

**Date: 3/17/2155**

**Location: Sol 3 (Terra) Spaceport**

***"Alert! Alert! All crew to battle stations! This is not a drill! Repeat! This is not a drill!"*** Walker jumps with a start as the calm, friendly atmosphere of the spaceport's cafeteria is broken as alarms shriek.

"What on Terra is going on?" he mutters, glancing out of the viewport. Several streaks of blue have appeared in the distance, telltale marks of ships exiting grav-jump. In most cases this wouldn't be out of the ordinary. Ships come and go all the time. But this was outside of the normal traffic lanes. If a battle station alert has been called, they whatever those ships are, they are a threat.

Without a word, the cafeteria empties as crewmen rush to their stations. Walker is no exception, darting towards the docked T.R.S. Skyward, where his fighter stands ready. Running through the transparent docking tube the vessel comes into view. The ship was a Guardian-Class carrier, flat topped like the naval aircraft carriers of yesteryear with a sleek, angled lower hull.

Walker's eyes shift towards the incoming craft. Bolts of red pulse weapons fire slam against the mag-shields of the ship and station, leaving behind only ribbons of light shimmering across the shield's surface.

Who are these guys? They couldn't be Aserati. The battle line is at least 50 lightyears from here. They couldn't possibly have gotten through unnoticed.

Walker reaches the hanger bay where his trusty Wolfpack fighter stood ready. The ship was designed after old jet fighters from pre-interstellar Terra. An elongated fuselage with long wings on either side. Three fins on the tail of the ship complete the look, resulting in a sleek, aerodynamic design. Rocket pods sit under the wings armed with both dumbfire and heat-seeking rockets. Plasma cannons on either side of the cockpit round out the fighter's armament, creating a reliable, deadly ship.

Climbing up the steps on the fighter's side, he slides back into the familiar surroundings of the cockpit. He relaxes slightly, feeling at home in the confines of his fighter. With a flick of a switch on his control console, the cockpit canopy slides into place, sealing shut with an audible hiss. Another switch initiates the pre-flight diagnostics.

The center screen starts scrolling through a list of subsystems. Life support, heat sinks, control thrusters. Each one flashes green as the program deems them within tolerances.

The hanger lights dim, replaced with red warning lights and klaxon alarms.

"Attention." A prerecorded message begins. "Clear the hanger bay area for depressurization. Repeat, clear the hanger bay area." The message loops over and over as crewmen make their way towards the exits.

Walker hits the ignition switch, feeling the rumble of the engines powering up. He reaches for his helmet before putting it on and activating the AR-HUD system in its goggles. A three dimensional rendering of his ship, a fuel gauge, an ammo counter, and thermal scanning all appear before him as projections on his goggles.

Before long, the hanger bay is depressurized. The outside world descends into the complete silence of vacuum. Only the sounds of the fighter's internal systems reach Walker's ears.

The bay doors open, revealing the fight outside. Missiles and rockets try to punch holes in the ship's hull, but are vaporized by the beams of the Skyward's point defense network. Walker hopes that the enemy can't overwhelm the PDN through sheer volume of fire. (Ugh... that sentence feels sloppy... Suggestions?)

Once outside, the AR-HUD starts marking targets. Red crosshairs for hostile, blue shields for friendlies. Now Walker finally gets a chance to see what he's up against. Much to his surprise, The attackers are indeed Aserati. The red and black insect-styled ships are distinctive to their race.

It's a small fleet of three ships. Probably part of the reason they were able to get so far into Republic space. The largest of them, a carrier/destroyer hybrid, takes the rounded shape of a beetle, but with four horn-like structures protruding downward from the edges of the upper hull. Hiveships, pilots like to call them.

The two others were frigates. Long and narrow with a set of X shaped wings, they were fast and packed a decent punch for their size.

Meanwhile all that was stationed here was the Skyward and a handful of Comet-class corvettes. Designed like small patrol boats, they were fast, but minimally shielded and with only one ship-to-ship pulse cannon on the bow. They were made as scouts and patrol vehicles, not frontline warships. All this to say they were at a disadvantage.

"Nova Squadron, form up on my wing." Nova Leader orders through the comm. Firing his lateral thrusters, he slides into position behind and to the left of the leader. Thermal imaging systems pick up the other four members of Nova taking their places in formation as well.

