replied. If it weren't for more important things, Locke would have asked how the Shivan could talk without a mouth. At least, it didn't *look* like it had a mouth. The Shivans intrigued the Terran. They were as alien and physically intimidating as he had imagined or seen in simulations, hell, some were three times his size, but they did not at all present the image of xenocidal maniacs. The five compound eyes on the Shivan's head almost looked caring, although Locke guessed it to be similar to how a dolphin looks like it's smiling.

"All of your questions will be answered. I suspect most of them pertain to what I will tell you about."

"You do realize..." Locke started. "...that the alliance doesn't trust you?"

"I would think that would be... what is your term... common sense?" replied the Shivan.

"True, I just noticed it in a different way. 'Mendacus' is a mis-spelling of the word for 'liar' in another language."

* * *

GTVJ Mendacus, flight deck

Lilith let out a whistle as she circled one of the SF Dragons.

"It appears you had the same idea as I."

Lilith turned to see Turel. "I guess so." She turned back to the fighter. "You know, I usually hate these things... but now I just wanna' take it out for a spin."

"Yes, the Astaroth has always interested me." Turel replied. "Hmm... it seems the entire squadron prefers the extremes. Captain Locke is heartbroken if he can't take out his Pega-"

Both pilots snapped their attention to the front of the Dragon when what would be best described as a canopy popped open. A Shivan leapt out and turned as it landed, just as surprised by Lilith and Turel as they were of it.

Several noises came from the Shivan, like metal clicks except too fast to call a click.

"Perhaps that is they're language?" Turel offered.

"Of course it's they're language, we've been through this al..."

Lilith and Turel looked over at the same time to see a slightly disheveled-looking woman peek around from one of the other fighters. Her hair could have attracted as much attention as Lilith's. While not very long, every strand was light blue in color.

"Oh! I'm sorry, you must be some of the new squadron, I thought..." She was interrupted again, this time by a rather abrasive electronic noise from the fighter she had apparently been examining. "Oops. One second!" She ducked back, making a face.

The Shivan shook its head as if it'd given up.

"There." The woman said as the noise stopped. She walked around the fighter. The Shivan

turned to her and more noises came, but the woman seemed to comprehend it perfectly.

"Yes... that's perfect! Thank you, Sonin." She said. The Shivan bounded over to another fighter.

"You can understand that?" Lilith asked.

"Mmm-hmm. I'm Dr. Mina Hargrove, I'm heading the research team on this thing."

"*The* Dr. Hargrove?" exclaimed Turel. "You also researched the Knossos portal, if I remember correctly. Pilots were privileged to an excerpt of one of your reports."

"That's me, I get around. I'll probably end up in Delta Serpentis when they finish building the new one. And now they want me for Project Abaddon, which they've planned out already after the Shivans have been here for less than a day... oh, um, that's supposed to be classified, you never heard that. Here, try these, they pin to your collars." She handed both Lilith and Turel a small, oddly shaped object. At a glance it could have been the top silhouette of a Nephilim bomber. They fastened the objects as instructed.

"Oh, you can get rid of that, too." Dr. Hargrove motioned to Turel's translator. The Vasudan shrugged and removed it. "Well, is it working?"

Turel looked puzzled. "I hear you in my language..."

"You in mine, Turel." Lilith added. "Wow."

"Shivan technology." Dr. Hargrove explained. "They made them on their way, they told us. Translates Terran Standard, all Vasudan speech, and the Shivans'... words. There's a rather interesting story there too. Apparently, the ship's Captain thought they wouldn't be done for a while, so he learned to speak Terran Standard. The Shivans left on his bridge crew said he was... less than happy. Of course, there still isn't enough for everyone, but there will be eventually."

A chime ringed through the room, most likely the entire ship. "Dr. Hargrove, report to Engineering. Dr. Hargrove, to Engineering."

"Always something new." The scientist shrugged. "Ah well, if you'd like to know something about the fighters, ask Sonin. She's the ship's flight technician."

"She? How do you... know it's a she?" Lilith asked, high on curiosity.

Dr. Hargrove shrugged. "I'm not a biologist, I know because they tell me." She said as she left.

"Dr. Hargrove!"

The Terran and Vasudan looked over to the Shivan. It... *she* raised one of her front arms to the side and pointed.

"*That* way."

Dr. Hargrove looked down the way she was going and looked back. "Ah yes, silly me!"

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On the other side of the ship, Alhazred entered a medium sized room with the Shivan captain. They weren't far away from the bridge.

"I should give you this now before I forget..." The Shivan said, handing Locke a small piece of metal. "Pin it to your collar, it's a universal translator. Works for all known languages."

Locke bit his tongue before he turned it into a Star Trek reference.

"This is our... I suppose you could call it a map room." The Shivan explained. Locke looked around; the room was circular, but totally plane. The walls were made out of a different material than the rest of the ship, and the room was about half as high as the flight deck. The brown metal shimmered lightly in the light, yet despite its apparent smoothness, it wasn't reflective. The Shivan touched a key near the door and a small square on the wall slid up. The alien took the small pad inside and pressed a few buttons.

