To Ness, Lewis and Harry, whose patience was paramount. To Jack and Tam, who spurred me on to write.
Part One
Prologue

Salas shook his head in disbelief. The Sentinel ship was abandoned and left to defend itself in the vastness of open space, against the might of Alpha.

They came from nowhere and his ship had no answer. His shields were depleted, the weaponry hold empty. He had nothing left to offer.

He found himself dreaming of another place, his planet, so far away and his family, his children and his home. All were just a distant dream.

The missile hit the ship broadside, towards the stern and ploughed straight through the main hull before exiting amidships. In a fraction of a second, nine Sentinels vaporized and the ship split almost perfectly into two, as if a chef’s knife sliced straight through an apple. The bow disintegrated as it fell away from the main body of the vessel and a massive explosion engulfed the remaining hulk in flames.

The Sentinel Commander looked puzzled briefly, before realization struck. With his ship destroyed, he was about to breathe his last breath.

Minutes passed and Salas awaited his fate with his crew lying dead around him and his own demise inevitable. He sat in his chair, raised his hands to his head and sobbed.

Then the bridge exploded and it was all over.
Chapter One

The Battle Cruiser

Commander Jonathan Hoskins sat at his station, observing his morning’s work. The Sentinel ship, with its crew of three hundred perished under the might of his Battle Cruisers superior weaponry. Weakened by his blaster cannons, the final blow, delivered with pin-point accuracy, destroyed the enemy ship just like the last five.

Hoskins commanded the Alpha Battle Cruiser Aurora 5. He was thirty-five years old and in his second tour in command of the Aurora. He had clear views on the Sentinels and the strategy to defeat them once and for all. simply the Sentinels were outnumbered and outgunned. This war would shortly be over. He would soon enjoy the spoils of victory. A third star beckoned and surely a fourth would not be far away. How many more Sentinel ships would they destroy this week?

Now was not the time to contemplate future glory.

“Helm, set a course for Beta Five, cruising velocity. Mister Ohama, scan the area for Sentinel activity. Stand down alert status.”

The Aurora 5 turned slowly and purposefully towards her new heading and accelerated briskly.

“Sentinel vessels within range, straight ahead Commander.”

Jonathan Hoskins smiled. This is too easy.

* * * *

The Human ship pursues its prey like a Vantac bird, he thought. Their persistence was a valuable weapon and their vessel was able if not exactly agile, but they could be defeated.

The Sentinel Mother ship remained in stealth mode and witnessed the destruction of yet another of their dwindling Northern fleet. The General decided enough was enough; the Alpha Battleship had destroyed its last Sentinel ship. He ordered his ship to alert status and set a new course. He would pursue the Alpha Ship and destroy its crew, one by one if he must.

The Sentinels were a species whose planetary realm lay some distance from Earth’s solar system. They were renowned for an emotionally-charged obsession with the protection of a region of space known as the Tri-Star System. They saw it as theirs to protect despite its location outside their known territorial boundaries. General Yoshi, commander of the Southern Fleet, defeated all who came before. He made it his priority to defeat Alpha. This, he insisted would be the start of that process.

General Yoshi’s Southern Fleet was different. His was the superior fleet of the Sentinels armed flotilla with a kill ratio second to none. His fleet arrived, unseen, in this sector three weeks before and prepared for battle, while in hiding in the plasma wave cloud which swathed the eastern tip of the Ionian System.

His three thousand strong warship was the flagship of his fleet. It was the epitome of advanced Sentinel engineering and illustrated his people’s commitment to the greater cause: the protection of the Tri-Star system.

The humans of Alpha fleet penetrated the outer perimeter of the Sentinels Tri-Star defensive screen. They immediately brought themselves into a much larger conflict between the Sentinels, the Partacians, and anyone else who happened to find themselves within the protected region. The humans ‘invasion’ and resultant entry into the Tri-Star system moved them firmly to the top of the list.
Chapter Two
A New Year- A New Term

The warmth of the morning sun was still evident even in late summer. Jake Carter took a short swig from his refreshment tube as he stepped out of his apartment block and walked purposefully towards the security station at the end of the main entrance to the Academy. It was going to be a hot day, and with the summer extending well into October it would be for a good while yet. Protective clothing was the order of the day, as the solar rays penetrated the Earth’s ozone as if it were a permeable membrane, rather than a shield to protect the planet.

Security here was a formality as e-genetic registers replaced retinal scanners. You could walk straight through a security station. At the station, Jake met up with Carla who gave him a big smile, pecked him on the cheek, and then on the lips for good measure.

“Good job. Steve’s not looking,” said Jake.

Carla laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “I can kiss whomever I choose. Thank you so much.” the exaggerated drawl of her Australian accent rose at the end of her sentence.

Carla was Steve’s girlfriend, although in recent months it became a one-sided relationship. Carla was losing interest rapidly. The three of them spent the last three years together at the South Downs Alpha Fleet Academy. Today was the start of a new academic year, their last in the Academy.

Jake was eager to get started. The new Sabre short-range attack ships were due in port later this week. Although he would have to wait until he graduated before he got the chance to pilot the new variant, he was desperate to climb back into the cockpit of a ‘real’ ship. The Rapiers were good but the Sabres were far more agile.

Carla was keen to get to class and rekindle her love for languages: nine of them, all off-world and all required fluency for her to graduate as a translator for Alpha Fleet. Unfortunately both flying and languages were off the agenda. Today was about the new term and admin, admin, admin.

Steve waited for them outside the tutor class. He, too, was keen to start flying but he also wanted to see Carla. The lovers embraced. Jake smiled and passed through into the tutor class and sat down at his workstation.

Great. The climate control is not working properly. It’s going to be a long day, he thought.

By midday, it was very hot. Thankfully the temperature in the tutor class was regulated, keeping the day’s heat at bay. Jake still felt uncomfortable and loosened the straps on his tunic down a notch.

Registering for classes was a lengthy process. Individual security protocol was a key academy stratagem. For each specialism and core subject, registration was separate and the duplication of personal data was tedious. Jake opted for five specialist subjects in his final year, even though only four were required. These days, Alpha recruiters looked for personnel with the widest possible brief. It became normal within the more established Alpha Academies to stretch oneself considerably in the final year.

Jake opted for Weaponry, Advanced Stellar Navigation, Quantum Mechanics, Earth Defense and, his key skill set—jump ship Command. These were spread over fifteen periods throughout the week, interspersed with his six core subjects. In all, fifty periods spread over a five day week. The rest of Jake’s time was in theory his, but private study and extra curricula activities meant limited free time.

By one p.m., registration was completed and timetables calculated. Lunch was followed by Parade Ground and thirty minutes’ intensive physical training in the gym, before the first actual tutorial of the day commenced. Geometric Mathematics was a core subject in year four and a double period on the first day of term, together with the insatiable heat and the desire to engage in his favorite activity, did little to improve Jake’s enthusiasm as he watch the old style ‘station’ clock tick slowly towards four o’clock.

The period ended so Jake joined Steve and Carla at the Alpha Broadcast panel in the corridor outside the classroom. After catching up on the latest Academy gossip and a précis of Alpha, Earth and Galactic news, they headed towards the main campus for a coffee break.

Fifteen minutes later, Jake and Steve climbed aboard the subrail, which departed with its usual tuneful whoosh before it reached its desired velocity. Within a few minutes, they reached their destination and they exited the train and climbed the steps to the surface. The brightness and sudden rush of heat hit the students as they arrived at ground level. The Academy’s space port was the largest of its kind in southern Britain and seconded as an official Alpha Launch Port, a commercial port as well as a student training facility.
The Students were here for their first flight theory lesson of the year. Today was Rapier simulation and while it wasn’t flying, it was the next best thing and definitely the highlight of the day.

Steve Costello was an excellent pilot. He vied for academy Top Gun and, in his eyes, he had little competition. Sure Jake was good, but this wasn’t his forte. Steve intended to be the best pilot in the fleet and be recognized in years to come as a flying ace par excellence, outpacing his rivals and out maneuvering his enemies. Steve found nothing wrong with being confident. He believed it was a good trait in a jump pilot. What he hated almost vehemently was formation and wing-man flying. Alpha insisted its trainee jump pilots master the vagaries of team ethics, above anything else.

Steve never showed his dislike of this. He needed to show team spirit was his highest priority and his actual outstanding ability was second. Today he was wing-man to Monte, an Algerian whose command of the simulator was good, but in reality, he would never be a real jump pilot. He would follow the Algerian’s maneuvers and stay out of trouble. He wanted the real thing and would come up soon.

Flight simulation was a critical part of jump pilot training. A newly qualified jump pilot was required to amass fifty hours of simulator flying in addition to three hundred hours of actual flying before he could be qualified. The flight simulation sessions were multi-disciplined and multi-craft-oriented to ensure the ‘Pilot’ experienced the maximum number of scenarios and training in as many types of craft as possible.

Steve was a product of the colonies. Born in New Portsmouth on Titan twenty-one years ago, he always wanted to be a jump pilot. He was accepted into the South Downs Academy on a scholarship, following in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps. Both had graduated and gone onto become middle-ranking jump ship pilots. Both died in active service. This fact was never lost on Steve. He considered this father and grandfather careless or unlucky. In this game you made your own luck.

He was distracted. Carla grew distant in the last few months. He didn’t know why, but he had a growing feeling it had something to do with Jake. While Jake was his ‘best buddy’, if he and Carla became involved, their friendship would come to a sticky end.

With the session complete, all fifteen students set down their ‘craft’ and completed post flight checks. Day one was over.

Carla joined Steve and Jake in the Students Bar on the main campus. Over beer and pasta they talked about the day, their expectations for the year and what they did during the long recess. As they left campus and walked back to the accommodation block, the evening turned cooler but was still humid. Steve walked beside Carla, with Jake a few paces adrift.

“I guess you’ll be able to find a few moments for me this evening Carla…your place or mine?” Steve sounded playful, but ever so slightly confrontational.

“Can we give it a miss tonight Steve? It’s our first day back and I have two language sessions tomorrow. I really need to prepare.”

“Will Jake be helping you prepare then?”

“Why should he do that?”

“You seem to spend more time with him than with me.”

“Oh, come on. I know you’ve been away from this for a while but let’s not get paranoid.” Carla was clearly agitated.

“What’s this all about?” interjected Jake.

“You keep out of this. It doesn’t concern you.”

“Okay, it’s your funeral. Jake turned round and walked slowly back towards campus.

“What the hell’s wrong with you? Why did you just shout at Jake?”

“Are you seeing Jake or not?” demanded Steve.

“No, I am not. I am not seeing you tonight either.”

The rest of the walk back to their block was spent in silence. As Steve reached his block, he turned off towards his apartment without further comment. Carla sighed. This is becoming repetitive, she thought. In the corner of her eye she spotted Jake who caught up having done a u-turn a minute or so after his earlier exit.

“Everything okay?” he asked Carla.
“You know it’s not. He really pissed me off.”

Jake comforted her and asserted that Steve would be fine tomorrow, he was just under a lot of pressure. With that the two friends chatted briefly, said goodbye and agreed to meet up before breakfast for a drink and a chat the following morning.

Jake arrived at his front door two minutes later. It opened automatically. He entered, stripped off his clothes and jumped straight into the jet shower.

He awoke the next day at five a.m. as usual. The proximity of his accommodation to the space port meant two things: one good, one bad. The noise from the roar of all manner of space craft, be they Academy, Alpha or commercial was constant. This was a bad thing. The good being front row seats to the finest display of ships this side of London. Sleep disturbed, he showered quickly and set off to meet Carla.

Jake Carter was in this for the long term. This was his career of choice and the long term aim was clear in his mind. He wanted ‘ship of the line’ command and preferably star ship command. This was all he had ever wanted. At the age of six, he had his first off-world experience in a Mars shuttle with his father.

Simon Carter rose to his current rank of three-star Commander during the Galactic war of 2195. His highest command was a B-class battle cruiser. He regretted never commanding a star ship or achieving a higher rank.

Although in recent years, Jake’s relationship with his parents grew difficult, he always wanted the best for his father and had the utmost respect for both of his parents. He knew the best way to make his Dad proud of him would be to graduate and work towards his personal target to command a star ship. Jake knew he had the capability to achieve it. He always came near the top of his class for everything he did while at the Academy and prior to that at the Edwards Academy, where Jake spent his childhood and teenage years studying.

He considered himself highly articulate and adaptable. He had a high IQ, was numerate, and a free thinker. His passion for galactic exploration was equally as passionate about Earth and its environment. He felt determined to make this year count and to graduate at the top of his class. He didn’t need off-campus distractions and he didn’t need Carla. Or did he?

Carla and Jake became closer during the academic break. He knew Carla since the Fresher Academy year. Although he was attracted to her, he always thought of her as a friend, than anything more; fundamentally, because she was Steve’s girlfriend. As he walked up the path towards Carla’s accommodation block, he wondered if that were changing. He hoped not because it would complicate things.
Chapter Three

The Rapier

The Rapier has staying power. That was the message in the President’s key note speech to Congress two years ago, when the one hundred thousandth Rapier came off the production line.

There were many different variants and nearly fifty years passed since the original Rapier jump ship concept was first demonstrated at Edwards Air Force Base.

The concept was simple. a small short range attack ship with the capability to take off vertically off-world or via a short runway from a planetary mass, but yet could reach high velocity in a short time period. Other jump ships would follow, but the Rapier was still the standard from which all comers must compete.

