

## Duel

Posted on Mar 19, 2011

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Officers snapped to attention as Commander Ray Javin walked onto the bridge. He returned their salutes, then took his command chair. He sighed inwardly, wondering how many hours it had been since he'd had a good sleep. For a minute he longed to be back on that rusted crate of an outpost, N-34. Things sure do change when you get promoted to Commander and move twenty light-years away from your home system, he thought. Commanding the Arcadia installation Vigilance in the Laramis system was more difficult and tiring than anything he'd ever dreamed about doing on N-34. Of course, being in the middle of a fourteen-year long war with an alien race tends to do that. Or maybe I'm just getting old.

Ray was two months away from fifty-one. He'd been in the business of "keeping the peace" for nearly thirty years now. A scant seven months after his near-eradication of the pirates hounding the Neptune area (one of the high points in his career) the first reports began filtering in about a possible sentient species having made contact with humans. Before Ray could take a breath he'd been snatched from the Galactic Police Force, which was subsequently dissolved and resurrected as part of the GTA, the Galactic Terran Alliance. I traded in a couple of pirates for an entire hostile race, he thought sourly. Of course, it wasn't as if he'd had much of a choice. Some people "higher up" had reviewed Ray's record, thought he'd make a fine GTA officer, and shuttled him off to a series of posts that had culminated with his landing the Vigilance job.

The Vigilance, although fairly out of the way in the Laramis system, still played an important role in shipping supplies to its neighboring systems, Ross 128 and Luyten 726. From Ross it was a direct jump to Delta Serpentis, which was currently a hotspot of conflict. Whoever controlled Delta Serpentis controlled, in effect, the only route to the Sol system, and Earth. Ray hadn't walked on Earth for four years now . . . .

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Shattering alarms broke the thin wall between sleep and wakefulness, and Mal "Fireboy" Johnson's feet hit the floor before his eyes opened. Another drill—that moron Javin liked to spring them at the worst times—but there was always the possibility that—

"Attention! All officers report to their stations! Vasudan ships have entered the system! This is NOT a drill!"

Great. Just what I need. Reaching for his flight suit, he slapped the wall panel and cut on the lights. He heard people running past his room out in the hall. The alarm continued to screech, although someone on the bridge had kindly turned it down a few decibels. After pulling on his suit, he splashed his face with water from the sink and wiped his eyes. Grabbing his Earth-gold ring from the small table beside his bed, he headed for the door. Seven minutes later he was in the cockpit.

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It was chaos on the bridge. Organized chaos, though, thought Ray. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. It's been a while since this place has seen any real action. Let's see how my people hold up. He turned to Junior Lieutenant Kerr, the bridge ops man. "What's the latest?"

"Well . . . we're reading two Aten class cruisers, along with three Satis freighters."

"Any light stuff?"

“Just picking up a few, sir. Wait . . . yes, more fighters are being launched from the cap ships. At least two dozen fighters, and I’m reading a few bombers. Amun class. They came in less than ninety seconds after that transport.”

“They must want something on the transport badly, to send that large a force . . . you gotten a confirmed ID on it yet?”

“Yes sir, it’s the GTT Icicle. They’ve already requested permission to dock, and we’re checking things out now.”

“Any idea where they’re from?”

“Umm . . . so far all we know is they were followed as they jumped from Luyten.”

Javin frowned. “Keep monitoring the Vasudan ships, and let me know immediately if any more decide to show up. Send the data we’ve got so far on the wide-band frequency, just so Command will know what we’re doing.”

Kerr grinned. “Already done, sir.”

He looks excited. Probably his first real battle. “And our fighters?”

“Scrambling. Right now they’re . . . twenty seconds away from launch.”

Javin tried to remember the number of battle-ready fighters on the Vigilance, but annoyingly, the numbers escaped him. “Ops, how many fighters are we throwing out?”

Kerr’s fingers hammered out commands on the databoard. “Two flights of Apollo fighters, and one squad—no, make that ten Zeus bombers.”

Javin spoke again. “And Vince is taking charge of them, correct?”