"This..." he said, imputing commands. "...is the galaxy as *we* know it."

He looked at one side of the room. Locke did the same. A square image phased into view on a large portion of the wall, filling the height and almost making a semi-circle. It was a shot of the Milky Way Galaxy. Over laid on it were millions, if not a billion little diamonds, each representing a star system. Despite their tiny size, a great many of them overlapped. One part of the galaxy, a rough wedge a little more than a quarter of the map, was unmarked.

"These are the systems my race is aware of. If any are inhabited, we call them by the names given by their settlers. This blank region that you see is unexplored." The Shivan explained. "And these... are the systems we have conquered."

The Shivan pressed something on the pad. Immediately, almost every mark on the map turned a blood red. The few that retained the original white color were on the borders of the Shivans' explored space.

Locke felt his heart skip a beat. It was only a holographic map, but that was misleading. If this was true, more than half the galaxy belonged to Shivans. There were so many red marks and so few white ones, he couldn't even find a pattern of marks that matched the GTVA on the map, even though it had to be on one of the edges of the marked stars. For the first time, Locke was truly afraid of an enemy.

The Shivan seemed to understand, giving Alhazred a minute to let the information sink in.

"How can you..." Locke started, deciding to rephrase himself. "How can one race..."

"Claim all of this?" The Shivan finished. "I thought you might ask that. Our origin is this system." The Shivan manipulated the control once again, and a square formed over a small area of the map, near the center of the red area. The enclosed section suddenly enlarged, filling the whole screen with a set of systems about as big as the GTVA. It zoomed in once more, on a solitary marker.

"Our race... Shivans, as you call us, has existed for more than a billion years. One thing we pride ourselves on is our attention to our recording of history, wrought about by our 'place in the Galaxy,' as your Ancients would have likely called it. We saw it fit to document everything as we swept through the galaxy."

"Not ours..." Locke responded. "We don't even know what they called themselves. No offense Captain, but you did a good job of eradicating them."

"As it always is." The Shivan responded grimly. He zoomed the picture in once more, showing the star system's layout and highlighting the 8th planet.

"This was our world. A long time ago... Perhaps when we had already existed about twice as long as your race has... we had the technology to explore the heavens. But we chose not to. We were content. We had been evolving in a form similar to yours, actually. Our race had no war, ever. To this day it is not understood how, but not once in our recorded history have we turned on one another."

"Until now? Never so much as... a defecting pilot?" Locke asked.

"Never. As a race of peace, we were also a race without weapons. And, as we were to discover... a race without defenses. Being more peaceful than should be possible, we didn't really understand the concept of conflict. Eventually, another race came to our world. They were at war with another space faring race and wanted to establish a base on the planet. We said no. We wanted nothing to do with this... thing they called war."

"They didn't like that very much, I take it." Locke added. Chuckling, the Shivan went on.

"No, they did not. They attacked us, killed everyone on our smallest continent, and established their base. We were enraged, and confused. We couldn't understand how something like this could happen in the universe. But we had more important things to worry about at the time. We used our technology, something they hadn't noticed, to build weapons, and ships, all of it far superior to them. When we retaliated, we destroyed them, all of them. We abandoned our world in favor of the void, where we have lived and evolved into this state of being. We grafted our young with our plasma cannons for so long we are now born with them. In any case, the race they were at war with thanked us for destroying their enemies... and then, as we destroyed them as well, we realized something. Or my generation's ancestors thought they did, anyway." The Shivan continued, now talking in the past tense.

"They realized that they were superior. Superior to everything else living, and as such, it was their duty to... *cleanse* the inferiority from the universe. We were the only race, it seemed, that were better than the others by so much we could have had peace. But since other races bicker and fight, it elevates us. It was decided we would only destroy destroyers, but that was twisted long ago into using even an argument between races as an excuse to destroy them. It was first a way of preserving life, a way of letting races that were superior to others and on our level thrive. But it was warped long ago. And since then, we have rampaged through the stars, destroying what is not our own, because all other life forms are inferior and must be destroyed. That one statement has driven us all this time. Until now."

"Yes... until now..." Locke echoed. "And then there's the million dollar question, as my people say. Why?"

"Many things..." the Captain answered. "A large group of us is discontent with our way of living. We are, quite simply, sick of it. Our race has focused so much on this xenocidal crusade for so long that we've lost our goal. It's no longer destroying to cleanse the universe or to kill destroyers who make themselves inferior by causing war, it's destroying because its tradition to the elders and to the younger generations, its enjoyment. We've taken your name for us because we can't remember our own, it was lost through the eons of chaos. Is it not sad, that a race cannot even remember their name? We always say we've given it up to not share a similarity with inferior races, but that's only because we're embarrassed that our great recordings don't have it. We've been planning this for some time, waiting for the right moment... your GTVA is the best chance we have ever had. Through what you call the Great War and then later in the recent conflict, opportunity did not present itself. Until your intelligence sent a suicide flight using stolen fighters into our staging area, beyond the nebula the first Ancient Portal you found led to."

Locke recognized what he was talking about instantly. "I was on that flight. One of us didn't make it... we destroyed some kind of devices..."