The latest variant came into production five years ago. The Rapier 7 was a technologically advanced two man interceptor/fighter which, off-world, could attain stellar speed from start in under fifteen seconds. It was fifteen meters in length, with the cockpit situated right in the nose cone of the space ship. This made for an awkward and not necessarily aerodynamic shape, but the proof was in the pudding. At the time of the variant’s launch, the other main jump ship models, the Hunter and the Sabre could not compete with the new Rapier. Over fifteen thousand Rapier 7’s were manufactured and they were once again the mainstay of Alpha Fleets off-world and ground launch attack philosophy.

The Academy had seventeen Rapier 7’s and these were reserved for Year four jump ship specialist students only. The other three years used either Hunter R2’S, which were essentially a Training vessel or Rapier 6’s, which were still good but aging. The fourth year jump students also had access to fourteen Mark 3 Sabres.

This morning, the fourth year jump ship students were about to take their first flight aboard the Rapier 7’s. They were to fly in pairs with only eleven ships in use today and Jake and Steve somehow managed to be drawn in the same ship.

It was another scorching hot day, with runway temperatures already pushing thirty-five degrees. Jake and Steve climbed the stairs to the surface and were confronted by a wall of heat. The two of them were talking after two ‘frosty’ days. following Steve’s outburst on the first day of term, but the time passed without further confrontation.

“Okay, so who’s first,” said Steve.

Jake would give in to Steve and allow him to take first pitch today. If he didn’t, he would never hear the end of it. Steve itched to pilot the Rapier 7 for the last eighteen months and finally it was within their grasp.

“You take her up first today and we can switch over maybe for the last forty-five minutes” said Jake. Steve seemed happy with that and they took their positions in the briefing room and awaited the instructors to start their pre-flight.

Lieutenant Commander Teddy ‘Night Hawk’ Taylor entered the room with two other instructors. Taylor was an Academy mainstay. He was an instructor for nearly thirty years and progressed to Chief Instructor. He was a good teacher and a great mentor, but he knew it and that meant everybody else did.

“Good morning people. As 4th years, you finally get the chance to fly a real ship today. The Rapier 7’s are primed and ready for take-off. so let’s get the pre-flight done and dusted, then we can get out there.”

“Today, two men per ship, each assuming command for half the flight time. We will use runway two, northbound, heading towards the Antiro Nebula. We will fly in formation and keep to the standard flight path. We will stop short of the nebula and return along the same path back to Alpha One. Total flight time today should be two hours fifteen minutes.”

He continued: “Myself and Lieutenant’s Marlo and Adamski will fly solo at the rear of the formation. No heroics today please ladies and gentlemen. You are just getting a feel for these ships and I don’t expect flybys or any wing tipping. That’s it. Get out there and enjoy.”

The three instructors stood up and left the room through the door leading directly to the flight hangar.

Jake and Steve were allocated a ship at the far end of the hangar. A long walk, but they would probably be first out. They boarded the ship via the wing and footplate and strapped themselves into their seats, with Steve assuming Command for takeoff and the first half of the flight. Familiarization and pre-flight checks took fifteen minutes and unsurprisingly, Steve and Jake’s ship was the first to leave the hangar and head for the runway.
Two minutes later the ship assumed ‘pole position’ on the runway and Steve requested flight clearance. They were cleared for takeoff and Steve pulled down hard on the stick and the Rapier responded instantly, lunging forward at five hundred kilometers per hour before taking off sharply after only two hundred meters. They assumed near vertical flight and accelerated briskly. The Earth’s shields were already down at their intended exit point and they cleared the troposphere and assumed off-world flight status, just twenty seconds after takeoff.

The remaining ten ships joined them in orbit within two minutes, with the final three ships flying in formation with ‘Night Hawk’ leading and the two instructors either side. Each vessel was assigned a call sign during the pre-flight and Red 5 piloted by Steve Costello, assumed the lead.

The solar system was always busy with freight, private, cruise and Alpha vessels occupying the same small area of space. Their movements were strictly controlled. Alpha Fleet vessels always guaranteed a high priority and the eleven vessel ‘training’ formation was quickly granted clearance and the formation departed long the seventh space way. Heading towards Mars, Red Group cleared the main Earth space routes and Steve expertly maneuvered the Rapier to its intended course. Red commander (Night Hawk) then issued the ‘jump’ command and all eleven vessels made the jump to stellar speed instantaneously. This was however, not a race and the Commander only allowed Red 5 the luxury of leading the formation briefly before he instructed Red 3 to assume pole position. The small fleet headed onward towards their destination.

Red 5’s cockpit was quiet. This was not particularly unusual, as the peace and tranquility of space, when not in battle, often created a calming environment. Steve monitored his key controls, via his head up and helmet displays, while Jake carried out the post take off checks.

Steve had something on his mind. He allowed Jake to think the matter of his intimacy with Carla was closed. It was most certainly not. Steve knew Carla was pre-occupied with something and someone and it was likely that Jake was involved. This was just the opportunity he needed to challenge Jake properly.

“So how’s Carla?” Steve asked.

“You should know. She’s your girlfriend,” replied Jake.

Steve smiled and declared, “You are seeing Carla behind my back. You are both flaunting it. Why can’t you find your own woman? Leave mine alone.”

Jake sighed it was going to be a long flight. “Steve, I am not seeing Carla; she’s your girlfriend, and I don’t do seconds, thanks.”

Before Steve could reply further, two of the three coaxial lights came on and they were starting to lose power.

“Red 5. What’s your position?”

“Looks like we have a coaxial fuel leak and we are losing pressure in the vectral thrusters. I am sending Jake to have a look.”

Jake went to the rear of the cockpit and studied the information monitors. Pressure would have to be diverted via the abdominal thrusters. This made for false economy and to rectify, Jake carried out a diversion of the power reserves. The pressure in the thrusters equalized and ship began to accelerate to its previous velocity. Crisis averted, Red 5 rejoined towards the rear of the formation.

This was certainly an improvement in cabin design, thought Jake as he examined the cockpit area in closer detail. The cabin was larger. They did away with some of the storage and duplicate instrumentation and she certainly seemed smoother and more alert.

It seemed a little strange that Steve hadn’t commented on the improvements. given that they were so real and that he spent most of the last year talking about them. This Carla issue was preoccupying Steve and this concerned Jake, not least because Steve could sometimes be a little hot headed. Today he was at Steve’s mercy. He would have to watch him closely in the next thirty minutes or so.

The formation rotated eight times on the outward journey, with a different Rapier assuming pole position briefly before making way for another. One hour and seven minutes after the exercise commenced the lead ship rounded the Alpha substation (a permanent scientific research laboratory based close to the Antiro Nebula) and the occupants of each ship began to hand over command of the ship to their opposite number.

Steve had different ideas. He elected not to hand over the controls and decided to take a different approach to rounding the substation than pulling the ship ‘round in a wide arc. He pulled back on the stick and forced the ship into a sharp incline, before accelerating vertically. He allowed the ship to just clear the substation mast before
tipping the wings and flying directly past the stations main control center.

The ‘Fly Pass’ spectacle in deep space was one of the most technically challenging moves a jump pilot could face and was also one of the most frightening to the occupants of the object on which the fly pass was conducted. This was strictly forbidden per Night Hawk and Alpha training policies. That he ‘wing tipped’ in order to achieve this just added to his ‘crime’.

As Red 5 finally rejoined the formation, Steve switched command of the Rapier to Jake and uncoupled himself from his seat and his com station and left the cabin without further comment. Jake took command and switched over to auto functionality. He cleared Red 5’s revised command status with the training command, switched on the NAVCOM and locked his Rapier into the formation. He then uncoupled himself and left the cabin in search of Steve. Not that he could have gone far; he was sitting in the cramped cargo hold with his head in his hands.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“Did what?” replied Steve.

“The ridiculous ‘wing tip and flyby’ stunt you carried out directly in front of Teddy Taylor and his cronies.”

“I wanted to see how much pace she had and whether she would pull that amount of thrust so close to a flat spin.” He continued. “She was fantastic. An absolute beauty, but I guess that I am about to be told off, big time.” he said.

“Absolutely you are, and the fact that you left your station, as have I for that matter, means we are both about to be marched up before the Academy Disciplinary Panel. For God’s sake get back to your station before somebody notices.”

Reluctantly Steve shrugged his shoulders and stood up and they returned to the cockpit and assumed their rightful flight positions.

The remainder of the exercise was uneventful. Two of the Rapiers did fall out of the formation on the return leg, due to temporary alignment glitches and Red 5 was back in pole position as they glided back towards Earth on the seventh Space Way. The Rapier felt good when Jake assumed manual control and he was pleased with his piloting efforts today. if not for his ‘misjudgment’ in leaving the cockpit to speak to Steve.

Landing was a formality, having cleared the space way and Earth’s shields. The occupants of Red 5 vacated their vessel and headed directly to the hangar command and debrief. The debriefing was short lived and the jump pilots were dismissed, with as anticipated the exception of Jake and Steve. Teddy Taylor wanted a word with both of them.

Teddy Taylor was not happy. He didn’t expect his ‘high value’ pilots to step out of line and especially not two of his ‘Top Gun’ candidates. He called both officer candidates to his office together but spoke to Jake first.

“Why did you leave the cockpit unattended?”

Steve tried to interject, but Taylor waved him away with a gesture that made it clear that he didn’t want comments from him yet.

“I needed to check that Steve was okay. I knew it was not correct procedure and, on reflection, I should have checked with you first. The NAVCOM was on,” Jake replied.

“Hm,” muttered Teddy Taylor. “Your actions could have resulted in a dangerous situation, had we been in combat. You need to be clear that you don’t leave the cockpit unattended for whatever reason during flight. Your friend’s peculiar behavior is his problem, not yours, although I respect the fact that you took all the necessary precautions required before you left the cockpit and that your intentions were genuine.”

“You can leave,” he added. “I won’t be filling a report on your actions, however I don’t want a repeat performance. Keep yourself clear of unnecessary distractions in your graduation year.” Jake stood up, saluted and left the room.

Taylor waited a few moments before opening his discussion with Steve.

“I cannot begin to understand what happened up there. Perhaps you can enlighten me?”

Steve shrugged his shoulders and sighed, “It was just one of those moments when it seemed the right thing to do.” He paused and then continued, “Whatever I say you are still going to refer me…I may as well resign my commission.”

Taylor was angry. He leaned forward and launched into a calculated, but abusive verbal assault on Steve. By the time he finished, Steve, who was usually thick-skinned with a ‘devil may care’ attitude to life, had turned a shade of grey, which in a brightly lit, white laminated room was in stark contrast to the redness of Taylor’s face.
“I am referring you to The Disciplinary Panel and suspending you from my course forthwith. You will be allowed to return pending the outcome of the disciplinary panel and NO your resignation won’t be accepted if you offer it. You are far too good a pilot to throw it away on a rush of hormones. You are dismissed.”

Steve stood up and headed towards the door, but turned back suddenly when it dawned on him, the potential severity of the situation.

“Commander Taylor, Sir. I regret my actions. I apologize unreservedly. I really need this…. The jump ship is my future. I won’t graduate if you fail me.”

“Get out,” shouted Taylor in a controlled fashion as he shuffled paperwork on his desk. “The Disciplinary Panel will decide your fate and until then I don’t wish to see your face.”
Chapter Four

Titan

Carla was in her element. She was surrounded by people who spoke a plethora of other languages and dialects. Where better to practice her linguistic skills than on route to Titan? She was aboard a scheduled Earth-Titan shuttle, filled to absolute capacity.

Planet-hopping was Earth’s new favorite pastime. Hundreds of high velocity passenger ferries transported their passengers to and from their ‘short range’ tourist destinations on a daily basis, in the knowledge that within the realms of the Allied Planets Federation (APF) and in particular Alpha’s significant boundaries, they were protected. The bountiful supply of wondrous locations and spectacular sightseeing made this the package holiday tour of the twenty-third century.

The shuttle was a bit of a dog. She was over fifty years old & her stellar drive had long since silted up. Her auxiliary drive was however, more than sufficient for the planet hop, and the journey to Titan took just over three hours. The passengers took the opportunity to relax and take in their surroundings during the flight, but Carla had other priorities. She was on route to Titan as part of an exchange project run between one of the top four Titan academies and the South Downs Academy. She volunteered to take part to assist her language, cultural and communication studies which formed the basis of her main specialty for the final year. Carla did this willingly, appreciating the benefits that such a visit would give her. She also had a more important personal reason for visiting Titan. She was looking for her Sister.

Carla’s sister, Joely, left the family home in Melbourne, Australia, two weeks before Carla’s sixteenth birthday. Joely was nineteen when she took off and said nothing to her parents. She told Carla succinctly “Come to Titan. You will find me.”

Carla’s parents despaired, but in time, respected their elder daughter’s decision and they didn’t follow her.

Within forty-eight hours, Joely made contact, assured her parents that all was fine and that she was pursuing a path she must take because of her faith. Carla’s parents agreed that when Carla finished her studies, she could seek out her sister and Carla waited patiently for an opportunity. Within a year, Joely stopped returning Carla’s comm links and then there was nothing.

Then finally, a place on the exchange became available and Carla volunteered, in the knowledge that she could ‘kill two birds with one stone’. Carla spent many hours researching the ‘faith’ to which Joely became involved with. It became a personal obsession, one which she told no one about, including her parents, Steve or Jake. Her research led her to three possible locations on Titan, all reachable by Modular transport and all within a few hours travel of each other. She was finally on her way to Titan and determined to use all of her spare time during the trip to find her sister.