“Yes sir, they’re being commanded by Major Eller—and they’re launching against the Vasudans . . . now.”

\* \* \*

Mal’s fingers tightened around his flight stick. “Everyone stay sharp—you know your targets.” His comm crackled to life. “Fireboy, this is Loudbang. My engines are acting up. I’m down to eighty percent speed.”

Mal’s HUD registered at least thirty assorted Vasudan fighters and bombers only nine clicks away. He flicked the comm switch. “Deal with it, Loud. We’re hitting ’em hard and fast, same as always.”

I don’t have time for this, he thought.

The attack plan given to them by Major Eller was simple. The Icicle was already far enough ahead of the Vasudans, and Eller had told them not to worry about it—it wasn’t their business. Alpha and Gamma’s job was to clear a path through the Vasudan assailants, making sure the enemy bombers were taken down before they could get close enough to the Vigilance to deliver their payloads. The Terran Zeus assault fighters from Beta group would engage the capital ships. Once the Vasudan

light fighters and bombers were cleared away, Alpha and Gamma wings would turn and help out Beta. At least, it's supposed to be simple. Supposed.

Mal cleared his mind of distractions and concentrated on the Anubis fighter he'd targeted, watching the distance indicator. 2.8 . . . 2.6 . . . "This is Fireboy to Alpha wing. Engage the interceptors first, but watch for those bombers." 2.2 . . . His HUD flashed a warning as the Vasudan fighter opened up on him with cannons. Mal twisted his stick downward, but not before sending two MX-50 missiles on a course for the fighter. The fighter flashed past him . . . then disappeared from his radar.

Too easy. He selected the next nearest enemy, a Horus interceptor. Mal pulled in behind the Horus, hoping to duplicate his dual missile trick while the enemy pilot tried to draw a lock on a Zeus bomber. The pilot must've picked him up, because he broke and peeled off to the right. Mal punched his 'burners and stayed on his tail, but this pilot wasn't bad. The Horus suddenly cut his throttle; kept his speed low for a second, then engaged his own afterburners and juked off to the left, throwing Mal off his back. As Mal pulled his stick back around to face the fighter, a missile cut into his field of vision and struck the Horus fighter, which retained its speed but started tumbling end over end and trailing debris. He's out of this battle. "Thanks, Niceguy."

"No problem, boss."

Better check on Beta wing. A quick glance at his HUD showed that Beta was holding out, only one fighter down and a couple more "in the red." They seemed to be having some success too, because some rookie let out a whoop as a Satis freighter went nova. Mal opened a comm channel.

"This is Fireboy to Alpha wing. Make sure those bombers are down; make 'em priority number one till they're gone."

Only a few pilots acknowledged, but Mal knew they'd follow through. He locked on to the next Vasudan fighter and turned his Apollo towards it . . . .

\* \* \*

Kerr looked over at Javin and grinned, that "We're-kicking-some-enemy-tail-isn't-this-great" expression that Ray had seen hundreds of times before. "Enemy light fighters are taking heavy losses; one Satis is down, another crippled."

"They're what, ten clicks out?"

"Eleven point two, sir. And sir, I was just forwarded a response from Command, they're sending a task force ASAP."

Probably show up in time to help clear away some Aten debris. Ray sat back in his command chair and thought, since there wasn't anything he could do until something happened. Sometimes I feel like I DID more back on N-34. Here I'm just a symbol, a—

"Sir!" Kerr's slightly panicked voice brought him back to reality.

"What?"

Kerr twisted his head around to look at Javin for a second, then swung back to stare at his screen. "Sir, one of the Vasudan bombers somehow got through . . . it's three clicks and closing. It's headed towards the bridge."

“Aren’t our gunners on it?”

“Uh . . . yes, they’re picking it up and tracking now.”

Javin smiled at Kerr’s back and watched the out the viewport as the fighter was torn into by the crack gunners manning the bridge turrets. The bomber vanished in a small sphere of fire. Javin refrained from voicing any “I told you so” comments. The kid would learn. He tapped a few commands into his comm and opened a link to Eller.

“This is Javin. Anything going on down there?”