"Communication nodes." The Shivan answered. "They're a little volatile, but they can send quantum pulses that allow attack fleets to communicate with bases of operation from great distances. When you destroyed them, we had our chance. The fleet had not yet received orders, but I had, it was normal for a flagship. Upon my ship's arrival, we told the rest of the fleet that we were to destroy the star you called Capella to create another nebula. That wasn't the real order of course. Still out of contact, I said that we were to invade your systems with our last Ancient portal, and then we staged the events that got us and only us here. We destroyed the portal as we used it, before it

could stabilize the node permanently."

The insectoid alien entered some commands on the pad again, and the map shifted to the entire galaxy once more.

"Our plan is to bring all of our forces to this region at once, as soon as the opportunity presents itself. They would destroy as many ships of the other side as they could, with possible exceptions being ones that might join later. If we pull this off, and declare our... your word is coup de' etat, I believe, it will cause a political shock wave in our ruling body, halting the invasion of your worlds. Of every race currently being attacked. The enemy fleet will be frozen for a short period of time, perhaps one or two of your weeks. Your authority figures are still deciding on the best course of action after that, I believe it will be to either assault the Juggernaut fleet or attack the conventional fleet. Either way, the first option will come eventually, it will be the part where the odds are against us. But with our fleet and what yours will hopefully be restored to put together, it's possible to win such an engagement. If the Juggernaut fleet is ordered to spread out, it would be better to ignore them as much as possible until only they remain."

"None of them besides this one are switching sides?" Locke asked.

"No. The commanders and most of the crews are young, ambitious... violent. Our leader is on the last Lucifer destroyer... I do not recall what he named it, 'e' something... I am finished for now Captain. The current situation will be covered in the normal Command Briefings. If you have a question about something I did not already answer, please ask."

"Actually..." Locke thought. "There is one thing I'd like to know. The Terran that first communicated with your race, Admiral Bosch. What happened to Admiral Bosch?"

"Ah yes..." the Shivan answered, intrigue in his voice. "I'm sorry Captain. Your superiors, well, they're my superiors as well now, made it quite clear I was to keep that to myself. 'Classified' I think they called it. The concept is new to me, we usually share all information with everyone in the chain of command."

Locke sighed. *It figures...I bet Bosch never expected this though.*

"In any case, the first quarterdeck meeting is tomorrow morning at 0700 hours. I will give the briefing. If that's all Captain, you are dismissed."

"Yes sir."

* * *

Mendacus' rec. deck

I should have asked him for directions... Locke thought to himself as he wandered a corridor. Not long after he had left the Shivan captain, he realized he had absolutely no idea how to get back to the pilots' barracks. He was in the right general area... at least he thought he was.

Passing a door slightly larger than most. Locke stopped. On the other side were sounds of a fight, a bladed weapon slicing every now and then. Fearing the worst, Locke hit one of the buttons for the door, the others being out of reach on the ceiling for a zero-G condition. The double door slid open, revealing a rather large room.

The room had the feeling of a gym except with no equipment. This feeling was compounded when Locke saw what the noise was coming from. A lone Shivan was dueling with several... things; aliens that Locke had never seen. A race annihilated by the Destroyers, maybe. They were also holograms, as apparent from the flickers they suffered every now and then.

On one of the Shivan's front limbs was a massive sword like weapon; two long blades on both sides of it's arm were held in place by bands around the limb. The blades almost met in front of

the Shivan's hand, each forming into a point.

The Shivan was using his weapon quite effectively. More and more of the beasts appeared, attacked, and then fell. At one point, two were left, and no more appeared. One was being exceptionally tricky, allowing the other to get behind. The Shivan destroyed the first one by spinning around and slicing through the top of it's head, and as it landed, two small dagger like weapons, glowing with energy, rotated out from the Shivan's wrist and onto it's other hand, and those sliced the head of the other clean off. The Shivan had been spared the time of bringing his other weapon to bear.

As the last creature fell, they all vanished into nothing. A holographic screen formed in front of the Shivan, displaying some kind of list. The second item from the top was white instead of red, and the Shivan yelled something.

Locke, sensing a need to introduce himself rather than just stand there stupidly, spoke.

"Bravo."

The Shivan turned. And voice what would best be described as a snarl. "Yes YES I'm coming! I understand this odd need you have to poke and prod just because you can't ASK about our biology..."

"Uh... actually, I just wanted to ask for directions..."

The Shivan looked puzzled, pulling back a little.

"Ah... you must be a pilot in the new squadron then. Barracks are down the left corridor, take a right, and go straight. Take the lift down two decks. Now leave me be and if you see a scientist, tell them I went in the opposite direction."

"Not big on conversation?" Locke asked, unsure why. He certainly didn't want to make a Shivan mad after seeing them; this was one of the bigger ones and would tower over him if it was standing on it's back limbs. And then it gave an odd little expression, it's top eyes pointing down-word like pointed brows.

"If you want to talk, be something to talk about. Others, Terran, easily annoy me. I would advise you to be somewhere else."

"Fine, fine... I can take a hint." Locke turned and walked to the door as the Shivan began it's exercise again, trying to break the record for fastest completion.