Nova Leader was Jan Case. A friend from his flight academy days. She could be stubborn and a little gung-ho at times. But she's reliable in stressful situations. And a skilled pilot. Both essential for the life she leads.

"Orders from command have just come in." her voice calls through the comm. "Epsilon Squadron will do a bombing run. We need to make an opening in their PDN and provide fighter cover if necessary."

"Heads up. The hiveship's letting the swarm loose." one of his wingmates calls out. A number of small, red crosshair icons appear on his AR-HUD, launching from the sides of the hiveship. Stingers. Wasp shaped fighters that could run circles around his squadron.

"Pick your targets, squadron." Jann orders. "Melt those stingers."

"Copy that, Nova Leader." Walker replies. Using his ship's gyroscopic systems, he spins the ship to face the incoming attackers. Using a control pad, he marks a fighter as his active target. His HUD locks on, highlighting the fighter's predicted path.

Walker slows his breathing, zoning out the chaos of the battle around him. Here in this moment, destroying the target is all that matters. With slight, gentle movements of the joystick he lines up his targeting reticle with the black and red fighter craft and pulls the trigger. His ship rumbles in tandem with the plasma guns on either side of the cockpit. White, glowing bolts of superheated plasma lash out at his enemy.

The enemy fighter rises upward, using its underside thrusters to evade the volley of shots. Most of his rounds pass underneath the ship. A few grazing the underside of the hull or melting through its solar panel wing.

Walker curses under his breath, preparing another volley. The target turns to rear their guns on him and quickly opens fire. Streaks of white pass around him as he maneuvers himself out of the firing line. Several audible pings reverberate through the craft as shots connect, impacting on the fighter's armor plating. Walker glances at the diagnostics display, letting out a slight sigh of relief. All systems still functional. Just superficial damage.

Turning his attention back to the stinger, he aligns himself for another attack. Once again, he has an opening. Without hesitation, he takes it, sending plasma bolts out towards the attacker. Walker watches as the stinger begins to spin. He takes note of debris tumbling away from the ship. He must have knocked out a thruster unit, sending the fighter into an uncontrolled tumble.

Tension drains from his body as he readies to finish the enemy off. Aligning his reticle once again, he fires. A small, brief explosion erupts from the fighter's "abdomen" as the power cells rupture, ripping the vessel apart. The remains of the stinger spin off into oblivion, doomed to burn up in Terra's atmosphere.

Walker's attention returns to the rest of the squadron, of whom are also keeping the fighters occupied and away from Epsilon squadron as their Flying Fortress-like bombers close in on the carrier. A fighter or two occasionally get through, but would be swiftly shredded by the bomber's turrets.

Now in range, the bombers turn sideways, their rocket pods facing the carrier's starboard side. One by one the bombers launch their payload of swarmer missiles, the ordinance too small and numerous for the enemy's PDN. A wave of small explosions rip across the black hull, breaching through in several places. Several thruster banks get caught in the wave. Some are ripped free of the ship while others simply sputter out and succumb to the damage.

"Nova squadron, this is Epsilon leader." Walker's comm crackles. Keep up the fighter cover. We're going in for another pass."

"Acknowledged, Epsilon-" Jan starts before being interrupted. A rapid beeping fills the cockpit. A brief spike in gravitational forces. It looks like something's grav-jumping in. Reinforcements? No. No, there's only one spike. The fleet wouldn't send a single ship while Terra was under attack.

His fears are confirmed moments later. A massive blue streak flashes into existence, fading to reveal a ship bearing the Aserati colors of black and red. The ship was massive. 600 meters long at least. The ship looked like a cross between a grasshopper and a cricket. Long and narrow with a ribbed back. Even from this distance Walker could tell that the ship was tough. Pulse cannons of varying sizes litter the surface. Any ship that drifted too close would likely be melted into slag within minutes. At the front was a cylindrical construct where the "mouth" would be. Above that looked to be the command deck. Though knowing the Aserati, the actual bridge is probably somewhere deep inside the ship.

"Is that some new dreadnaught they've been working on?" One of his wingmates muse.

"Whatever it is, they've positioned it unusually far from the rest of the fleet." Walker comments.