Titan was a product of Beta Forming. Long before man first visited the outer planets, it was thought Titan stood a realistic chance of being able to support and sustain ‘Life’. Prior to the first contact being made with an Alien race, humans developed a fascination with, if not a tainted view of, the prospect of life on other planets, believing that stories of ‘little green men’ on Mars were nothing more than fiction. When the first human set foot on Titan, in the form of female Cosmonaut Ulga Tiviranovski, it was clear that there was no sign of life. There was water and plenty of it, beneath the frozen porous rocks of Titan’s barren surface.

In the year 2125, the combined atmospheric conditions made Titan the perfect candidate for the inaugural Beta Forming Project. Over the next twenty-five years The Beta Forming transformed the barren, lifeless rock into a vibrant ecosphere, a veritable haven for all manner of Earth species, which lived largely in harmony with a plethora of compatible species from other planets. The Beta Forming Project was a complete success and led from its humble origins on Titan to become a huge industry over the next fifty years. Labeled a planetoid, Titan became an Earth Colony and millions flocked to the new world to establish a new and permanent home in the stars.

The rich mineral deposits of both Titan and its fellow moons and planetoids turned the colony into a business and industrial center and huge cities such as New Portsmouth, which eventually became the planets Capitol, appeared. The beauty and dramatic landscape of Titan, its proximity to Saturn and its other moons, and the controlled but perfect climate, turned the industrial planet into a tourist haven, especially once the Space ways from Earth were made safer following Alpha’s inauguration.

The Eagle shuttle landed at Forest Gate, the main New Portsmouth space port at midday. Carla headed straight for
the Modula Transport link on clearing security, departing immediately for the first of her three destinations. She had all afternoon to herself and she planned to use the time wisely.

Like Carla, Joely studied languages. She hadn’t opted for the Alpha graduation route to fuel her fascination for language, culture and interplanetary diversity. She joined the co-ed group known as AUSWAS, an Australian division of the World Organization for Interplanetary Cultural Diversity, when she turned eighteen. Unknown to her parents, Joely became involved in some divisive and political elements of AUSWAS’s work and it was these that Carla believed led Joely to Titan. Joely was impressionable and, despite her academic intellect, she could be easily led. The idealistic beliefs of this ‘underground’ wing of AUSWAS had taken Joely in. Carla knew little of this group, other than what they stood for and this almost certainly meant trouble. She would have to be on her guard during this trip.

The Modular transport was a high-speed low-altitude hover ship, which utilized Titan’s thick atmosphere, to hover at a height of just over fifty meters above the ground. The ship skimmed the planetoid on specially designated and controlled routes allowing for a precise and efficient network. Carla’s ship arrived at AUSWAS HQ at 12.30 p.m. and she headed immediately to the organization’s reception facility. Here she made several discreet enquiries regarding her sister, the ‘group’ and a Professor Nigel Winterburn, an English Interplanetary Consultant who left Earth some years ago and was rumored to be the head of the ‘group’ based here on Titan. Her initial enquiries found little, but after a quick lunch, she returned to the AUSWAS facility and headed to the reference library. Here she found various articles relating to the ‘Collective’ and references to Professor Winterburn. This led her to seek out Dr. Helen Smythers, a fellow Australian who not only was aware of the ‘Collective’s’ existence on Titan, but also the whereabouts and relative movements of Professor Winterburn. Carla left the AUSWAS headquarters and headed back towards the transport link. She was pleased with her afternoon’s work and she began to believe this link could lead to her Sister.

Dr. Helen Smythers was, however, concerned; concerned enough to make direct contact with Professor Winterburn. Far from being troubled, Winterburn made light of this and replied by saying that, “Perhaps this is could be a real opportunity, the Collective needs new blood and a new contact within Alpha could be useful. She will make an excellent new recruit.”

Carla arrived at the Hotel in downtown New Portsmouth just after six. She checked in, located her room, showered, changed and joined her colleagues and associates at a pre-dinner reception in one of the function rooms adjacent to the restaurant. During the reception, and afterwards at dinner, Carla exchanged pleasantries and engaged in several lengthy conversations with local New Portsmouth students, colonial students and associates from both affiliated and non-affiliated APF planets. She was able to make fluent conversation in some fifteen different non Earth languages and was even able to exchange a few words with a Plexiduran. This peculiar species were multi-dimensional and, during conversation, would shift between two or three dimensions, disappearing briefly and then reappearing momentarily while in mid-conversation. This made for an interesting dinner discussion.

After dinner and drinks, Carla returned to her room and opened a personal comm link with Earth. She would speak to her parents first. She needed to update them on her findings, and then perhaps do a bit more research before she spoke to Steve. She was still angry with him and despite the fact that they parted on seemingly good terms, she seethed about his stupidity—and Jake’s, for that matter. She felt confused about how she felt about Steve and what future they might have.

Jake answered the comm link when Carla called. Carla thought Jake’s actions during Steve’s Rapier fly-by incident were brave, but ill-conceived. He was lucky to get off with a caution, but Steve would be unlikely to be treated so lightly, his actions were idiotic. When Steve did eventually join the comm link, Carla and Steve greeted each other in endearing terms, much as you would expect from a couple, separated by over a thousand-million kilometers of open space.

There was sarcasm in Carla’s voice when she brought up the subject of the Disciplinary Panel meeting. She made it clear that, while she would support him, if he were booted out then he was on his own. Having reinforced this point and without laboring further, she then went onto discuss her days events and what was in store for tomorrow and the remainder of the week. Ten minutes later she closed off the comm link and retired to bed.

She lay awake for some time thinking about Joely and what would come from her further investigations tomorrow, and about Steve and what a fool he was. She was questioning more and more why she chose Steve as a partner at the Fresher’s ball in year one of the Academy, when she could have anyone. Not Jake though. He was with Joanna at the Fresher’s Ball. Joanna graduated from the Academy last year and flew Rapids in frequent battle exchanges with the Sentinels. She and Jake split up a year ago and he remained single ever since.
much time thinking about Jake when I should be thinking about Steve? Carla wondered.

The next morning, she took breakfast in her room, showered and made her way down to the Reception room for a Q&A session with New Portsmouth’s new Alpha Ambassador. The session was interesting and challenging as, although the Ambassador spoke English, his Titan dialect was strong and he was more difficult to decipher than many of the non-English conversations she had on this trip.

After refreshments and a further session in the Reception Room on key APF languages, Carla left the hotel at one p.m., thinking she had until five to progress her search further for her sister. She was missing out on two language seminars this afternoon, both of which could have been of some interest to her, had she not already achieved fluency in both languages. At AUSWAS, the previous day, Dr. Helen Smythers gave Carla an address in the eastern docks area of New Portsmouth where she might be able to find Nigel Winterburn. She took the Modular Transport Link to the dockland area of the city and then set out on foot to find the address. At 2.30 she reached her destination: an abandoned warehouse in the center of the dockland area, purported to house several small sea going vessels while under repair. Closer inspection revealed they hadn’t been moved or touched for years.

Carla entered immediately. On first inspection it looked like a normal warehouse, but she could see that it was everything but. The ‘sea going vessels’ were a holographic projection which gave the impression that the premises were used as a boat repair house. In reality, the building housed a multitude of offices—some occupied, some vacant—and in the center was a large hall which was recessed into the ground to a depth of two stories below the surface.

As she continued her observations, she realized she was being watched. She turned around slowly to find her sister Joely.

“I knew you’d find me!” said Joely excitedly.

Carla stared in disbelief and then, as if the pain of the last six years of uncertainty suddenly lifted, she walked forward and clasped her sister and they hugged. The two of them stood there for a moment, holding each other before Joely pulled away. “We have much to discuss,” she said, as the emotion suddenly drained from her voice.

“What is this place?” asked Carla.

“All in good time.” replied Joely.

Carla followed her sister down into the recessed hall. She could see that the hall was structured in the form of a small operations center.

“Welcome to the ‘Collective’,” said Joely.

“The what?” said Carla.

Joely continued, “That’s who we are. We are a group whose prime responsibility is the protection of the galaxy’s cultural diversity. Let’s meet some of the others and then you will begin to understand.”

Carla met several of her sister’s colleagues, and was then introduced to Professor Nigel Winterburn briefly before he disappeared into a different room. She learned that the Collective was not just linked to AUSWAS. Like the hologram, this was a front. The work they did was critical to the survival of the galaxy. Exactly what was ‘critical to the galaxy’s survival’ was unclear, but Carla was impressed. This was not a part-time operation and these people were committed to their work and to their ‘Leader’ Nigel Winterburn. Momentarily, a door at the side of the main hall opened and Joely ushered Carla inside. Winterburn granted Carla an audience…

Carla entered a small foyer, which in itself led to a much larger room, with a vaulted ceiling with attractive wooden architraves. This room was definitely more in keeping with a church than a warehouse office. Nigel Winterburn stood at the far end of the room facing Carla as she entered. He was wearing a black Saluc, the traditional dress of the Betanica Sect.

“Welcome” said Winterburn. “Come closer and let me see you.”

The atmosphere was electric. Carla could feel the hairs on the back of neck. Strangely she found that she could not resist and she approached Winterburn with eager anticipation. When she was within a few meters, she stopped. The adrenalin dispersed and she suddenly felt frightened. She turned to look for her sister for support, but found that she was alone. Alone, apart from the Betanic Priest.

“Don’t worry about your sister. She is keen to see you too, but she is preparing for a trip that we are making. I will make sure you can have some time together shortly.”

“I get the impression you knew I was coming.” said Carla boldly.
“Yes I did. You made enquiries about my whereabouts at AUSWAS and your sister always said that you would come.” He spoke in an articulate, but deep and reined tone. His accent was English. Strangely, she also felt comforted and slightly aroused by his presence.

“Why are you wearing the robe of the Betanica Sect?” asked Carla, who was surprised at how brave and direct she was being.” Because, my dear, I am a member of the Betanica Sect, “he replied.

“The Betanica Sect is a Sentinel religion.”

“That is a common misconception and is what Alpha would have you believe. Yes, we are represented widely within the Sentinel race, but we are spread widely across many worlds and many people including as you can see. Earth. Do you understand the basis of our beliefs?”

Is Joely a member of the sect? thought Carla. She was concerned about her sister. Was her sister a traitor? “Yes, I think that they have some religious predilection about the Tri-Star region, and particularly about the two wormholes.”

“You are surprisingly well-informed, but also a little naive. The protection of the Tri-Star region is the basis for which the Sect was formed. We are here to keep the evil from within at bay.”

“So why are you here, in a place where the people are so cynical to such beliefs? “

“Well it’s not the war, I can promise you. We have a presence everywhere.

“Where is your visit to?” Carla continued.

“Oh, I think enough has been said for now. We will talk again when we see you next time.”

“How do you know there will be a next time?” said Carla.

“Oh I believe there will be,” said Winterburn.

With that, the door to the ‘chamber’ opened and Carla’s sister reappeared. Winterburn smiled. “See that Carla is looked after and make sure she is sent on her way in time for her next seminar.” With that he strolled past the two young women and exited the chamber. The two sisters exchanged glances and hugged again. There was no need for explanation, thought Carla. It was really good to see her sister again.
Steve awoke early. It was Thursday morning and he had a restless night. Today was the day of his disciplinary meeting.

Even early in the morning, it was hot. The temperature over the last two weeks was excessive even by current standards for this time of the year, and the antiquated climate control in his flat could only cope intermittently when temperatures exceeded forty degrees. He showered, dressed, and had coffee and a banana for breakfast.

Steve stepped out into the baking September sun just before six a.m. He commenced his morning run, thinking that by the time he completed his circuit he would be exhausted but his mind might be clearer.

Jake awoke at 7.30 a.m. and, having washed and dressed, met Steve at 8.30 a.m. The two students then headed towards the security station and the main entrance to the Academy.

They walked in silence, both deep in thought on what was to happen this morning. They entered the main academy building and headed for the court room. Steve asked Jake to attend his hearing, as it was his right to invite an Academy colleague to support him. At nine a.m., Steve was summoned to his disciplinary meeting. He and Jake entered the Academy Disciplinary Panel’s Court room.

The room was circular with the ‘defendants dock’ set in the center of the room. Steve and Jake sat side by side in the dock. The disciplinary panel sat round the circumference of the room, with their seating some two meters above the dock floor. The five members of the panel entered the room together and each took their seat surrounding the defendant. The chair of the Panel then stood and stated the date and time and the title of today’s hearing. He then turned towards Steve and asked him to stand.

Steve stood and the chair spoke clearly and concisely.

“Enson Costella, you have been charged under Section 5 of the Academy Student Conventions of dangerous piloting of a type seven Rapier jump ship on September the 12th, this year. You have admitted your actions and have requested leniency in the Panels judgment towards you today. Is that correct?”

“Yes” said Steve.

“Who supports you in this request?”

Jake stood up and said “I do. I am Enson Jake Carter and I support the request for leniency.”

“Will both of you please be seated.” said the chair.

“We must first establish for ourselves the actions that took place on the 12th September. We will see recorded evidence from the Rapier that was immediately in front of your vessel at the time the incident took place. For the record, the defendant’s vessel was coded Red 5 and the recorded evidence came from Red 2.”

The evidence commenced, and was interrupted on several occasions, while the Panel asked Steve various questions relating to the ship, the training mission, the operational status of his ship and Steve’s mood at the time. They also asked Jake to confirm whether the facts Steve stated were correct. Jake confirmed each point and both he and Steve were then asked to sit while the panel made their initial deliberations.

The chair then rose again and began to cross examine Steve.

“Enson Costella, you are the product of a Titan education and upbringing is that correct?” This was answered in the affirmative and the chair went on to discuss Steve’s family history in Alpha and their eventual demise.

“Can you advise what you stood to prove by taking this action on the aforementioned day? Did you do this to prove that you were worthy of your family’s legacy in the piloting of jump ship?”