Minutes passed, during which the Shivan failed to notice the overcoat Locke had left next to the door. With ten seconds to the record, the Shivan raised his blade and prepared to deliver the final blow... and another blade, long and curved, raised unnoticed to it's side. As the Shivan swung, so did the other blade.

The mighty destroyer roared in shock as his own momentum was used to pull him way off to the side, almost flinging him. Attached to the blade that was now in between his was a long metal pole, and holding that pole, pulling with all his might on the weapon and the Shivan, was Captain Locke.

The holographic system detected the lack of activity towards the program and shut it off. Turning sharply, the Shivan glared five very red daggers at the Terran.

"You... have a VERY big death wish, ape."

Smirking, Locke backed off and slung his scythe over his shoulder. "No fair, I don't know what you evolved from."

The Shivan was not amused. Locke jumped to the side as the destroyer swung down at him

with his weapon. The Blue Lion swung the blade of Death idly, trying to get a feel for how the Shivan defended. The attack was easily blocked. Locke tried again, and again, each time with a different motion. As the Shivan retaliated, he noticed a pattern.

Every time Locke's adversary guarded, it was with the same motion; blocking the blow by holding his blade horizontally at the right height. Just managing to guard against several very hard swings, Locke dodged to the side. The Shivan's momentum worked against him again, this time carrying him too far in the follow through.

Taking his advantage, Locke raked the very tip of his scythe across the Shivan's back, just enough to draw blood. Spinning the weapon around as he drew back, he raised the staff end and slammed it hard into the wound. Purposely going for it again, he just stopped himself as the Shivan swung around to guard. In the process, the blade drew blood from Locke's side; not a serious wound, more like the one the Terran had just inflicted. Ignoring it, Locke suddenly caught himself and went under the blade, jamming the end into the Shivan just below the head. Recoiling, the Shivan knocked Locke's feet from under him at the same time.

Locke and the Shivan both swung almost blindly; and froze when they had the tips of their weapons at each other's heads. The Shivan suddenly broke out in what the translator heard as mild laughter.

"Not bad, Terran, certainly better than I would have thought. Perhaps I will tolerate you yet."

Standing up, Locke watched as the Shivan peered out the door before taking off down the hallway. Locke guessed he was the research team's guinea pig before leaving himself to settle in his quarters.

* * *

Bridge, next morning

Dr. Hargrove felt like a twentieth century mechanic. Having to install a standard Terran/Vasudan comm. system on the Mendacus was fine; going through all the little incompatibilities between GTVA and Shivan technology was not. And laying on her back on the rough floor, half underneath a console, because the rest of the science team was too busy to make the modifications that the station needed was just plain uncomfortable. All this and it was only 0530 hours. This would be a long day.

"Well Commodore, if that doesn't work I don't know what will." Dr. Hargrove flatly stated as she stood up and dusted her hands off. "God I can't wait for the Vasudan scientists to get here... undermanned does not even *begin* to describe this... can you try it now so I can *fix* it now if it's not working?"

Chuckling, Commodore Ronald replied; "Of course Doctor. Command requested to know when our comm. system was working anyway. Communications, hail Allied Command."

Complying with the order, the comm. officer on duty looked for the frequency and sent the standard hail. Much to Dr. Hargrove's delight, Command responded with not one pop of static and a clear picture on the screen. She couldn't stick around though, she had work to do. All she really heard of the conversation was the Command Officer requesting to see the Captain urgently. But what she cared about is that she could HEAR it, without it being relayed short-range through the Aquitaine.

* * *

"Captain Locke..."

Said captain rolled over on the floor. Almost everyone's quarters in the pilot barracks hadn't been converted for Terrans or Vasudans, and thus there was no bed in his room. But, with his coat as

a pillow, the floor sufficed.

"Captain, are you there?"

Reaching into one of his bags, Locke pulled out a small copper dagger he normally used for display during one of his ceremonies. It served a different purpose as he hurled it at the wall where his comm. unit would be in his old quarters aboard the Aquitaine.

"Captain! Wake up!"

Jolting upright from the sudden shout, Locke blinked his eyes several times and truly woke up at last. "Huh? Wha..."

"Ah, good, you're awake."

Locke recognized it as Commodore Ronald and blinked again, getting up.

"Please report to Quarterdeck immediately Captain. Ronald out."

Glancing down at his military issue watch, Locke frowned. "Either this is wrong or the Captain hasn't gotten the hang of Terran Galactic Time." He mumbled, noting it was only 0600.

Walking down the corridor five minutes later, Locke pulled on his uniform jacket and zipped halfway. Being a Captain afforded him slight protocol violations in small things like uniform, and the jacket was too tight to zip all the way with the oversized bandage on half of his abdomen. If there was one thing he was grateful for, it was that Quarterdeck was apparently near the actual flight deck. He never understood that about Hecates, the Quarterdeck was halfway across the ship.

Entering the room, Locke noticed two things; it was small, a testament to the ship's two-squadron capacity. And Commodore Ronald was talking to a Shivan. A Shivan with a long patch of some kind of gunk on it's back, and a dried black liquid around it.