Eller’s voice came back, clear and fast. “We’re working on ’em, Ray. I’m having our boys concentrate on the freighters first. If we can cut into their forces enough they’ll think twice about coming any closer to us with just two cruisers.”

“The transport?”

“We’ve been talking to them. Sounds like they’re a Special Forces team with some top-level Vasudan hostage. They grabbed him from an exchange in Luyten, and that really stirred things up. We already granted them permission to dock, everything seemed to check out.”

“Have you taken any of their people on board?”

“No, I was waiting to clear it with you first. This looks legit, but . . . they should probably stay on their vessel until we clear things up around here.”

“Good thinking, Vince. I’ll—” Javin stopped as he began hearing shouts over the comm channel, followed by commotion from his bridge. He looked up, and, for the first time in years, Ray felt fear.

\* \* \*

“Thunderbolt to Fireboy; that was the last of them.”

“Good job. Now let’s go help out with the Satis.”

“Already done.”

Mal swung his Apollo around as the explosion from the last Vasudan fighter faded. Not bad. Us against two Atens and a freighter. Now let’s mop up.

“Fireboy to Alpha wing. Form on my lead, and take down that last freighter.”

The dark backdrop of space suddenly flared blue, lighting up his cockpit. Mal instinctively jerked up on his stick, fighting to get out of the way. Something big was coming through . . .

\* \* \*

A Typhon. It had to be. Ray almost felt sick as he watched, powerless, as the massive ship continued to pour through the subspace node. In all his years, nothing he’d encountered screamed abandon hope like this ship did. He’d heard the usual stories from people who had claimed to have survived an encounter with a Typhon, but nothing prepared him for what was out there, heading for his installation. Ray tore his eyes off the viewport and tried to take in what was happening. Alarms

were blaring, people were shouting orders, and his comm was beeping.

He wanted to shout a dozen things at once; orders to evacuate the civilians and non-military personal from the installation, a call to notify Command and request heavy reinforcements, a recall warning to the fighters, reassurance to his crew. But all that is already being done. He was stunned as he realized he couldn't really DO anything. Sure, he could give orders, but so little was actually dependent on him . . . . He ran for the rail and looked over the edge.

Officers were working frantically, and Javin realized after a few seconds that he was just standing there. He returned to his chair and answered the comm. As he did, a voice shouted from below. "Sir! The Vasudans, they're . . . jamming us somehow. We can't get through to Command!"

Then Eller's voice came out of his unit, sounding fairly calm.

"Commander, this is Vince. Got any bright ideas?"

\* \* \*

Mal almost lost it as he watched a Typhon class cruiser sliding out of the subspace node towards him.

"Fireboy to all wings! Keep away from that thing!"

Well, that's pretty obvious. A Typhon! The Vasudans must really mean business. Mal targeted the Typhon, which, to his dismay, was still coming through, and turned his ship on a course away from it. He fired his 'burners, then touched his comm again.

"This is Alpha One to all wings, I repeat, don't even think about engaging that thing. Watch for bombers." The other pilots must've been as stunned as he was, because Mal got silence for nearly twenty seconds. Then a pilot's frantic voice broke over the comm:

"What—this is Gamma Four, what are we supposed to do? That thing—"

"Quiet!" Mal snapped back. "We all know what it is. We keep our distance and wait for their fighters to show up. Then we fight."

\* \* \*

Javin was incredulous, to say the least.

"Vince, that's . . ." he struggled for a word, then said simply, "It wouldn't work."

"I don't mean disrespect Commander, but do you have a better idea?" Vince sounded a little strained now.

Javin thought fast. "How long do you estimate before the initial backup we called in arrives?"

"I don't know . . . you know how that works. Could be minutes, could be hours. The Vasudans aren't here for us. I think they'd buy it."

Ray felt old, yet strangely alive. This was what he was here for. People, thousands of people, were looking to him for salvation. He still had a job to do.

He turned back to Kerr.

“Open a visual-audio channel to the captain of that ship.” He pointed out the viewport at the Typhon. “We’re going to try talking our way out of this.”