“Nothing. (Steve ignored the question about his family’s legacy, hoping they would not pursue it). I only wanted to see how good the Rapier 7 was.”

“We will consider your past disciplinary history. Enson Costella. Is this the first time that you have been disciplined for Fly passing and Wing Tipping?”

“No.”

He was asked to provide details of his previous charges and the punishment meted out. The Panel then each asked the defendant questions regarding the actual events and what happened on that day. Steve answered succinctly,
keeping his answers brief and to the point as he and Jake had agreed in their previous discussions in the days leading up to the meeting.

The Chair stood once again and asked Steve directly, what he thought the penalty should be for his actions. Steve replied that while he thought he should be punished, the jump ship was his main curricular activity in the Academy and that, whatever happened, he wanted to ensure that he was able to return to flying as soon as was practicably possible. He then sat down. The five panel members then proceeded to discuss the matter amongst themselves. After a few moments, the Chair stood once again and advised that the panel would retire to consider their verdict and that the hearing was in recess for a period of thirty minutes.

The disciplinary Panel was composed of three full-time permanent and two part-time elected members. The full-time members, who included the Chair, were Academy hierarchy. The Chair was the vice chancellor of the Academy and the other two permanent members were members of the senior faculty. The two part-time members were elected annually by the student populace at the end of the second term of each year. Election was only eligible for third year students, who would, when elected, take their seat in the Panel for duration of one year. At the end of that year, the outgoing panel members would then return to full time studies and revision in readiness for their Academy graduation finals. The year’s ‘attachment’ would then count towards one of the students elected specialty subjects, resulting in an automatic credit pass in this particular specialty.

Jake considered standing in the early stages of last year but was persuaded not to by Steve and Carla. Standing against Simon Ward Anderson would have been futile; he was a natural public speaker and a born politician, and while he didn’t excel in any other area he was ‘popular’ and was always going to win the vote.

His compatriot on the Panel was Maria Shavenosky, a veritable wunderkind who charmed the votes out of the majority of her male voters. Ward Anderson and Maria sat in front of Jake and Steve while they awaited the return of the Chair. Jake didn’t care much for Ward Anderson. He was a little smarmy, as far as Jake was concerned, and clearly considered himself to be a cut above the average student. A man destined for an Earth-based staff post and presumably a march up through the ranks, without anyone really noticing whether he achieved anything, thought Jake.

Maria Shavenosky was different, a petite and attractive Polish girl who was also one of the brightest students on the campus. She would graduate in the top ten and become a damn good pilot. She had also had a brief encounter for Jake in year one of the academy, a fact that hadn’t gone down well with Joanna, his girlfriend at the time. Jake got himself into trouble on several occasions in that first year when he was ‘caught with his trousers down’, but somehow Joanna always managed to forgive him. Jake told himself he’d grown out of this immature behavior and his relationship with Joanna ended not because of his infidelity, but because Joanna graduated. They parted as friends as she headed for her first jump pilot posting.

Maria looks good today, thought Jake. He really must catch up with her soon.

Just then one of the faculty administrators entered and whispered in the ear of one of the permanent members of the Panel.

“The Chair has been briefly detained elsewhere but will return shortly. The meeting will remain in session, pending his return.”

Jake and Steve sat in silence and Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Jake did feel for Steve. His actions merited this response, but it was clear he regretted them and was willing to do anything to get back onto the course. Whether that would be enough remained to be seen.

Steve sweated, feeling hot and uneasy. His future was being held in the balance and the bastards were making him wait for his punishment deliberately.

Why can’t Carla be here? He thought. Her wanderlust was just bad timing. He needed her here by his side. Jake was a help, and if he was honest, he could have been in even more trouble, if Jake hadn’t supported him both today and following the ‘incident’ itself. He forgot about how only days before he accused Jake of sleeping with Carla. He didn’t care anymore. He wanted Carla back and just wanted to get on with his training, Steve feared the worst. He knew they didn’t have the direct power to have him thrown off the course but they could influence his senior tutor and his flight trainer. He could be looking at graduating as a shuttle pilot.

The Chair finally arrived and took his seat. He shuffled some papers and spoke a few brief words to the other panel members and then he stood and addressed the meeting.

“Enson Costella, please stand. You have admitted to the charges brought forward by you flight trainer and your
senior tutor. This Disciplinary Panel has sat today to determine whether appropriate discipline is required.”

“The panel has considered your actions; that you have admitted your wrongdoings, and your pleas for leniency, and we have reached a verdict from which your senior tutor can act upon should he elect to.”

“The Panel considers that your actions placed both your co-pilot, your immediate colleagues and the inhabitants of the substation at considerable risk and for what? You have a track record of disobeying instructions and flouting rules and conventions. You seem to have a complete disregard for the Academy rules, conventions and codes of conduct. My personal opinion is that you should be thrown out of the Academy. However, the collective verdict of the Disciplinary Panel is that you should be allowed to continue your training, including your jump ship training. You will be deducted one whole point from your graduation score and it is recommended that you should not be allowed to compete in the Top Gun competition this year. You are dismissed”

Jake led Steve through the chambers door and out of the main campus building. Steve looked ashen.

“They can’t stop me from taking part in the Top Gun, can they?”

“For God’s sake, Steve. You have just been let off the hook and back on to the training course. Never mind the competition, you can still graduate with an 8.5 if you knuckle down for the rest of this year. Just forget about the Top Gun.”

“I guess so,” said Steve. “There’s no way am I going to forget the Top Gun.”
Chapter Six  
Aurora 5

The Sentinels’ Northern Fleet never really got to grips with the Humans’ technical capability, with their cunning and devious battle tactics. The fleet was in terminal decline, morale was low and their remaining ships were old and war-beaten. The humans’ success against the inferior forces of the Northern fleet was inevitable but unfortunate.

General Yoshi didn’t want to be here. He was intent on continuing his destruction of the Partacians and this was an unnecessary distraction. He assumed command of the Northern Fleet and made good what remained of the salvageable ships, and scuttled those left behind.

Earlier he visited his Northern Fleet incumbent. He declared the ‘Kaphflona’ and immediately assumed command as he watched the outgoing General plunge his ceremonial sword up through his abdomen and out through his neck. Death was slow and painful, but the path of the Kaphflona was clear. He was leader and General Timona was dead. He watched as the dead General was taken away for incineration.

The Sentinels were a deeply spiritual people who followed many faiths, but none more so than the teachings of the ‘Betanica Sect’. In essence, the Sect controlled the faith of each of his three thousand crew and that of each and every one of his Fleet Commanders, their crew and the Sentinels that surrounded the Galaxy. The Sect representatives numbered nearly one hundred in his ship alone and, although General Yoshi didn’t count himself to be truly a man of faith, he did respect the Sect and their importance in the greater scheme of things.

Yoshi attended the Katana Ceremony. This four hour ritual involved the blessing of the ship and the fleet prior to battle and the sacrificial slaughter of a representative of the enemy. The human female was nude and muted. She would die painfully and slowly but her death would be the start of many that he, General Yoshi, would inflict on the humans. Despite his lack of faith, this was a good ceremony, he reminded himself.

* * * *

The Aurora 5 hit the dust cloud at maximum cruising velocity. A huge vortex of dust and debris from the Beta five planetary rings swirled into existence as the Battle Cruiser ploughed through the dust cloud on route to its latest destination.

Jonathan Hoskins sat at his desk in his study and attended to his administrative tasks, without even noting the curious special effect that was erupting around his ship. He spent many years in space and the shudder from the impact of a ship entering a dust cloud at high velocity was hardly a special moment for such a seasoned traveler. Over his years, both in command and as a sub-officer, he saw many sights, and today’s special-effects show would continue to go unnoticed. He glanced up at his window when the ship’s stellar drive started to power down. This noise was distinct, and was a signal to him that his ship was nearing its new target. He opened a comm channel

“Bridge: Status?”

“We have located the Sentinel vessel and have taken the stellar drive off line. We are at standard pursuit velocity.”

“Excellent. Let’s hold off the fireworks until I get to the bridge.”

Hoskins left his quarters and headed down the corridor to the main bridge access lift.

He was ready for the next battle, and the ease in which his ship was eliminating his enemy meant he did feel calm considering that his ship was about to go into combat. As he neared the lift, he did feel a sudden sense of urgency. Something didn’t feel right. He considered this for a moment…

“Bridge. Run a full diagnostic and scan to check if there is anything else out there.”

Lieutenant Commander Jacques, the Aurora’s First Officer came back almost immediately and confirmed that all diagnostic checks came back clear. The ship ran at ninety-two percent, and short range scanners revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

His instincts still told him something was wrong. He entered the express elevator which whisked him quickly upwards three decks before coming to a rest on the top deck, the command bridge.

* * * *
The Sentinel ship was in silent mode. This was a more practical mode for pursuing the enemy than the safer—and more secure—stealth mode. The vessel was a Sentinel dark ship. It was constructed of dark metal composite alloy which made it barely visible in the twilight of space. Add to that the silent mode, which in the context of the Sentinel flagship really was silent.

The dark ship pursued the Alpha vessel for several days, and when the Aurora 5 dropped out of light speed, the Sentinel vessel parked on top of the smaller Alpha ship. General Yoshi was pleased. He had the Alpha vessel exactly where he wanted it. The Alpha ship’s weapons would be useless at such a short range, and from here he could suck the life out of the enemy vessel’s stellar drive. He waited patiently as they plowed through the dust cloud. It was here that they would be noticed, and they needed to clear the phenomenon before they could commence an attack. His weapons were poised for an instant response, should the Alpha vessel fire first. They would see their own demise, he was certain of that, but at the right time.

* * * *

Hoskins was anxious. He sat at his bridge chair and monitored the ship’s immediate surroundings on his head up display. There was something there, he was certain.

The ship’s status was ‘Conditional alert’, a hybrid state where the ship was neither at battle stations nor ‘stand down’. Hoskins requested further checks when he arrived at the bridge but still they detected nothing material. His crew was used to Hoskins’s gut feelings and went about their duties without reference or question.

‘There.’ Hoskins pointed out a definite shadow to his first officer.

Lieutenant Commander Jacques leaned forward.

“Can I suggest a sensor sweep?”

“Yes, promptly and discretely Number One.”

Hoskins knew that, whatever it was, it was likely to be Sentinel. It was big and too damn close. He needed to get some distance between them.

“Aurora 5. Prepare for emergency jump on my command, charge up the plasma converters and raise defense shields to maximum.”

Fuck, it was on top of them. How long it was there?

He asked himself. This was not a side of the Sentinels he had seen before. They didn’t sneak around, the Northern fleet didn’t. This tactic and this ship suggested something different. What were they planning and when?

He didn’t have to wait long for the answer. The Sentinel vessel launched a low yield atomic charge directly into the Aurora’s drive section amidships. The missile exploded and the auxiliary drive immediately ceased.

“Go to condition yellow and prepare for emergency jump Number one, what is the state of the sensor sweep?”

“Preliminary results confirm a large Sentinel vessel immediately above us. Shall I launch a Rapier battle group?”

“Negative. Battle stations. Go to jump on my mark and sweep round 180 degrees to port and drop to 220.”

“Prime the PBA and raise forward shields to maximum.”

“Mark.”

The Aurora 5 instantly surged forward at maximum thrust. The power of the emergency stellar jump forced the Sentinel vessel upward and briefly into a downward spiral, but the vast Sentinel ship corrected itself immediately and fired broadside clusters at the Aurora as it steadied itself, scoring direct hits and causing minor damage to the aft decks and again to the auxiliary drive.

“She’s big,” said the Aurora’s first officer.

“I think we may have met our match, Mr. Jacques. This might be our first contact with General Yoshi. Take us to SD5. Brace for hard acceleration. Mark.”

The ship’s stabilizers compensated and the Alpha Battle Cruiser lurched forward, accelerating briskly to SD5. The Sentinel ship started its pursuit but despite her obvious ailments, the Aurora 5’s thrust was too great and she began to pull away.

The Aurora 5 was in some difficulty.

“Stabilizers to maximum,” shouted Jacques.
“Status report.”

“Significant damage to aft decks, no reported casualties as yet, the auxiliary drive is offline and we are venting plasma from the stellar drive,” replied the first officer.

“Effect immediate repairs and maintain velocity. Steady as she goes.” said Hoskins. He decided this day was a long way from being over.
Chapter Seven
The President

President Roslyn was in a bad mood. The news from Beta Five reported Alpha encountered the Sentinel’s Southern Fleet—or part of it—and that the Alpha came off worse. To add to his woes, the news wires were reporting his approval rating at a new low of just twenty-seven percent and the public’s generally-positive perception and support for the war was beginning to lose ground.

This was definitely not the right time for the Defense Secretary to come to him to request additional Alpha funding, but the incompetent fool was doing just that. He was standing there right in front of him and demanding further funding.

Charles De Voort was a diminutive, spectacled man who usually spoke his mind. He was confident, articulate, and generally got what he wanted. He headed up the Defense Department for the last eight years, and had visited President Roslyn for Alpha funding on numerous occasions in the past. He always got what he wanted.

Not today. Roslyn was not in the mood to play party politics. He was not in the mood to create yet another headline about yet another increase in funding and he was not in the mood to see De Voort’s face, let alone have to listen to him.

However, the case for further funding was clear. Alpha required funds to launch an all out strike on the Sentinels’ Southern Fleet. He was obligated as an APF member to remove the threat from the Sentinels, because he had signed a treaty which pledged to do just that. Not that upsetting the APF was of particular concern, but they did still provide Central APF funding, albeit directly to Alpha. Their ultimate aim was to remove the Sentinels from APF airspace.