"Ah, good morning Captain. Captain Norath, meet Captain Locke..." Ronald started, before being cut off.

"We've met." The Shivan commented, cocking his head toward Locke. "Though I admit I didn't think someone that puny would be my fellow squadron commander..."

"Puny? Who has the injuries bad enough that he needs bandages?" Locke said. Norath didn't need to know he had an even bigger one.

"Ah-hem."

Shutting up, the pilots turned to the Commodore.

"I'm not even going to ask, I'm just giving the briefing because the Captain is busy. Captain Locke, you were briefed on the NTF situation before arriving, correct?"

"Yes sir." Locke answered, nodding.

"Well, you might as well disregard that, because this morning, it got worse."

Norath pondered that. He had only vaguest knowledge of the Terran rebellion, other than Admiral Bosch. "Define... worse."

"Last night, the GTVA announced the news of this ship to the major media networks. Needless to say, the news spread pretty quickly. Unfortunately, in our haste to handle what we have planned, we overlooked a possibility..."

Stepping to the side, Ronald pulled a pad like the one the Shivan Captain had the day before. A star chart of the GTVA formed on the wall. The icons for Altair, Aldebaran, Ribos, Antares, and

Ross 128 were all in red. Commodore Ronald explained.

"A somewhat large portion of our forces were... less than pleased with the news. Several battle groups, a lot of which fought in Capella, refuse to accept our welcoming the Shivans. To make matters worse, they've made their point by joining the new NTF. With our fleet only in the preliminary stages of reconstruction, this is a serious threat. Before today, the NTF was a small armada; now it's a fleet. A fleet bigger than ours. All of the rebels are in these systems. As far as we know, our defecting forces are falling in line with the flagship, the NTD Vermilion, and it's commanding officer, Admiral Karen Shima."

"Shima?" Locke thought aloud. "Where have I heard that..."

Ronald answered immediately. "History class, most likely, Captain. Admiral Shima's mother was the commander of the GTD Bastion during the Great War. Hell, her mother just came out of retirement to help counteract our loss of experienced officers from the last conflicts. In any case, with our fleet nowhere near full strength, we could be looking at a civil war that will last longer than the first that we don't even have a numbers advantage on, and the alliance is going to use the Mendacus to make sure that doesn't happen. The Shivans were kind enough to provide us with a map of jump nodes we didn't know about. Not all of them are stable enough for Terran or Vasudan ships... like this one."

Ronald entered a command on the pad, and a line signifying a jump node formed in yellow between Mirfax and Ross 128.

"But..." Ronald went on. "It's perfectly fine for the Mendacus. The installation in Delta Serpentis positioned at the Knossos construction yard sent in a recon unit. They were driven off, but they found the NTF's main staging area in Ross 128. We'll be there before they can even consider moving. Captain Locke, when we enter the subspace tunnel to Ross 128, you'll fly ahead in your Pegasus. It's been modified to handle the unstable node. As soon as you enter the system, you'll jump behind the seventh planet, on the opposite side of the NTF group. We need tactical data; what ships are there, freighters, cargo, scan anything you can. You'll be going in alone Captain, and will be so until you have gathered data on everything or have been discovered. But try not to get discovered at least until the Mendacus arrives to deploy the rest of the fighters. The rest of your squadron, and yours, Captain Norath, will fly heavy bomber and fighter support roles against the NTF upon your arrival. You don't need to destroy them all, just keep them occupied until the Mendacus can recharge its jump drives and enter the field of engagement. If that amount of time is enough for them to decide to run, we can at least inflict some damage. This point is very near the Delta Serpentis jump node; we believe if they run, they'll head there and then to Beta Aquilae."

A sound chimed, signaling the intercom had just turned on. The captain's voice came over. "Commodore Ronald, we have entered the Mirfak system. ETA to the Ross 128 node is 20 minutes, with another 10 until the system itself."

"Roger that, Captain, on my way." Ronald acknowledged before turning back to the squadron leader. "I've already had your squadrons briefed. Captain Locke, you launch in 20 minutes. Norath, your squadron launches with the Blue Lions in 30."

* * *

Flight Deck

Locke walked onto the flight deck, not long after, finding the usual quasi-chaos that all flight decks exhibited just before a major launch. The ambient light in the huge hanger had been brightened and made less red. His helmet under his arm, he walked over to his Pegasus, which had been conveniently placed on the ground floor. A Shivan was standing in front of it, glancing back and forth between a pad and the fighter.

"Can I help you?" Locke asked politely. The Shivan hopped an inch or two into the air, turning around in the process.

"Ah... Captain Locke?" it questioned. Locke nodded. "Hmm, good. I'm Sonin, the crew chief. You specified your weapons load out already and we have it set, but... you didn't specify a primary gun, and according to the information I was given, the guns mounted on now shouldn't be compatible with the fighter."

Alhazred chuckled. "That's because they aren't. Not normally, anyway. The crew chief on the Aquitaine modified the power couplings for the cannons to take it and set it so the reactor would force feed power into the guns. I didn't specify a primary because the Kaysers themselves don't actually fit in the banks, so those are modified too. They're welded in."

