

Ross 128

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As the Ross 128 sun ran its reflection across the metallic white hulls of the patrol ships, some of the pilots wondered if they would return from their mission alive. In the previous days, Vasudan strike parties had proven quite proficient in dispatching their Terran enemies. GTA Patrols in the system were now comprised almost entirely of rookies, some promoted to lieutenant right out of the Academy. Such was the case today. And none of today's pilots could have ever imagined how they would go down in history...

"Cut the chatter, Gamma Two." The new lieutenant had grown tired of his wingman's idiotic quips, and now finally had a real reason to shut him up. The Vasudan patrol had arrived. Waiting for his adversaries to make the first move, the lieutenant slowed his wing to a cautious approach speed. He didn't have to wait long. Thoth fighters were now bearing down on them, moving into attack range. The Terran wing leader was itching to set the record straight with his enemies, and maneuvered his pilots into attack formation on a head-on course. It was time to even the score. Nobody wasted any time. Even without firing orders, as soon as the enemies were within range of each other, primary shots and then secondaries were being exchanged. Within a few moments, a Vasudan missile tore one of the wings off of a Valkyrie fighter, ripping the ship apart as if it were paper, claiming the first casualty of the skirmish. A Terran Apollo responded by tossing primary shots through a Thoth cockpit, destroying the fighter in glorious ball of flames. As the wings were weaving through each other, the Terrans scored another kill, the explosion rocking their own fighters, one-upping their proud rivals for the first time in over a week.

As the Terran pilots were regrouping and turning to reengage, the lieutenant noticed bright crimson darts heading for the Vasudans. "What on Earth is that?" Only adding to the pilot's curiosity, a Vasudan fighter suddenly exploded, and then another, and another. Within seconds, the entire enemy presence disappeared from the scanner screens. The lieutenant studied the void in front of him and gave his order. "Approach with caution, pilots." But it was too late. One of his own wingmen was already going down. "What the..." And then he saw them: black ships... death black ships. "Engage!" But the effort was futile at best. Even when the Terrans managed to hit the attackers, it was as if they were flying a simulator. The shots weren't doing anything. The enemies weren't taking any damage. None, whatsoever. One final wingman later, the lieutenant gave the inevitable order. "Retreat! Get back to the Pandora!" The lieutenant and his three remaining wingmen fled the area in panic, heading back to their home destroyer.

But the ships of death followed them. As he looked over his shoulder, the lieutenant thought he saw a large subspace portal opening, allowing a mysterious destroyer into the battlefield. He tried to convince himself that there was nothing more to it, that it was just a thought, a mistake, nothing more... But there it was, and it was following him.

Flying in a v formation, the four Terran fighters made the jump, their enemies ripping at their engines as they hit subspace. When they dropped into space again, mere clicks from their home destroyer, the Pandora, the lieutenant turned his head again. When he did, he saw the mysterious destroyer jump in again. "How? How did they follow us? How..." And then he saw the bombers. Wing upon wing of shadowy bombers were leaving the destroyer's fighter bay. Fright had long since overcome the Terran pilots, who no longer even tried to halt their enemy's advance. Green trails of gas and smoke saw the enemy warheads all the way to their target, punching through the seemingly paper hull and tearing off pieces dozens of meters long. And then the Terran pilots witnessed something that would haunt them for the entirety of their short lives. Terror held his eyes open, gluing his lids up, allowing every horrific detail to seep into the furthest crevices of his mind. A red and orange beam of light shot out of the charcoal destroyer towards the Pandora. But unlike

ordinary light, this beam had teeth, eating a hole right through the ship, leaving whole subsystems smoldering and smoking. More bombs pounded the Pandora, causing a chain of explosions and ripping the entire communications array off of the vessel only seconds before a final blast completely obliterated the ship, taking down one of the Terran pilots in the shockwave. Horror had now taken the rookie lieutenant by throat and was choking the very life out of him. He barely found the strength to utter further orders to retreat.

The pilots thought they remembered an installation being located nearby. Without the time to check or the power to resist, the pilots set their jump drives coordinates, praying that they would find help on the other side of subspace. Three pale-blue vortexes opened up against the dark void of space, waiting for the Terran fighters to make the jump. As the pilots approached the portals, more black fighters moved in against them. The lieutenant watched as his two remaining wingmen were devoured by flames. The last thing he saw before he hit subspace was a missile heading straight for him, missing him as the portal closed.

On the other side, the lieutenant stared off into the distance. Several dark spots painted in front of a planetary background. The installation. But he couldn't shake the fear. He tossed his head from side to side, checking his six for the death black enemies. No sign, but he knew... he knew they were following him. They had before. And they wouldn't stop now, not for anything. Holding onto his sanity by only his fingernails, the lieutenant opened an all-points emergency communication. Still gripped by the things he had seen that day, for several seconds, the only noise received by anyone listening was the sound of himself desperately trying just to breathe. Swallowing his breath, the lieutenant finally managed to inhale enough oxygen to start his transmission. "Mayday! Mayday! This is Lieutenant Ashe..."