The cost was ridiculous, really. Fully twenty-five percent of Earth’s GDP went towards defense, and despite APF’s treaty commitment, to fund their contributions, to date was derisory; a further half of one percent GDP funding was required to fund the new strike. What could he do? Alpha was not yet completely self-funding. They still relied on ECG—Earth’s Central Government—to provide the funds, and if Earth didn’t fund it then Alpha would go short and, inevitably, losses would be greater. Would they be able to find the funds elsewhere?

Roslyn stood and beckoned De Voort to take a seat in front of his vast desk.

“Can you give me a justifiable reason as to why I should authorize, and why the senate should follow suit? The costs are ridiculous. I need you to reduce costs, not increase them.”

“I believe I have outlined a fully justified and coherent plan for additional funding.”

Just then Alpha’s chief of staff entered. Admiral Neville was Alpha’s commander in chief. De Voort asked him to attend to give substance to some of his costing plans. The Admiral was late, which offended the President, and he didn’t like the Admiral either which offended him even more.

It was right at this point that President Roslyn elected to make a stand. There will be no additional funding. The economy cannot afford it and Alpha would have to cope by cutting costs elsewhere. The media would have their say, but that would die down. In the end he was doing this for the good of his party and the next president.
Chapter Eight
The Wounded Fox

The Aurora 5 limped into Alpha Territory at sub-stellar speed, having sustained a velocity in excess of light speed for over 36 hours. This was much longer than Hoskins intended, but it was clear they were still being pursued, and to reduce to sub-light speed before would have almost certainly resulted in the Sentinel ship going in for the kill. He had the relative protection of territorial space, even though his ship was still over twenty light years from home. Surely Yoshi would not try to engage in battle here?

The rational was simple, made simpler by the fact that while the Aurora’s stellar drive still operated, most of his ship clearly didn’t. Repairs were carried out to all decks affected, but the bulkheads were damaged. No amount of patching up mid-flight would resolve this problem for long. In addition the shield systems faltered, plus the ship’s pitch and yaw controls were knocked out of balance by twenty percent. The Auxiliary drive was back on line, but the plasma injectors in the stellar drive poured plasma into the void, leaving a trail for all to follow. Like a wounded fox, the prey was being pursued; his blood was the plasma, and with a weakening heart, he waited for his attackers to catch him and finish their kill.

The Sentinel vessel still pursued them. It was some way back, but within range, and the gap between them was definitely closing.

Hoskins turned his attention to the location of the nearest Alpha vessels. There were two ships within short range and a further four just outside. His communications officer tried to contact them but this area of space was notoriously bad for comm links. Hoskins knew he needed to get nearer to a sub-space communications booster before his transmissions were picked up. At current velocity, the Aurora 5 would be within comm range in fifteen minutes. Hoskins knew he could not rest on his laurels waiting, so he left his quarters and headed straight to the main hangar deck.

The Aurora’s jump ships were stacked two high each in an individual ‘workshop’ to the left of the hangar. The ship’s CAG was Lieutenant Eileen Collins and she looked up as Hoskins walked towards her.

Aurora 5 had a complement of twenty-seven vessels stored within two hangars in the center of the ship. This provided protection and allowed the jump ships, in particular, the opportunity to achieve maximum thrust before they left the relative safety of their mother ship.

The main hangar housed twenty Rapier jump ships, twelve of which were Rapier 7’s. The other eight, the reserve fleet, were aging Rapier 6’s. The smaller hangar deck to the rear of the main deck housed five Sabres and two Eagle carrier ships.

Hoskins briefed his CAG some hours earlier that the likelihood was that he would be calling all the Rapier 7’s and three Sabres into action. In this situation, the jump ships would provide the Aurora 5 with ‘cover of last resort’, if the comm links failed to call in assistance from the other nearby Alpha vessels.

Hoskins knew his options were running short and it was time to brief his CAG and get the jump ships primed and ready for launch. This was the kind of decision he hated. He was about to order his crew into action, with the likelihood that some would not return. This was different from the elation of a few days before. The hunter became the hunted.

Hoskins briefed Lieutenant Collins and ordered that the jump ships in question be made ready for standby status. He left the hangar deck and headed straight for the bridge.

The ship was in relative calm. The crew was not naïve; they all knew that they were being pursued, rather than being the pursuer, but they also knew that if the ships commanders were relaxed then the situation must be under control. Hoskins learned not to over-hype these situations and he deliberately tried to air a feeling of calmness as he walked towards the front of the ship. He knew the time for calmness neared its end and battle was imminent.

He entered the bridge and took a seat at his station.

“Comm Status?”

“We are just entering range for the comm’s booster and we are sending repeated relay messages to all the Alpha vessels within short range,” advised the Communications officer.

“Good, carry on.”
“Number One. How is General Yoshi this morning?”
“Almost upon us. The good news is that we have partial shielding,” came the reply from his First Officer.
“Excellent.”
“She is within range, sir. We can deploy blaster cannons on your command. Shall I make us weapons ready?”
“Hold off for one moment Number One. I want to see them before we fire.”
“Three Alpha vessels have responded and on route. ETA twenty minutes sir” said the Comm Officer.
“Excellent, Mr. Peterson. We wait.”

* * * *

The Earth ship was within weapons range, but Yoshi was not ready to attack yet.

He was aware they knew where his ship was. They could not see his vessel—not with the naked eye, but their heat filters could trace the outline of his ship thermically. Surprise was therefore no longer a tactical advantage.

Other Alpha vessels were also on route to intercept. This was a positive step from Yoshi’s perspective as the wider the audience the better. He wanted Alpha to recognize the superior capability of his vessel and his fleet.

Some members of his senior crew expressed surprise when Yoshi ordered the ship to cross into Alpha space. They hadn’t challenged him but would eventually, and he would listen, albeit as a pretence. He would pursue his attack plan anyway. Tactical standoffs were Yoshi’s specialty. He knew his tactics were right and his ship had the stature and strength to vaporize the Earth vessel.

He also knew that as Fleet Commander he had the authority and moral high ground to pursue the Earth ship and he would not rest until this was achieved.

* * * *

The first missile struck the Aurora 5 on deck six and penetrated the blast shields defenses. The second and third disabled the stellar drive and the fourth penetrated the real of the hull and embedded itself beneath the rear hangar deck. The force of the explosions sent the Alpha ship into a half spin, before the ships stabilizers compensated and adjusted the balance polarity.

Hoskins immediately took the ship to battle stations and allowed the ships NAVCOM to bring her around so that the Sentinel vessel faced them. The Aurora weapons were deployed immediately and Blast Cannons peppered the surface of the Sentinel vessel, but without making any significant impact.

“Deploy PBA and load five teutonic torpedoes.”
“Launch jump ships for close range attack, I want those fucking Sentinel shields down. Get the Sabres to concentrate on the Sentinels Hyper drive.”
“Comm status. Where are those Alpha ships?”
“ETA, two minutes for the first ship sir, the others should be within five.”

Another huge explosion, this time on the fore deck, rocked the bridge, temporarily making the Commander lose his footing. He recovered and watched as two missiles launched and headed straight towards their target. Both reached their intended destination but neither breached the Sentinels ships shields.

“PBA on line.”
“Fire at will.”

The PBA was the Aurora 5’s most devastating weapon, a multi warhead laser that together formed an immensely powerful plasma weapon. The weapon could only be used in short bursts and with extreme caution, but would guarantee the temporary failure of the enemy vessels shields. No sooner had the weapon been deployed, it went offline, requiring recharge before further deployment.

“Battle Cruiser Pacific, to port, sir. She is deploying PBA and launching torpedoes.”
“Co-ordinate our attack priorities with the Pacific, Number One.”
“CAG, what’s our jump ship status?”
“All ships deployed and engaged.”
“Two more Alpha vessels in range,” said the Comm Officer.

“Number One, coordinate.”

“Shields are down to twenty percent, both main drives offline,” the bridge operations officer shouted. “CAG advised a dorsal attack is ineffective. Two ships lost already.”

“What about the Sabres?” asked the commander.

* * * *

The three Sabres launched first. Flight Lieutenant’s Obeya Temsouri and Carson O’Brien were the team leaders in Blue Sabre 1. The slingshot mechanism propelled the Sabre into space at high velocity. Obeya expertly brought the jump ship around and assumed pole position at the front of the three vessel ‘V’ shape formation.

Obeya was the Aurora’s Sabre lead. She was a veteran in her third full tour and she was good. She was also the current mistress of a certain Jonathan Hoskins.

This didn’t prey on her mind. She was fond of Jonathan, but she was a professional pilot first and foremost. The relationship between her and the ship’s commander was not something she broadcast. Born on Seta 9, Obeya was the product of a specialist breeding program which Earth was reluctantly involved in for twenty-five years. She was part-human, part-Dactorian, and part-Barcudian. This gave her increased strength, stamina and intelligence. She was ostensibly human, and looked human.

She was accompanied by Carson O’Brien, an Irish Titan immigrant. He was a good jump ship pilot but preferred to take control of the Sabres’ offensive capabilities when in a two crew member sortie.

The three Sabres accelerated briskly away from both the Aurora and the Sentinel vessel before tuning and assuming an attack posture. They launched their offensive at maximum thrust and swept past the Sentinel vessel from bow to port and then under and over the enemy vessel before starting the whole maneuver again. The Sabres stayed in formation and continued this close range assault while their blast cannons and short range PBAs attacked the enemy vessels shield systems from all angles. They were blasted by the Sentinel ships huge laser cannons and ATA missile systems. The ATA was the most feared weapon in the Sentinels armory from a jump ships perspective. They were accurate; launching, locking on and never letting go. Deadly because they nearly-always penetrated the jump ships’ limited shield capability.

Obeya just avoided one ATA missile when a second one locked on. She pulled the ship upwards at maximum thrust and headed straight for the Sentinel vessel, pulling up at the last minute. Luck was on her side today and the missile got caught in the Sentinel’s shield system and exploded, knocking both the Sabre and a nearby Rapier into a flat spin before both pilots recovered and Obeya pulled the ship out of danger. Unfortunately, the Sentinels laser cannon targeted the Rapier, and the damaged Rapier limped off in space, only to be hit by a further ATA missile which destroyed the Rapier and her pilot instantly.

The three Sabres returned to formation once again and continued their close range offensive. However it wasn’t long before one of the other two Sabres was in trouble, having been hit by the aftershock of an ATA explosion. She started to spin, and her pilot temporarily lost control before recovering and straightening up. She was clearly in trouble, and Obeya advised her fellow pilot to pull out of the next attack and return to the Aurora 5. The Aurora’s CAG immediately launched the reserve Sabre which quickly joined the Sabre hunting pack in attack formation.

All around them, the carnage of a space battle was evident. The size and power of the Sentinel Vessel was telling and although the jump ship pilots were doing their best, it was inevitable that some would be lost. The Sabres continued their offensive and were joined by three other Sabres from one of the other Alpha Battle Cruisers, and all six targeted the Sentinels aft shields which were beginning to show signs of weakening.

“Commander…CAG says Sentinel ships aft shields our down”

“All ships target the aft shields.”

The Sabres did their job and the Battle cruisers began to re-target their main weapons. The four Alpha Battle Cruisers and their jump ships began to get the upper hand. Hoskins was fortunate that the nearest ships were ships of the Line. With two more Alpha vessels on their way, Hoskins knew Yoshi would not stick around for long. He had proven his point, and showed this ship more capable than anything the Sentinels had ever sent before.

* * * *

General Yoshi was disappointed. The other Earth ships were no match for his vessel. Enough was enough.
Monitors showed more Alpha vessels were on route and this fight was over. He issued the command to move out, and the huge Sentinel vessel roared into life and made good its exit.

* * * *

The humans suffered considerable damage and loss of life. Seventeen jump ships were lost in the thirty minute combat. The battle cruisers were still largely intact—except for the Aurora 5, which listed to port with only maneuvering thrusters and no operational drive. The ship’s hull was pitted with impact blisters and the bulkheads were in tatters. The Aurora 5 was a salvage vessel only.

Hoskins sat in his bridge chair and stared out into space in disbelief. How could things have changed so much in just forty-eight hours? The Fox was as good as dead.
Weekends off were a rarity in the final academic year. Jake, Carla and Steve took advantage of this treat to ‘let their hair down’ in the knowledge that, this morning, they could all take their time recovering from the ‘night before’.

It started when Carla returned from Titan late Friday evening, and they met up at the ‘Apple Bar’ in the central campus area. The bar was a popular student hangout which derived its name from the source of their specialist drink: cider. Much cider was consumed and following a visit to the local Chinese restaurant they went back to Carla’s apartment: Carla and Steve, very much together, and Jake accompanied by Maria Shavenosky.

Jake awoke with a start. He took a few moments to establish his bearings and to realize Maria slept soundly on the other side of the bed. This was Carla’s spare bedroom. It all came back to him, the drink, the revelry, the Chinese food. Yes, he definitely slept with Maria and it was good.

Then the room began to spin and he jumped/half-fell off the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Having emptied the contents of his stomach, he gingerly returned to the bed and his sleeping companion and lay down. Head pounding, he returned to his sleep, praying that in a few hours he would feel better.

Jake woke again at nine a.m. to find Maria already risen. He heard voices in the living area and realized Maria, Carla and Steve were all up already. He got up and headed straight for the shower. Refreshed and feeling slightly better, he dressed and headed for what smelled like the traditional post ‘student’ night breakfast, ‘fried’.

Steve patted Jake sharply across the back and whispered, “Well, well, you and Maria seem to have got it on again my friend.”