\* \* \*

Mal was getting fidgety. The Vasudan force—now consisting of two Aten cruisers, one slightly damaged Satis, and the Typhon—had been sitting there, just sitting out there, twelve clicks from the Vigilance, for the past ten minutes. Which meant that, for the past ten minutes, Mal and his fighters had been waiting a comfortable distance from the enemy, without having received new orders. What are they waiting for? This isn’t like the Vasudans. Mal was sure that the force the Vasudans now had could destroy the Vigilance, although it could be costly. And why haven’t they launched any fighters? They could swarm us, easy. He would have almost welcomed more combat; he hated not knowing what was going on.

After a few more minutes, he hit the comm unit in disgust, then tapped in the code for Vigilance’s ops.

“This is Alpha One, mind telling us what’s going on?” He didn’t even try to hide the frustration in his voice.

A voice answered almost immediately. “Uh, hang in there, Alpha. We’ll let you know when we figure something out here . . .”

Mal hit the comm again and cut him off. It was obvious he wasn’t going to get any information.

There was nothing to do but wait.

\* \* \*

It was silent on the bridge. All eyes were on Javin as he talked to the Vasudan commander. It had been a fairly slow conversation, but that could have been attributed to the delay while the computers on both sides translated. It was obvious to Javin, and, he assumed, to Commander Bobat om Rhelash as well, that neither side wished to engage the other. The Vigilance, while outgunned, was still an Arcadia-class installation; the largest and most heavily armed installation produced by the GTA. Javin guessed an all-out assault would be devastating to both sides, and he was fairly certain that om Rhelash’s orders concerning the Icicle—whatever they were—didn’t include the attacking the Vigilance. Javin knew, however, that some of the radical Vasudans didn’t factor in losing equipment and personnel; they lived for victory, and victory alone. While om Rhelash didn’t seem like that type, Javin knew he had the firepower to destroy the Vigilance and take back the Icicle. Which was why Javin was trying Eller’s gamble.

\* \* \*

Mal’s comm crackled, then spoke to him. Finally.

“About time—” he began, but the voice on the other end cut him off.

“Quiet. This is Major Eller. Listen to me. Javin just cut a deal with the Vasudan Commander.”

Huh? Eller himself? This can’t be good . . .

“The Vasudans aren’t exactly eager to engage us, and I suspect their commander’s orders didn’t even involve us. What he does want is the passengers aboard the transport he chased here.”

Get to the point.

“However, the Typhon has some sort of jamming beam trained on us. We were only able to get out a quick message to Command, and we’re not sure how much of that got through. Hopefully, we’ll be receiving reinforcements soon, but . . .

Mal exploded. “But what? Get to the point, Major. If you want us to suicide trying to take down that beam, just say so.”

Eller took his outburst calmly, then spoke again.

“No. That’s not what we agreed on. Javin was able to convince Commander om Rhelash to accept a duel.”

Mal was confused. “A . . . duel? What do you mean?”

“A duel to buy us time. However, Javin told him it was a duel for control of the Icicle. He probably knows we’re lying, but I don’t think he knows we’ve got backup coming. You’re the best pilot we’ve got.”

It all hit Mal at once. “Wait . . . you telling me that I’m going to fight one-to-one and the winner takes those people prisoner?” He was too stunned to be angry.

“Yes. Buy us as much time as possible. If you lose, I doubt Javin would relinquish the Icicle, but he’ll be forced to attack us unless he wants to leave.”

Thanks a lot, Eller.

“We’re sending out a repair and reload craft now . . . we’re also sending you the co-ordinates for where the fight is going to take place. You’ve got less then ten minutes.”

“I suppose I can’t refuse this, Major?” He made the title sound like a curse.

Eller’s voice came back, cool as ever. “Yes, but we’d just find someone else. You telling me you’re not the best we’ve got?”

Mal laughed, and wondered why he did. “I understand what yer saying, Major. I’ll take this. You tell my pilots what’s going on—I’m going to be busy for a while.”

“Good luck then. Buy us time.”

Mal cut the connection.