Sonin glanced at the different specifications on her pad again. "Hmm... remind me to give your old crew chief a call, Captain. If he modified those monstrous things to fit in there, she's a genius. Your fighter has been fully prepped, good luck."

Before Alhazred could reply, a loud, inhuman scream echoed through the fighter bay. Turning, both the pilot and crew chief saw a Shivan forearm sticking out of the canopy of a Dragon class fighter, apparently stuck when the heavy metal swung down.

"Norath you IDIOT." Sonin yelled as she stomped away. "I TOLD you I made it lower faster..."

Locke was amused, until a Terran caught Sonin halfway across the deck. He swung his helmet on and decided to power up his fighter, and then he heard the conversation. The pilot was demanding to know why all of one of the secondary weapons had been taken. Recognizing the voice of the Terran, Locke paused.

"I believe..." Sonin answered, calling the information up on her pad. "Lt. Turel got the last of them."

Shit! Locke thought. Abandoning his plans to power up his Pegasus early, he walked over.

"The Vasudan?! You give *him* the last?" the Terran shouted. "You're all the same..."

"You don't give up, do you, Ensign? Sonin, go... give Norath a hand." Locke flat out ordered, not pleased. He turned back to the pilot. "As for you, I've about had it. I don't know how in hell you got in my squadron, I don't really give a damn."

"But Sir..."

"Shut up! I'm speaking!" Locke interrupted, backing the pilot against the wall. "I will NOT have a racial prick such as yourself in my squadron, I don't care WHAT I have to go through to get you out, you can rest assured it will happen. You're grounded!"

Locke walked to his fighter, put his helmet on, and climbed into the cockpit. Running a pre-flight check, he powered up the fighter and got ready to leave. Diverting every iota of power to engines, he glanced out into space. A few seconds later, the familiar blue tunnel of subspace replaced the void. Sonin came over his comm. system.

"Captain Locke, you are cleared to launch. We don't use catapults to save space, you'll need to use anti-gravs."

With that, Alhazred hit his burners, banked hard to the side, and shot out at over 100kph. Bringing his fighter around the Mendacus, he gunned the afterburners again and sped ahead. If it took the Mendacus 10 minutes to travel the node at 25kph, he would be there in less than 2. And he didn't know if he should get some kind of bragging right or just be terrified of how long he would be alone...

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All the pilots were finalizing their ship and weapon selections in the briefing rooms. Lilith chose a Myrmidon... with three banks of Kaysers, Trebuchets and 2 Helios torpedoes. Massive destruction was going to be her forte for this mission.

Satisfied with her choices, the Blue Lions' second in command walked out of the briefing room, thinking it had been odd how Locke hadn't given the briefing for once...

But she thought something completely different when a man bounded out of a shadow towards her, and the knife in his hand was suddenly embedded in her side. She couldn't scream; his hand was over her mouth. Before she could even think about struggling, he dragged her back into the briefing room and threw her to the floor. Glancing at the fighter display to see what fighter was Lilith's, he walked back out. No one saw a thing, since the briefing room led to a small empty corridor before the actual flight deck.

Lilith tried to get up, but found she couldn't. A sense of numbness was spreading through her body from the wound... a toxin.

Shit shit shitshitshit can't believe he just downed me like that eh Locke's gonna' bepissedwhenhefindsoutwho... she thought, remembering the glance she got of her assailant's face. She tried again to get up, gaining a small success. She reached to the briefing table and managed to grab the edge, but her consciousness didn't last long enough for her to do anything else.

* * *

Turel watched from his cockpit as Epsilon wing, Shivan Naheemas, rose off the deck and flew out of the bay. Commodore Ronald's voice came over again.

"Epsilon wing, launch."

A wing of three Seraphims bombers took off... Turel remembered a couple of their own wings were shorthanded with Locke gone and a pilot grounded, and he was leading Beta Wing himself. Except halfway down, a Myrmidon joined the wing.

Odd... Turel thought, trying to remember if that was the spot for the Alpha 1 fighter or not for this mission. Apparently not, Lilith was leading Alpha wing, and he hadn't noticed her coming onto the deck...

"Beta wing, launch."

Turel forgot about it, now focusing on the mission. They'd still have a few minutes to wait anyway, depending on how Locke was faring.

* * *

"Okay... lets see what *you've* got..." Locke said to himself as he moved his fighter to the last freighter. His scan results had been disturbing, to say the least. Everything read "Civilians/bio-organic." In any case, he wouldn't know completely until the data was analyzed.

Moving on, Locke set course to come up along side the lead destroyer. The Hecate had a brilliant red chevron wrapping around the center. Locke guessed before locking on it was the Vermillion. He matched speed, started the scan, and waited.

* * *

"Are all ships ready?" Admiral Shima asked on the bridge of the Vermillion. Her XO reported that they were still forming up. "Make it quick; they already knew we're here, they wouldn't send a recon flight unless they wanted to make a move."

Wanting nothing to go wrong, Shima walked around the bridge, making sure everything was

in order. She glanced at one of the sensor consoles and almost moved on, but something caught the Admiral's eye. The tactical officer noticed her interest and since sensors were part of his post, stepped up.