Jake grunted, suddenly embarrassed, not thinking what reception he would receive from Maria.

In the event, this was not an issue as she came to him and kissed him.

“Well, you took your time Mr. Carter,” Jake responded. They embraced briefly before sitting down to eat breakfast.

Three hours later, Jake and Steve sat outside a café in the main campus area. The sun broke through following a tropical downpour that these days was much a part of the extended British summer. The heat felt unbearable, so they elected to take a seat beneath the air-cooled parasol. Steve told Jake about Carla’s return and how all seemed okay between them. Jake doubted this, but pacified his friend by agreeing and suggesting perhaps the short time apart was a necessary evil.

Their conversation cut short as a huge passenger liner launched into the cloudless sky. It blocked the sunlight briefly as it soared overhead, climbing slowly as she waited for clearance to pass through the shield defenses. She would be accompanied by two Alpha patrol vessels, prior to her jump to stellar speed. This was yet another method of making money for Alpha as they sought to gain financial independence from Mother Earth: the volume of commercial flights had increased markedly in the last few months. The Alpha port contracted with a whole plethora of commercial entities making this port a viable commercial proposition. A political hot potato, it was clear the Alpha Admiralty moved towards a confrontation with the Earth Central Government.

Jake sipped his coffee and returned to more pressing matters. He had not really had time to establish how he felt about last night. Yes, he had feelings for Maria and there was no denying her attractiveness. She was bright, articulate with a bubbly and effervescent personality—which came to the fore at the right time rather than all the time, which would have been annoying. This was not their first encounter of this kind. Last time, there had been no morning after, and he had not spoken to Maria for some weeks after the event.

“So, how come you and Maria hooked up again then?” Steve asked.

Jake smiled and replied that he was not entirely sure, but Maria enjoyed the cider along with everyone else and maybe this was not the best way for a ‘head’ student to behave. They bumped into each other and started to chat. Jake used Steve’s disciplinary meeting as a means to get the conversation started, although Maria remained professional and didn’t comment directly. She said she had seen Jake and meant to call him in the last few months but never had the chance.

So were they together. Steve asked and Jake replied.
“I think so. I am not really sure to be honest, but we are meeting up tomorrow. I guess that must be a ‘yes’. Let’s drink up and head for the Port. The Sabre 4’s are in and I’m ready for a sneak preview.”
Chapter Ten

Back to Class

Monday morning was monthly physical time for Jake Carter. He passed, and was cleared for active duty for another month. Jake spent the time mulling over his current ‘issues’ and he left the occupational screening facility with both a clean bill of health and a clear head.

He entered the physical testing room first, and then spent thirty minutes on the various bench, muscular and stamina testing facilities while being monitored by the PT assessors. Jake was physically fit. He must be. Flying jump ships was one of the most physically demanding roles in Alpha.

The tests were relatively easy and allowed him to spend a little time thinking.

He turned his attention to Maria. She was a breath of fresh air, and their burgeoning relationship came along at exactly the right time for him. Not that he wanted a deep and meaningful relationship right now but it was physical, which was good. He enjoyed the closeness. Maria also expressed her desire for the relationship to be casual.

“It should be more than just sex,” she said, “but we are not talking ’meet the parents,’ honey.”

Jake and Maria met up again on Sunday evening for a quiet drink, a stroll and then sex, some food and then more sex. This was good, he decided. Let’s just continue and see how it goes and, hey, you could do worse than Maria Shavenosky.

His thoughts moved onto Carla. Not that he thought about Carla in the same way, he told himself, or tried to persuade himself. Carla was a little distant since her return from Titan, but she was still close to Jake and the two of them played their regular tennis match early on Sunday morning, before breaking for brunch at about ten a.m. Carla showed disapproval of Jake’s relationship with Maria at first, but she softened her approach after Jake made it clear they were just casual.

She’s still coming onto me, he thought. Is it me, or does she really want me?

As for Carla’s relationship with Steve, she made it clear she disapproved of Steve’s recent jump ship misdemeanors and she wanted him to back off a little, as in recent weeks he came a little too full on. They seemed close enough on Friday night. Is that because of what happened on Titan?

Carla told both Jake and Steve how she found her sister, but she didn’t exactly bubble over with enthusiasm. Perhaps their first meeting for years was a little touchy. Jake decided he would not put any pressure on Carla and, ultimately, it was good if she and Steve remained close.

He then moved briefly to Joanna. She opened a comm link with Jake early on Saturday evening. She took her first jump ship operational role and was on standby on Alpha Six (Jupiter station) to fly Rapier 6 sorties into deep space. She didn’t mention it, but given her location, she would probably be on Sentinel reconnaissance sorties. After their relationship ended, Jake and Joanna moved on and, following some early cross words and some occasional embarrassing exchanges, they both calmed down and were friends once more. The physical relationship was gone, but they were still close, having lived with each other for two years.

*Ironic, she should call a few hours after Maria and I got together again,* he thought. Just like last time. He decided he would contact Joanna more regularly, but it did concern him that she was so close to the potential Sentinel front line.

On Steve, he came to terms with Steve’s ridiculous actions on the jump ship, and hopefully Steve realized he was being supportive. Steve got away with his actions, not least because the Academy offered students a moratorium on prior disciplinary issues at the start of the final year. He was allowed to recommence his jump ship training and, it seemed likely, an offered sponsorship for Top Gun. The fact Steve was ‘loved up’ again, or that Carla was more receptive to him, meant he was unlikely to go off the rails again, right? The fact he walked a type rope anyway would probably help Steve stick to the line from now on. Steve was jealous with the friendship between Jake and Carla, especially after he returned from his summer-long sabbatical to find them as friendly as ever, but the events of the last few weeks cured any ill feeling. Jake decided he would stick by his friend and support him, right up to when he competed against him in the Top Gun competition.

Finally Jake turned his attention to his parents. He had not been home for over two months and, while he spoke to them regularly on the comm link, the conversations were frequently brief and a little terse. Jake missed his parents and the family dog, Barrat, a great deal, and perhaps it was time he returned home for the weekend. He decided he
would speak to his parents this evening and arrange a date to return home.

After the physical tests, Jake moved on to the OT clinic, where his body was subjected to a complete imaging scan. This scan looked for signs of disease, infection, muscular distress, brain dysfunction, fracture, and every other type of physical abnormality in current medical practice, including signs of both physical and mental fatigue and stress. The whole process was painless and took less than five minutes. This was followed by the usual blood and urine samples.

The results of all the OT tests were available immediately. Jake scored ninety-eight percent, which was pretty much his median score, and it had all been relatively painless and straightforward and a good chance for Jake to take some time out.

He left the OT clinic and headed for class. He was looking forward to the next class, having missed the otherwise compulsory Parade Ground session, which he disliked immensely.

Jake arrived at the Advanced Stellar Navigation class with a few minutes to spare and went over to Carla and a group of students gathered round a message board. The commotion related to the publishing of the Academy’s official Top Gun sponsorship list. This list of students would represent the college at the Top Gun competition. Jake and Steve’s names were both on it.

Jake, Carla and their fellow students then entered the classroom and took their seats at their workstations and the lecturer stood up and commenced his tuition. The hour-long seminar was informative and useful. Jake enjoyed this subject and was quite knowledgeable of the cosmos and its peculiarities often overlooked by students. In years to come and when he would be considered for potential command posts, this theoretical knowledge of Stellar Navigation would serve him well.

Jake and Carla both had a free period after Stellar Navigation and they headed for the central campus for a coffee. The sun was again extremely hot and they opted for the climate-controlled environment of the Refectory rather than outside. It was quiet, and Jake and Carla took the opportunity to grab a snack and catch up.

Carla apologized for not being entirely clear about happened on Titan, and she took the opportunity to explain what really happened during her trip. When she finished, Jake urged her to be careful. Carla took his advice in good grace, but made it clear she found her sister and had no intention of letting her go again. Her parents agreed to fund a further trip to Titan at the end of the autumn term. Christmas on Titan was not a tantalizing prospect, thought Jake, but he offered himself as a travelling companion. Carla accepted readily. Great, Jake thought. Steve will be delighted and my parents will be decidedly unhappy when I announce that I am going to miss yet another family Christmas.

The free period ended and they headed off for the next lesson. In Carla’s case, Colonial Political and Environment, and for Jake, it was jump ship time.

Jake met Steve at the campus subrail station and they took the next train to the space port. The brief journey was uneventful, but Jake noted Steve was unusually quiet.

When they reached the surface, having climbed the stairs from the subrail station. Jake asked Steve whether everything was okay.

Steve’s response was considered, if not a little blunt. “Yes fine. It’s Monday.” He then clammed up again and they continued their silence until they reached the Academy tutorial block. They were five minutes early and they headed for a shaded spot and both took the opportunity to take refreshment from their liquid tubes.

Steve then opened up.

“I just had my pilot’s license revoked,” he said.

“What, why?” asked Jake.

“I had my monthly medical this morning. My physicals were ninety-eight percent but the head scan picked up a possible psychological issue. I am on a temporary license revoke, pending a twenty-four hours psych evaluation. The fuckers are trying to find a way to get me out of the Academy.”

“No way Steve. The scanners are thorough and it is possible they picked up on something small. The evaluation will clear you. I am sure your suspension will last a day or two only. Anyway, you’ve been though a pretty traumatic ten days or so. You are bound to still be a little stressed and the scanners have probably picked up on that. You are still here today though?”

“Its theory today and tomorrow. I am not worried about that,” replied Steve. “It’s the Top Gun tournament I am worried about.”
“When does the evaluation commence?”

“The monitor is being fitted at 5.30 p.m. in the occupational screening facility.”

“Okay, do you want me to come with you?”

“No, my friend, thanks for offering, but I need to clear my head. I am going straight back to my apartment and have a quiet and uneventful evening. Can you tell Carla for me?”

“Sure, but she will wonder why you are not telling her yourself.”

“Yes she will, but she is going to be disappointed with me once again. I need to stay clear of the stress for the next twenty-four hours.”

“I am sure it will all be a lot clearer tomorrow.”

With that the doors to the Academy tutorial block opened and the jump pilots entered and headed for a small lecture theatre to the rear of the building.

Commander Teddy Taylor waited as the students entered. He shifted his papers patiently as he waited for all the students to take a seat and then stood up.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Today we are going to talk about Sabre 3’s.
Chapter Eleven
Returning to Alpha One

Jonathan Hoskins was relieved. It took nearly four weeks for his grief-stricken ship to be brought home, and finally this sorry episode would be put to rest.

Everything went well until General Yoshi’s Southern Fleet appeared on the horizon. His was not the only encounter with the Southern Fleet Alpha was involved in, in recent weeks. No matter, he was not concerned with how others dealt with the Sentinels: this was about his career and what would happen next. Admiral Martin was as unforgiving as the innocent party in a partner’s extra-marital affair. He was not going to take this well.

He turned towards Obeya and kissed her forehead. She was still fast asleep and he saw no reason to disturb her. He left the bedroom and entered his study. He opened a comm link and asked his First Officer for a status update.

“Ten minutes to Alpha One. Shall I break out the flags?”

“Hardly, Number One.” This was not the time for light heartedness. “I will be down in fifteen minutes.”

He closed the comm link and dispensed a strong black coffee from his food station, then returned to his bedroom and dressed.

Obeya Temsouri continued to sleep soundly. She was so beautiful and looked so young and innocent. He was suddenly glad that he no longer had to make the decision to send her out to what could easily lead to her death, but not for a while. He also knew the chances of her being part of his next commission was remote. They were less-than-discreet in recent weeks, and these things didn’t take long to reach the people you least wanted them to. It suddenly dawned on him that Admiral Martin may well be the least of his problems. His wife was in port and, as a staff officer, it was highly likely that news of his indiscretions reached her.

The Aurora 5 entered the space way and slowed to sub-stellar speed. She took the journey remarkably well. In the immediate aftermath of the battle she was patched up and prepared for tow. Hoskins argued that she could create her own head of steam and, once the interim repairs were completed, she should be able to assume full control herself. In the last ten days, she was released from the tractor beams of her salvage vessel and had continued the journey without further assistance, albeit more slowly than usual. Her maximum cruising velocity was reduced to SD2. However, the Aurora 5 was still destined for decommission, and the salvage vessel followed close by, anxious to ensure their latest investment didn’t stray into trouble until the salvage assessment was completed. If they could repair her bulkheads in ‘dry dock’ she would be a saleable item, and there were elements of the APF crying out for excess Alpha stock.

Hoskins already said his goodbyes to his ship. Not sentimentally, but in a respectful way. It was considered standard Alpha practice for the ship’s CO to treat his command like a ‘lady’. She served him well and that he brought her back for decommissioning would count in his favor. She would not be considered a vessel lost under his command. His crew performed well under pressure and, on reflection, the outcome was a good one. They discovered a great deal more about the mysterious Sentinel ‘Mother’ ship and her dark metal characteristics, and they had determined vulnerabilities. Yes there was loss of life, which was always regretful, but Hoskins death loss tally under his command was still under fifty: a favorable statistic.

“Your shuttle is here, Commander.”

His shuttle was to take him to Alpha One fleet command on Earth, while the Aurora 5 and the remaining crew were destined for Mars, where decommissioning would take place. His crew was then scheduled to be shuttled directly to Alpha One.