"Must be trying to keep us from attacking it. The rest of the fleet keeps us occupied while this thing does... what?" Jan adds. "Regardless, that ship is likely a priority target. Nova Squadron, form up." With a few movements of his joysticks, Walker matches speed and direction with the rest of his squadron.

"Got another one of your crazy plans brewing, Nova leader?" Walker says. There's no way they'll get close enough to hit it with missiles. Conventionally, there's very little they can do

"Something like that. We might be able to goad those cannons into hitting the ship itself."

"Hold on. Something's happening." Walker's instruments pick up a power surge in the vessel. Coinciding with this, the cylindrical protrusion begins to open up and retract. And from inside the ship extends a massive railgun. Four guiding rails extend outward with large rings holding them in place.

"I don't like the looks of this..." A wingmate mutters. Walker agrees, watching as a solid black projectile of some sort gets loaded into the weapon. And then, the weapon fires. The whole ship recoils backwards from the force of the blast as the projectile streaks off into the distance. Towards Terra.

"Somebody get me a read on what that thing just-" Shrieking alarms cut off the rest of Jan's command. Warnings of being at an "unsafe distance to celestial body." That can't be right. Walker glances at the diagnostics panel. No system errors. Then what could-

Walker glances towards Terra before doing a double take. The planet is collapsing in on itself!? He watches, unable to tear his eyes away as the planet starts to crumble and shrink, growing blacker and blacker.

"No..." He mutters. Terra's being compressed into a black hole! His thoughts immediately drift to his family. He was supposed to be on shore leave. His wife was planning on going to dinner with him to that one restaurant the first met in. Slowly the truth sinks in. She's gone. Everyone he knew and loved. Dead. Torn apart into an unrecognizable mass of atoms and compressed into a point of infinity.

Walker starred in shock. He couldn't bring himself to look away. His home now reduced to a small orb darker than the void of space itself. The sheer magnitude of the gravitational forces bending the light around it. Unrecognizable as the birthplace of Terrankind.

"-to the Skyward! Repeat, everyone to the Skyward! We need to get out of here now!" Jan's urgent voice snapped him back to reality. She's right. They need to get to a ship with a grav-jump drive. It's their only chance to escape. He glances at his instruments. "Ten minutes to event horizon impact" could be seen flashing on the screen along with a three-dimensional image of his current trajectory, spiraling towards the surface.

The Aserati had since jumped out, leaving only crimson streaks into the distance as evidence of their presence. (Probably should put this detail elsewhere... but I can't decide where.) Walker rotates towards the Skyward and fired his thrusters. All the while alarms blare in his ears about the black hole. With urgent and slightly careless maneuvers he brings the fighter into the hanger bay, landing with a less than graceful thunk. Almost immediately as the last of the fighters touch down the bay doors start to seal. Now their fate lies in the Skyward.

“Attention crew, this is the captain.” The inter-ship comm calls out. “All hands brace!” Walker stays in the cockpit, feeling safer in the more familiar, closed environment of the fighter than out on the flight deck.

Without warning, the ship lurches, hard. Walker is slammed against his fighter’s canopy. His fighter begins to slide across the deck in spite of the magnetically locked landing gear. The ship screeches as every system is tasked to their limits. Grav-jumping in a body’s sphere of influence is incredibly dangerous, usually leading to the ship in question reduced to a cloud of warped and twisted metal shrapnel. But there’s no other choice.

The rumbles of explosions rock the ship. Lighting and artificial gravity give way, leaving Walker weightless in complete darkness. He had been trained to cope with impending death. An attempt to keep him cool and collected in high risk situations. But training can never match the feeling of being sure that now is the moment that you meet your end.

And then it’s quiet. The explosions peter out. The lurching ceases. Emergency lighting clicks on.

“This is the captain.” The comm says, laced with static. “We have reach Sol 2. The starport has received our distress call. Help is on the way.”

A miracle. They survived. One of the few survivors of the greatest cataclysm terran-kind has ever faced. Walker sighs in relief. But that relief quickly fades as he remembers who he lost when Terra collapsed. Family. Friends. The home he grew up in. The park he used to play in. Everything that shaped him into who he was. Gone.

A flood of emotions. Walker buries his face into his console, weeping silently. It was the Aserati. Those callous, unfeeling monsters. They did this. They murdered them. He won’t ever forgive them. He can’t. They deserve nothing more than to be left to die on some old derelict. They must pay.”