"Admiral, can I help you?"

Shima's gaze didn't move. The rather large and intimidating woman pointed to a small reading on the screen. "What's that?"

"Looks like... a small asteroid. That's usually what anomalous readings like this are, since small ones don't have enough matter to get sensor lock from this close where the outputs from our subsystems interfere slightly. Normally it's nothing, like say if we were tracking a fighter it would be..."

"Lieutenant, I don't need a lesson!" Shima snapped. "What bothers me is it's not... moving..." a possibility occurred to her as she spoke the words, and she began entering commands into the sensors, knowing exactly what she wanted done and unwilling to waste time by filling in her tactical officer. Having reconfigured a scanner, she zoomed the display in on the unknown reading. "Have a wing of fighters surround this point... now if you're what I think you are..."

* * *

Locke waited for the scan to finish. It was more than half done, but scanning destroyers took time. Just as it completed, a piercing ring shot through the cockpit. Locke thought his eardrums would burst, and tried to grab his ears through his helmet. A second later however, it passed.

* * *

"A Pegasus!" Shima remarked, seeing the outline that the active scan had given her. "Have those fighters converge; no one fires yet, try to get him alive. Get scanners locked on that thing and transmit targeting data to our fighters!"

* * *

"Shit what the hell was that...!" Locke thought aloud. *Oh well, scan done, let's see what the next one's got...*

"GTVA fighter, this is NTF wing epsilon. Power down and surrender immediately!"

If Locke wasn't sitting down, he would kick himself very hard for not noticing the wing of fighters coming up around him on his scanners. He considered his options: surrender, which wasn't going to happen, or running like mad. He was angled vertical with the Vermilion directly above him, so the fighters only had him in a semi-circle below. And despite the fact that the Vermilion almost certainly knew he was there and was undoubtedly trying to get sensor lock for the fighters, they hadn't done that yet. Alhazred opened a comm. channel.

"NTF fighters..."

That out, he suddenly swung down and gunned the afterburners, shooting between two fighters.

"...kiss my ass!"

* * *

Looking around, Turel started to grow impatient. At the rate Locke was apparently going, the Mendacus would be able to jump in before the fighters did.

"Turel."

The Vasudan blinked, startled out of his small irk-ness. "Sniper? Yes? What is it?"

"Have you seen Lilith anywhere?" Sniper asked.

"No, I would think she'd be in front of Alpha wing. Why?"

"Because..." Sniper told. "I'm Alpha 2 and she isn't here. I'm not sure the prospect of substitute wing leader is something I like."

"Odd..." Turel thought aloud. "I wonder where she could be..."

Before he could finish that thought, the familiar Allied Command officer hailed the fighters. "Pilots, Captain Locke has been discovered by the NTF. Jump to the field of engagement immediately."

* * *

"Command, I seriously hope they're on they're way!" Locke hissed as he banked, rolled, and dodged gunfire and missiles. The fact that no one could get aspect lock on him yet was the only thing saving him. If the rest of his squadron and Norath's didn't arrive before one of the capital ships locked on to him, he was either dead by missiles or anti-fighter beams.

"Hold on pilot, I've just ordered your reinforcements to jump in. They should be arriving momentarily."

A second after that, an indicator on Locke's controls flashed 'Aspect lock acquired by hostile targets. Stealth mode compromised; deactivating.'

Before he could curse, however, a multitude of small jump nodes opened. Terran and Shivan fighters alike emerged from them, and Locke quickly poured the speed on and rushed behind a line of friendly fighters to get a breather.

It was a fur ball within 10 seconds. Locke soon banked hard and flew back into the fray, and the NTF fighters were dropping like flies. The Shivan bombers in Norath's squad quickly disposed of one of the three Orion class destroyers and a corvette. And on top of all that, a message soon came in to every allied fighter. A Shivan appeared in Locke's comm. window.

"Mendacus to Allied fighters; our jump drives have recharged and we are approaching the field of engagement."

No sooner had he finished than a massive jump node opened, and the Juggernaut emerged. The remaining NTF capital ships swiftly turned and headed for the nearby jump node into Delta Serpents, and the Vermillion was almost there already. The multitude of freighters had already jumped out. This time, Commodore Ronald came over the Allied comm. channel.

"All fighters, stand clear of the NTD Paracelsus!"

A few seconds passed, during which the bombers attacking the Orion turned and shot away. The crystalline arms of the Mendacus surged with power that gathered at the very ends and shot out as the massive beams so large they obliterated the destroyer's aft section. The effects served to actually deform the shape of the destroyer's silhouette. What was left of the destroyer floated dead in space for a few seconds, before it's hull collapsed with explosive effects.

Locke started reading an odd comm. signal from an Allied fighter near him. It read as Alpha 1. Spinning around, he found out it was sending a secure transmission. The receiving end was the Vermillion. Locke overrode the Myrmidon's security code with his own and tapped in.

"...corvette and destroyer deployments in other NTF controlled systems. In some cases I can give you their names."