Hoskins left the command bridge, headed directly to the main shuttle bay, and boarded the shuttle departing the Aurora promptly. From here he saw the considerable damage inflicted on his current commission and he briefly felt a tinge of sadness. The shuttle headed directly to Alpha One and, within thirty minutes, touched down on a command pad. He exited the ship and steadied himself as his feet touched terra firma for the first time in over four months. It always took a few hours to adjust after a long period off-world. He headed directly to the main Admiralty building and, on clearing security, headed straight to Admiral Martin’s office. He was expected. Forty-five minutes after leaving the Aurora 5, he found himself sitting opposite Admiral Conal Martin.

“Jonathan, will you take some coffee?” Martin asked. He liked to get his subordinates in a relaxed frame of mind before he commenced his debriefing.
Hoskins said, “Yes.”

An assistant came over to arrange the refreshments.

“The fact that you have brought her back is a positive; and that you were able to inflict damage on the Sentinel Flagship, that is also a positive. Loss of life is a negative and so is the fact that you have put out of commission a perfectly good space craft.”

“I have read your report,” he continued “and the details have been verified by the commanders of the other two vessels. All in all, I think, a good job done. How is Lieutenant Temsouri by the way?”

Typical Admiral Martin to save his ‘real’ criticism to last. Martin was a life-long friend of his father, and he had attended Jonathan Hoskins’ wedding some six years before.

Taken aback slightly Hoskins replied, “She is a good pilot sir and one for the future.”

“What about the rumors of your physical relationship with her?”

“Not true, sir.” Hoskins decided he would deny and see where it got him.

“There is no smoke without fire, Commander Hoskins. I have done my best to quash these rumors, and I believe they won’t leave this room. I presume that you will end it and cut off any further ties with Ms Temsouri. Is that clear Jonathan?”

“Yes sir.” If the Admiral could keep this from his wife, that was great, but Hoskins didn’t cherish the prospect of not seeing Obeya. Now was not the time, and he must go with the Admiral’s stance on this. He continued his denial. “There really was nothing going on sir. I have become close to Lieutenant Temsouri, but in a professional manner only. I have taken her under my wing so to speak.”

“Let’s cut the crap, Jonathan. You have been screwing Lieutenant Temsouri and at present, as far as I am aware, your wife doesn’t know about it. I don’t approve, but I have been a friend of the family long enough to compel me not to interfere further, as long as you commit to not seeing her again. If you can’t, I will have no choice but to throw the book at you. I have compounding evidence and I don’t expect my senior officers to lie to me, on or off the record.”

Hoskins decided to shut up. He wanted the conversation to move on and hoped Admiral Martin would not try to close the meeting off without commenting on Hoskins’ immediate future.

The coffee arrived, and Martin turned the conversation briefly to Jonathan’s father and a recent golf game before returning to the official issues of their meeting.

“I am assigning you to a new commission. A Type 32 Duke-class Battle Cruiser. Same crew complement, but with thirty jump ships and an additional complement of one hundred marines. She is due to be commissioned on September 30th and will hail from Alpha Five. You can transfer your crew en masse.”

“The command post requires a three-star rank and I am promoting you, effective immediately. This is long overdue, Commander, despite your wanton destruction of a perfectly adequate ship: your offensive skills are advanced and your capabilities as a commander are considerable. Just don’t let me down in other areas.”

“Thank you, sir, that is excellent news.” Hoskins was overjoyed but tried his best not to show it. “Did you get a chance to look at my crew recommendations?”

“Your recommendations are all accepted and your first officer will be promoted to commander, One Star.” Martin stood up and gestured towards the door. “You will deal with that other matter, won’t you?”

Hoskins took this to be the close of the meeting. He stood up, saluted and confirmed that he would speak to Obeya. He paused briefly before he said his personal goodbyes, and heaved a sigh of relief as he left the Admiral’s office. The Admiral could have easily insisted Obeya be transferred to a different command but he hadn’t. All in all, the meeting went well. He headed for the Recruitment Building. He needed to ratify his acceptance of his new command and to receive his commission papers. This day was a long time coming.

He was pleased. He had a brand new, faster, and bigger ship, essentially; the same crew, who were competent, reliable and trustworthy; and he could keep Obeya within his command. His wife was none the wiser, and he could return to his San Francisco Bay home to spend a week with her before he needed to start work on his new commission.
Chapter Twelve
Alpha Independence

Admiral Neville was tired. He was tired of the same old crap: the same people making the same argument about Alpha divorcing itself from the support of ECG. He knew his side was losing. Of the fifteen high-ranking Admirals who sat on the Senior Admiralty Bench of Alpha Fleet Command, he could count only four who definitely still supported ECG funding—and even that number was questionable. Admiral Martin expressed anxiety on this matter, and the fact of the persuasive arguments of the other side, led so resolutely and confidently by Admiral Koenig, began having an effect on Neville himself.

Matters were deteriorating markedly. President Roslyn refused the additional ECG funding required for the Alpha’s plan to remove the ‘new’ threat from the Sentinels Southern fleet. Neville advised the senior bench of that significant development today. Neville was a traditionalist. Alpha Fleet was established to defend the interests of Earth and its colonies. This was a fundamental principle of Alpha’s incorporation and an underlying principle of its Articles. This could not be changed without a seventy-five percent majority vote in favor and that meant twelve of the Bench would need to vote in favor. He would use this as his leverage.

Neville sat down at the large wooden conference table in the Senior Bench’s Chambers fifteen minutes before the Bench council meeting was due to convene. As he looked up, he saw that all fifteen Admirals sat there and awaited the opening of the meeting. Neville was a stickler for timekeeping and protocol and refused to start the meeting until the scheduled time of 11.00 hrs. At last he stood up and addressed the bench.

“Fellow Admirals. I have submitted a request for additional funding from President Roslyn for the assault on the Sentinel Southern Fleet.”

He paused briefly and continued. “This funding has been refused.”

Silence, deathly silence. There was no response from anyone until Koenig finally stood up and responded, “This is not entirely unexpected. We must fund the campaign from a different source. I believe AFP will consider this to be in their own interests. I understand Admiral Kohn has already approached them. Is that correct Admiral?”

Admiral Kohn stood up and Admirals Koenig and Neville gave way.

“Yes they have advised a considerable sum, in respect of additional AFP funding. This was signed off and the new funding line can be drawn on immediately.”

Koenig jumped up and replied “Excellent, Kohn. We are funded in majority by outside benefactors. We need to move towards removal of ECG’s influence on our affairs and make appropriate amendments to our constitution. I move that we carry this out today.”

Neville stood up, and Kohn and Koenig gave way.

“This is not possible. It is not part of our scheduled agenda for today, and I believe that this bench will need to receive further representation from all relevant parties before we consider this again.”

Admiral Koenig stood up again and said firmly. “It is my right to request a special motion to vote on this issue today. “ He then sat down and two other Admirals stood up and almost in unison seconded the motion. Neville knew he had no choice but to give way. He summoned up his most authoritative voice “We will vote on this motion after lunch. We will, however, take the time to consider the options this morning, and I move to propose an amendment to the special motion. Specifically that ECG will continue to be named as an ‘influencing’ factor in our decision-making process, and that Alpha should continue to meet with senior members of ECG periodically to brief them, gauge their support and seek verification, before we resolve anything other than ‘ordinary’ resolutions.”

No one stood up in support. It was clear to Neville he had lost and even Admiral Martin was swayed by the new developments. Alpha was, in essence, no longer dependent on ECG funding, and he could no longer justify the argument that ECG should maintain any control over Alpha’s actions. Commercially, Alpha was able to stand on her own, notwithstanding the significant additional costs involved in fighting a targeted and enduring campaign against the Sentinels’ Southern fleet. Having made good use of Alpha’s port and terminal facilities in recent years for commercial activities at Alpha’s home ports and the major star bases, Alpha also leased reserve and decommissioned vessels to other AFP members and provided consultancy expertise and training to anyone who requested it. They were a large commercial organization and all parties would have to come to terms with this.

Admiral Neville sat down and made a few brief notes on his tablet, before rising again and declaring a twenty-
minute adjournment to prepare the necessary documentation for a special resolution. He would, he decided, make it his first action after the break to resign his leadership of the bench. This was not his game anymore. He would let the younger Admirals fight it out, and hope that the political ramifications of the vote they were about to take would make the bench see sense and hold off the total divorce of Alpha from ECG. He stood once again and collected his tablet, and left the room without further word.

Admiral Koenig waited patiently for the other members of the bench to leave the chamber before rising. He knew that it was highly likely that, by the end of today, one way or another he would become Alpha’s new Commander in Chief.

The Admirals all returned to the chamber twenty minutes later.

Admiral Neville stood and spoke for what he believed would be the last time at this forum.

“Admirals.” He said shakily. “It is with regret that I feel compelled to resign my post as CIC immediately. I shall also be tendering my resignation from Alpha with immediate effect. I feel certain the motion will go against me and I cannot knowingly be involved in this action. Alpha Fleet was established by Earth Central Government to defend the realm, and it is only by a quirk, no, a mistake in the drafting of the original articles, which allows this resolution to take place at all. Alpha will be a lesser organization without Earth’s influence, and it fills me with a deep sense of despair and anxiety for what the future holds for both the defense of Earth, its colonies, and the region in general. Today, unless I have misjudged the mood in this room, Earth has suddenly become a less stable place to live.”

He sat down, and a few moments passed before Admiral Yohoti stood up and announced himself as interim chairman, pending the establishment of a new CIC, which must be resolved today. No one questioned his actions or passed further comment. Yohoti continued by opening the debate on Alpha’s proposed independence from ECG. The arguments were brief. Those who supported Neville felt disenfranchised. They made their observations, but the stronger and more persuasive arguments came from Koenig and his supporters.

Within thirty minutes, Yohoti stood.

“Gentlemen, Ladies, I propose that we move to vote by a show of hands. All those in favor of the special resolution to amend the Articles to remove the influence of ECG please raise your hands.”

Yohoti counted twelve hands and then raised his own. Only Neville and Martin’s hands remained by their sides.

“The article is amended accordingly. Let the records show that ECG ceases to have any influence over the affairs of Alpha Fleet forthwith.”

He stood again and asked the bench to consider nominations for a new CIC. He asked that nominations be proposed and seconded, and that after lunch each nominee should make opening statements, be cross–examined and then make closing statements with a view to voting by ordinary resolution.

In the event Koenig stood unopposed. He already had the support of the majority of his peers; his coronation was swift and effortless, and at 15.39, Admiral Koenig, the newly elected Commander in Chief, stood up.

“Thank you Admiral Yohoti for standing in as temporary Chairman. Admirals, I am honored to take on the highest of Alpha posts, and on such a momentous day in our history. We must not rest, we must facilitate our funding requirements, and we must renew and extend our abilities. We must specify and develop our strategy towards the Sentinels and to the other warring factors in the region, and we must take our seat at the top table of the AFP.”

He turned towards Admiral Neville.

“James, your undoubted loyalty and ability has stood the test of time, and you have been without doubt one of our great CIC’s. We respect your decision to stand down and wish you all the best in your future endeavors.”

Koenig then turned back towards the bench. “This meeting is closed.”
Chapter Thirteen

The Sentinels Prepare

General Yoshi was in a confident mood. After all, he destroyed the Alpha ship and severely damaged two others. Following his victory, he passed back into neutral space and moved into the Ionian System. He then rejoined his fleet and continued their preparations while hiding in the plasma wave cloud swathing the eastern tip of the system. The waiting was nearly over. His fleet numbered some seven thousand ships, by far the largest number of vessels he ever commanded; and because the majority originated from his Southern fleet, they were a superior fighting fleet.

His intention was clear. He needed to remove the threat from Alpha and seek revenge for the near destruction of the Northern fleet.

He was joined by five hundred vessels from the Eastern fleet and over seven hundred fifty from the Western fleet. This was his fleet and he was given the task of destroying the human threat. This became the Sentinels’ top priority.

Alpha was heading ever closer to the three stars and this was a matter of great concern. The Betanica Sect had even gone so far as to issue a Jombarat decree. This was an ultimatum that the Sentinels were compelled to carry out. Since religion was paramount in Sentinel society, the issue of such a decree was taken seriously. They must remove Alpha’s offensive threat and capability to travel to the Tri-Star system by whatever means necessary.

The Sect sent one hundred of their own fighting vessels to do their bidding. These ships were mostly small and were not part of Yoshi’s command. They were devastatingly effective because they used phased neutron weaponry capability. Such weapons were outlawed in most societies, but there was no jurisdiction over the Betanica Sect. They would use this weapon whenever their commanders deemed it appropriate.

Yoshi’s task force was ready and he planned to give the command to move out and head into Alpha’s territorial space shortly. The fleet was ready, the Sect ships were ready, and this morning he attended a Katana Ceremony where yet another human was sacrificed. *Where are they coming from,* he asked himself?

Yoshi sat at his Salu, a vast throne-like chair from which he delivered his commands. Here he issued the order to attack and pursue the Alpha vessel, and he issued his own decree earlier this afternoon. The Task Force must destroy the source of the threat to the Tri-Star system. They must destroy Alpha One.
Chapter Fourteen

Roslyn

President Roslyn leaned against the metal balcony and looked out over Lake Lugano. It was a humid night, following several hot days and, despite the thunderstorms of yesterday, the muggy conditions continued.

This was where Roslyn came to relax. His villa sat on the gently-rising slopes of Monte Bre, one of two mountains that looked out over Lake Lugano, both of which stood proudly like sentries guarding the city of Lugano. He liked to come here a couple of times per year, and acquired the villa when he first became a senator in the lower house of ECG. As President, the opportunities to visit his favorite part of Europe were few and far between, until recently when he decided to take a small step back from confrontation and try to enjoy the last eighteen months of his presidency.