\* \* \*

His Apollo made it to the coordinates three minutes ahead of the deadline. There was still no sign of the Vasudan ship he was supposed to battle, and Mal wondered if the enemy pilot was as incredulous about this whole thing as he was. Mal felt like he was in one of the holo-flicks he used

to watch as a kid, where one man was able to save thousands. This never happens in real life, does it? He took a deep breath and checked all his systems once more. Suddenly, his comm was beeping, and Mal took the message. It was the Vasudan pilot, he guessed.

“Greetings, Terran. I am told you are to be my opponent.”

Mal was unsure how to respond, so he said, “Yeah, guess so.”

“I am Thramin il Hremet. And you are called?”

He really wasn’t expecting this. “Johnson. Mal Johnson.”

“I assume you know what is at stake here?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I am launching now.”

He was true to his word: Mal’s sensors almost immediately picked up a Seth-class fighter catapulting out of the Typhon’s port hanger. The fighter came top speed on a course to the coordinates. This guy isn’t wasting any time.

\* \* \*

Javin stood on the bridge with his hands clasped behind his back. Kerr, who had composed himself by now, was busy tracking the two fighters on his databoard. Javin suspected most of the crews on both sides were doing the same. He heard boots clang on the metal stairs as Eller joined him on the bridge.

“Figured I couldn’t do much down in Control. How’s he doing?”

Without turning, Javin responded. “Still alive.”

“Suppose we should be thankful for that . . .” Eller stood next to Javin and braced himself on the rail. “Did you pick up on that little conversation they had? That was interesting.”

Javin was silent for a minute, then: “How long before they tire of this and just assault the installation?”

Eller shrugged, looking almost unconcerned, but Javin knew that behind his mask Vince’s brain was working overtime. “Hard to say, Commander. I was a little surprised myself they took us up so easily on our challenge.”

\* \* \*

Mal twisted his Apollo left and narrowly missed another savage burst of cannon fire. Neither fighter had done more than minimal damage to the other, and Mal wondered how much longer he could keep this up. Bringing his craft around in a tight turn, he tried to get behind the Seth, but il Hremet was faster and broke away. Then the Vasudan was on his tail, and Mal’s missile warning flashed. He pulled back hard on the stick and hit his afterburners, leaving two countermeasures behind. The missile disappeared, and Mal continued to fire his ’burners, gaining distance on the Seth. il Hremet turned to pursue him, but Mal was already out of cannon range. Here goes nothing . . . Jerking his



stick hard to the right, Mal spun around and got il Hremet in his sights. Apparently, both pilots had the same idea, because each launched a pair of missiles, then was forced to break off to evade. He's too fast . . . Mal threw his ship into a corkscrew spin, sending countermeasures flying. One missile was caught in his chaff, but the other one struck his Apollo. Mal heard the muffled explosion, and felt his ship shook with the impact. Checking his HUD damage display, he saw that his sensors were damaged, and his engines were at eighty-eight percent.

Not good. I don't stand a chance against him at this speed.

Mal jerked hard on the stick again and dodged yet another volley of fire. Continuing to turn sharply to the right, Mal snapped off a shot of his own as the Seth fighter filled his sights for an instant. One shot grazed the hull, but then the Vasudan fired his afterburners and swung around behind Mal. Mal started a dive, but his craft responded sluggishly. The Seth's fire hammered the Apollo, and Mal heard the crackling of loosed electricity as it played over the rear of his craft. The Seth was directly behind him now, and for all Mal's juking and turning, il Hremet continued to blast away at his Apollo. Desperate now, Mal tried an old trick. He fired his 'burners for a split second, then cut his speed. il Hremet reacted just as they'd all done in the past, picking up his own speed as he saw Mal's engines flare . . . and then flashing past as Mal decelerated.

Mal loosed a pair of missiles onto the tail of the Seth as il Hremet screamed past him, and shouted out loud as both hit.

Two small explosions puffed outward from the enemy fighter, follow by a larger blast as something blew aboard il Hremet's ship. Then the Seth was slowing, and Mal, not wanting to give il Hremet the same opportunity he had just had, slowed with it, until both ships came to a complete stop. Mal wiped away the sweat that was dripping off his forehead.