Alhazred's face showed a look of confusion under the helmet. That wasn't Lilith... his expression turned to one of utter shock at what came from the Vermillion.

"Alright pilot; you want to defect, you've got it. Land on the NTD Babel immediately." A women's voice came through. The Myrmidon banked hard and headed for the last Orion.

"All fighters, we are unable to obtain a stable lock on the Babel. We're targeting the NTC Damocles to try and kill two birds with one stone. Sand clear!" Commodore Ronald yelled. The Damocles, a Fenris cruiser, was moving around the rear of the Babel. At that very second it was directly behind, it's full profile open to targeting. A second before the Mendacus' beams powered up, however, the Orion class destroyer banked to starboard, altering course to reach the node.

Slamming the comm. button to broadcast to his squad, Locke yelled; "Alpha 1 is defecting! Blue Lions, break off engagements and pursue! I want that fighter destroyed, and I mean NOW!"

The Mendacus' beams blew the tiny Fenris away as if it was a frame without anything holding it together in a storm. The Babel got off taking shrapnel from the Fenris and being winged by one of the beams, slowing slightly to wait for the defecting pilot. As the Vermillion jumped, the Myrmidon landed and the Babel picked up speed, jumping before the Mendacus could lock. As good as the Blue Lions were, the destroyer and fighter had been too far away to catch. Locke wished he had ignored the notification to back off; he would have been close enough to intercept.

As it was, the bombers had the task of destroying a corvette while the Mendacus annihilated another one and two cruisers that were closer to the juggernaut. Allied Command came through.

"All pilots, return to the Mendacus. Mission complete."

* * *

"Damn it god DAMNIT!" Locke shouted among other expletives as he climbed down from his fighter.

Commodore Ronald was on the flight deck to meet him.

"Captain, I can understand your anger..." Ronald started, trying to calm him down for the news he had. Though he'd never been a pilot himself, he guessed that squadron commanders wouldn't take something like this well. He was right.

"The hell you do... sir. I..."

"Damn it Captain, this is important!" Ronald said, cutting Locke off as he had done to him. "Honestly, you're right. I have no idea what you must be thinking but I would advise you to calm down for this; come with me."

* * *

Medical

The Mendacus' medical facilities were more advanced than any Terran or Vasudan doctor could think possible. Applying their technological gift to it, the Shivans had been able to extend their lives by at least a dozen years each, heal mortal wounds, and find cures to new diseases and poisons in hours. Or sometimes minutes.

But even their wonders couldn't bring back the long dead. And 'long' in this case simply meant *too* long; past different amounts of time for different circumstances, there was nothing that could be done.

Like right now.

Two Shivans and a human were conversing next to the medical bed where a covered body lay.

"Pilot, do you have any idea who did this?" asked the ship's Captain.

Sniper thought over it for a second.

"It's... only a guess captain, but I'd say it was the one who defected today. It makes perfect sense that he decided on his actions after Captain Locke grounded him, needed to get in a fighter unnoticed, and did... this, to do so."

"I see... Doctor... is there anything you can do?"

The other Shivan shook his head. "She's been gone to long. I'm a doctor, not an anti-toxin... I can study her blood to find a cure, which the Terrans probably already have, but even if I'd started immediately after this happened, it wouldn't have been quick enough to have saved her."

The double doors leading into the room slid open to admit Commodore Ronald and Captain Locke. Ronald, whose purpose was to just bring Locke down, left. The Doctor nodded to Sniper and the other Shivan, who did the same. Except while the Captain headed back to the bridge, Sniper stayed outside the door.

"Captain Locke?"

"Yes, that's me. This looks like an infirmary... are you a doctor?" he responded.

"Yes, also what you would call a psychiatrist. Unfortunate that we couldn't have met under better circumstances but well... I'm afraid there's just no easy way to say this, and in my experience just telling someone has the effect of disbelief. So I'll just instruct you to look under that cover, assure you it isn't a joke, and... explain what happened."

Looking over to where the Shivan had gestured, Locke saw what could only have been a covered corpse on a bed. As he walked over, a pit formed in his stomach; this was something bad. He knew it. And he knew it more when he lifted the cover enough to see a face.

The Shivan quietly watched as the Terran, for all intents and purposes, got the wind knocked out of him. His trained eye immediately noticed the signs of a mental shock.

A sound of horrified surprise came from Locke. Stumbling backwards, the pilot just caught himself by spinning to lean on the wall. His hand came up over his face, his eyes shut tight for a second, trying to block out the sight. Locke tried desperately to steady himself, and looked at the Shivan.

"What... happened....?!"

"She was stabbed with a poison tipped Terran knife. One of your subordinates thinks it was a pilot that you just grounded, trying to get into a fighter..." the Doctor faded off.

Knowing full well who it was, Locke slid down the wall, his eyes staring at nothing, an arm draped over his knee, his hand clenched so tightly in a fist that his nails drew blood, and his thoughts thankful he couldn't see Lilith's... Rebecca's... his second in command's lifeless face from the floor.

Author's notes: This continues from FS2. Complete with some HP Lovecraft thrown in... oh yeah, this is NOT a self-insertion (you'll see why I have to say this once you start reading...)