His engines must be out. Time to end this.

\* \* \*

Cheers erupted from the bridge as the crew watched Mal's missiles impact the Vasudan fighter. Javin relaxed and breathed out. He glanced over at Eller, who stood impassively. Javin moved over to Kerr, whose grin was reflected in the screen of his databoard.

"Open another channel to the Vasudan Commander. We're only out of this if he keeps his part of the bargain."

Eller walked over to both of them and said something about going down and checking in at his post, but Javin didn't really hear him. He was trying to compose his thoughts. All too soon, he was staring at the Vasudan leader. Javin couldn't tell by looking at him if he was angry or not—Vasudans usually masked their emotions.

"Yes, Terran Commander?"

Better be straight with him. "Commander om Rhelash, what of the duel?"

"I don't understand what you are talking about." om Rhelash gestured offscreen. "The duel is not yet over."

Javin put the channel on hold, then reached for the comm.

\* \* \*

Mal sat there, forty meters away from the enemy ship, finger on the trigger of his gun. He found it difficult to press the button, but he wasn't sure why. Do it, you idiot. He would've done the same to you. But still he hesitated, and for the life of him, he didn't know why. He'd killed Vasudans before, dozens of times, with no remorse. Why was it any different now? He couldn't say. Mal wiped his face again and waited.

The crackle of his comm snapped him out of his thoughts. It was Commander Javin. "Alpha One, this is Command. What are you waiting for? Destroy that fighter and return."

Mal slowly touched the comm. "I'm sorry Commander, but I . . . I can't." You fool. What's the matter with you? Do it!

"What? Destroy that fighter and finish the duel, Johnson. That's an order."

Mal's mind screamed at him to touch the trigger. It would be such a small thing, over in a second. But his body rebelled, and Mal found himself talking. He was surprised he could say such things.

"I'm not gonna do it, Javin. I'll tell ya what. You come out here, you sit here in my chair instead of on your bridge, and you push the trigger. I'm telling you, it's different out here."

Javin was angry now. "Alpha One, destroy that fighter immediately!"

Mal couldn't believe he was this calm. "Not an option, Commander. I'm heading back."

He cut the connection, and seconds after he swung his fighter around, subspace nodes opened up thirty clicks away.

\* \* \*

Kerr laughed out loud. "Sir! It's the Protector! And the Iron Fist!" Murmurs ran through the crew on the bridge, but Javin scowled. That pilot is in deep trouble when he gets back . . .

"We're being hailed by Admiral Rokahn, Commander."

"What about the Vasudan force?"

"Looks like . . . yes, the Typhon is already headed out." Kerr's grin was so big it looked like it had to stretch to fit on his face, and Javin found it hard to hold on to his anger. I remember that feeling.

"Sir?"

Javin blinked. "Yes, put me through to him."

The Admiral's face filled the screen. "Greetings, Commander Javin. We came as soon as we could." Rokahn paused, then spoke again. "So tell me, how were you able to hold that off as long as you did?"

Javin sighed. "It'd take a while to explain."

"Well, we'll be sending craft over to dock at the Vigilance shortly. You'll have to tell me about it

about it then. Nice to see you in one piece, Commander.”

“You too, Admiral.” Javin saluted, then broke the connection.

“Sir . . .” It was Kerr again. “Sir, there’s a Scarab support craft being launched from one of those Atens . . . should we do anything about it?”

Javin looked out the viewport and breathed in deeply. “No, Kerr. Let it go.”

\* \* \*

Nine days later, when he got out of the brig, Mal found a message waiting on his databoard. Twisting off his ring and tossing it onto the bed, Mal sat and called it up. He frowned. It was from someone in the Communications section. He scanned the message quickly.

“Pilot Johnson, you have received an unusual message. It originated from a Vasudan vessel, and, as you know, all contact between GTA personnel and Vasudans must be cleared with Intelligence. It lists one ‘Captain Thramin il Hremet’ as . . .”

Mal smiled and leaned back in his chair. He didn’t have to read any more.