He flew his yacht directly from the AFP summit on Telgaron just two days ago and landed on the water in front of his villa. The summit was interesting for the first twenty-four hours before the conversation inevitably turned to Alpha Fleet and to their divorcing themselves from ECG. This came as a surprise to Roslyn, as his cabinet colleagues assured him Alpha’s senior Admirals were not ready to make such a huge commitment. Clearly this was not the case, and to make matters worse, Admiral Koenig was elected as CIC—totally unopposed.

The government would challenge the legality of the move. This was political expediency. It was however highly unlikely that they would be successful, and there was a certain inevitability about it all, even if the speed of the events took everyone by surprise.

Alpha took this action following Roslyn’s refusal to provide further funding. This was the start of his new leadership ethos, which simply told his government colleagues, his friends, family and his enemies he meant business and would not be broken by anyone. Why should he? His status and term as leader of ECG could not change, but Roslyn wanted to be seen historically as a great leader following his ten year term of office. His current popularity and that of his party was not clear, especially following Alpha’s unilateral decision to divorce itself from ECG. If he didn’t act, he could be perceived as being a weak President. He needed to come up with a strategy to pull back some of his government’s influence over Alpha. Roslyn worked through his mind the makings of a solid and workable policy to achieve just that.

He already started the process. Initially he made representations to the main power brokers at AFP: he told them he felt it was unreasonable for his government to still be funding Alpha in the light of AFP’s funding to Alpha. His stance here was simple. ECG would reduce their ‘voluntary’ contributions to AFP’s central purse if the new funding commitments were allowed to continue. This was not met favorably, but his government could do as they wished and it might yet prove a popular strategy politically.

As he stood watching the moonlight shimmer across the lake, the second part of his strategy took shape. Alpha may control the space ports on Earth and its surrounding colonies, but his government controlled the shield systems. He could control Alpha’s movements within the Earth’s territorial boundaries by limiting shield clearance. They would control departures and lease clearance facilities for Alpha and other commercial ventures. Alpha would reduce funding and have to bear costs to clear each planets shield systems.

This is brilliant, he told himself. He would work on the logistics and wording of his next speech to congress tomorrow. How long would it be before Koenig came knocking on his door, desperate for a return to the old ways?
Chapter Fifteen

Top Gun Preliminary Trials

The ‘Top Gun’ or ‘Top Gun’ tournament, as it became known, was pseudo-military slang for the ‘Alpha combined jump ship command trials’. ‘Top Gun’ was an historical term for a competition between US Navy Pilots vying for the top prize in piloting of military attack aircraft in the late Twentieth Century. Although the term and the practice were lost in time, the name ended up being applied to Alpha, and it stuck. Even Alpha used the term together with the official title in its event literature. The trials took place yearly and were open to all Academy final-year students. Each of the fifty-plus Alpha Academies would send two pilots to the trial finals based on Titus 3, and the outright winner was termed ‘Top Gun’ with the college to which he or she attended termed ‘Top Gun Academy’. The rivalry between Academies was fierce and the top five or so Academies invested heavily in ensuring they put forward the best candidates for the Trial Finals. The Finals were held in April so, once completed, the Pilots could go on into their final term and concentrate on their academic finals and graduation without hindrance.

The South Downs Academy commenced their Preliminary Trials in October. The sixty or so applicants were whittled down to ten who contested the Final Trials for the Academy. This was a proven method of selection, one which gave South Downs the title of Top Gun Academy twelve times in the last twenty years, and the last five years in a row. As a result, the Academy gained a reputation as a jump ship specialist college and was consistently in the top five by academic performance.

Jake and Steve were listed on the official South Downs College Top Gun sponsorship list. This meant the college officially supported them, although officially they were provided no special preference. Unofficially they were given ‘additional assistance’ during the run up to the various trials. The Academy reasoned non-sponsored candidates were invariably not in this for the final prize.

Over the years, candidates with no serious prospect of winning entered the Top Gun Trials for a variety of reasons. Most fraternities were represented—some took part for fun, some for recognition and some believed they had a realistic chance of winning.

Today was day one of the preliminary trials. It was the first Saturday in October and once again it was blisteringly hot; so hot, in fact, that the jump ship take off pads had to be air-cooled to ensure the jump ship fuel lines didn’t ignite when they fired up. There were no Rapiers or Sabres in sight today. The Hunter RS7 was the jump ship preliminary vessel. All students had flown these at some stage in their compulsory training and their use was freely available. The Hunter was a one-man short-range attack jump ship with similar flight characteristics to the Rapier, but less agile and much heavier. They also required manual calculation of fuel intermixes, a process automated on the newer vessels. They were being phased out as Alpha invested heavily in the newer Rapier and Sabre variants, but were still very much a part of Academy training as the manual fuel-mix calculation provided valuable experience.

Jake had not flown a Hunter for nearly three months, when his preliminary trial commenced. This was a time trial, involving two circuits of Earth and the moon in a figure-eight formation. He would launch at the same time as five other candidates. The objective was to launch and land within ten minutes, preferably a great deal faster. He carried out the usual pre-flight inspection, paid particular attention to the fuel lines and to the standard drive configuration. The previous pilot might have used the wrong intermix, which could be the difference between success and failure even for one of the academies best Top Gun prospects. At 10.30 a.m. precisely, Jake powered up the Hunter and taxied forward toward the vacant jump pad, fifty meters in front of him. He hit the pad at maximum thrust and the Hunter launched immediately. Jake compensated for a slight shudder in the throttle and brought the ship into symmetry for a near perfect launch and clearance of the planet’s shield systems within twenty-five seconds. His ship was already some distance ahead of his nearest rival.

Jake’s intermix calculations were completely accurate, and the acceleration to his maximum close-planetary velocity was achieved instantly. He progressed ‘round the moon and back towards Earth effortlessly, and then carried out the reverse swing adjustment required to bring the ship into a negative curve, allowing for a smooth transit into the second part of the ‘eight’ configuration. Jake’s time was excellent as he brought the ship ‘round the circuit for the second time. He obtained prior re-entry clearance as he passed the halfway point of his second circuit. He launched the ship into landing mode as he cleared the defense shields and plotted a course for his return to the Alpha port.

He touched down and came to a complete stop eight minutes and 28 seconds after he had first fired up the
engines. This was a good time, but would probably not be the best. He had gone for quality and the assurance of qualifying for the next phase of the trials rather than the fastest and most spectacular method. Jake managed to dismount the Hunter before the next-best paced jump ship touched down in second place in his particular heat.

Carla was a decent pilot, although jump ship training was not one of her academy options. Both Steve and Jake urged her to take part in the trials. She was in the same heat as another good pilot, Maria. Carla was quick, but Maria was quicker. She touched down with a time of eight minutes and 47 seconds.

After eleven heats, the organizers called the pilots together for the final heat’s pre-flight briefing and Steve Costello entered the hangar with eager anticipation. He was granted ground clearance just two hours previously, having begged both his tutor and his flight trainer to allow him to take part. This had only been possible because the twenty-four hour psych analysis revealed nothing ‘out of the ordinary’ and the Occupational Health team gave him a one-week pilot ban, rather than the one-month ban expected. Steve’s trial was faultless and uncompromising. He recorded a time of eight minutes and fourteen seconds, the fastest recorded time for the first section of the preliminary time trial.

The Trials broke for lunch, and at 2 p.m., the first heat of the afternoon’s events were scheduled to take place. The Hunters launched in teams of ten. This time they commenced their trial at different places on the figure-eight circuit, the idea being that each pilot would chase down the colleagues in front of them. This was again a time trial, but with the added distraction of having to either overtake, or be held up by, the ship or ships in front of you. This was a much more complicated proposition and the line between success and failure was thin.

Jake, Maria and Carla were all in the second heat. Jake had adjusted the fuel intermix to compensate for the fact that no launch or landing was required. Again his adjustment was correct but the Hunter felt sluggish. He compensated halfway through to prevent the other pilots in the heat from catching up. Jake won his heat, with Maria coming in third, but his time was less than perfect, leaving Jake feeling he may have to speed things up in the third event.

The third, and final, event of the day was an attempt to spice things up a bit. The trial was over the same course, but this time the heats were run in the order each person appeared in the trial table. This meant Jake, Steve and Maria went in the last heat.

The ten Hunters lined up at their distinct starting points in the ‘eight’ formation as before and the trial commenced. Jake started well and ran first as he entered the second circuit, but he got caught up in a squabble with the two ships in front of him. This cost him time, and he ended up finishing in overall 5th place for the day. Steve ran well all day and it was no particular surprise that he ended in first place. Maria flew fantastically well and managed to pass Jake, ending the day in 4th place. Carla finished a highly respectable 27th. She was animated when they all met for a coffee at the close of the day’s trials.

The second day’s trials began with a launch from Earth, but on a different route. This time the figure-eight rounded Mars, and the Hunters were required to use a short burst of their Stellar drive to ‘jump’ from one planet to the next. This was more complicated and the top pilots came to the fore. Steve and Jake came in first and second. Jake replaced Maria in 4th place overall.

The collision of two Hunters in the final heat marred the trial. Both pilots came out unharmed; one ejected and was rescued by an Eagle Search and Rescue Shuttle, who returned him and his stricken ship to Earth without further cause for alarm.

The final trial was crucial. Twelve of the sixty candidates would be eliminated from the Top Gun competition today. It was critical to avoid mistakes. The trial involved taking off from Mars via a launch tube, with all sixty Hunters launching at the same time. This trial often proved to be a logistical nightmare for the organizers, as they must first find sixty Hunters and their launch tubes and then request ground and shield clearance for both Mars and Earth. The final event then was a sprint: a launch into space at high velocity, a jump to light speed, and a perfectly timed deceleration to allow clearance of Earth’s shields at the right angle of decent and speed for landing.

This time Jake got it spot on. He was ahead at launch, at the jump and at deceleration and managed to beat Steve to the launch pad by a whole five seconds. As a result, Jake jumped to second behind Steve in the overall trial timings.

Maria and Carla didn’t have a good day, with Maria finishing the day in 22nd place and Carla in 46th place. Carla remained in the competition, but only just. Twelve candidates were eliminated including both those involved in the collision.

The first trials day ended and the students returned to their homes to enjoy what little remained of their weekend.
Jake, Maria, Steve and Carla all met up briefly for a drink before agreeing to call it a day. A new week loomed, and it was back to studies in earnest tomorrow.

While Jake and Maria walked back to their respective apartments together, Steve and Carla hung around for Steve to speak to the flight instructor team. He wanted to ensure his suspended status was lifted for his academic flying and not just for the Top Gun Trials. It turned out to be just a formality, with both Sabre and Rapier flying scheduled for the following week, Steve just wanted to be certain everything was okay. The Academy organizers were relieved the trials were a success and this year’s candidates looked quite good. The next Trial would follow in six weeks, when a further twelve candidates would be eliminated.

Steve and Jake were where they wanted to be, heading the trials list and fully intent on keeping it that way. Neither of them would give up their ticket to Titus 3 without a fight.
Chapter Sixteen

A New Ship

Alpha Five was the nearest star base to the Sun and one of the busiest. Venus became a populous planet in recent years, following advancements made in Beta Formatting. Commercially, Venus was the second-largest trading partner of the Earth Colonies.

Jonathan Hoskins arrived on Venus, five days prior to his new ship’s commission date, largely because life at home was slightly less ‘homely’ than he anticipated. His wife found out about Obeya through the same channels Admiral Martin had. She greeted Hoskins at the door and then slammed it in his face. Two hours later, she finally allowed him into the house where she shouted at him for a further hour. Eventually Hoskins gave up and spent the night in a local hotel.

He finally admitted to the affair two days later, but by then his wife had placed a local restraining order on him. Without either grounds or time to challenge this, he elected to take an earlier shuttle to Alpha Five, where he commenced his pre-commission work in peace.

He didn’t blame his wife’s response. He hardly saw her in the last eighteen months. While she sat at home patiently waiting for him, he was ‘racing about the galaxy screwing everything in sight.’ Hoskins did, however, feel guilty. He loved his wife, but he loved Obeya too. This was going to be difficult, and he needed to clear his head before he tried to speak to his wife again.

On the 30th of September, the new Halo 7, was commissioned, with Jonathan Hoskins as its inaugural Commander. The Halo was a striking vessel: larger than the Aurora 5, and clearly brand new. Her striking, unblemished outer hull looked as white as newly-fallen star. Sleek and powerful, she gave the impression of a larger and much more important ship. The Duke Class vessels, of which the Halo 7 was the fifteenth, were engineered and brought into service six years earlier. They were classified as a B-class ship of the line when first commissioned, but downgraded in the last twelve months to make way for the new Galaxy class super battleships just launched. Such a classification downgrade was not unusual and was certainly not a reflection on her abilities.

She was capable of SD6 via one of two twin matter/antimatter reformatting drives. She had an additional ‘fast jump’ ion drive and two sub-light auxiliary drives. Her thrusters and space launch capability gave her seven propulsion drives in total, making her one of the most flexible cruisers in Alpha’s expansive fleet. The three hundred crew plus a complement of one hundred marines were located in comparative luxury in two of her fourteen decks. She contained three hangars to accommodate thirty jump ships, and four smaller hangars to house her Eagles, a variety of shuttles and her probes.

The Halo’s armament and defensive capabilities were impressive, too, with plasma weapons, ten laser cannons, fourteen teutonic torpedo tubes and an oval-shaped flux capacitor PBA. Her shields were upgraded Battleship-strength with vertical wave shields, and virtual stealth capability, to boot. Hoskins was much impressed when he researched his new vessel and even more amazed when he saw her.

The crew transferred from the Aurora 5, but with natural wastage, transfers and promotions, only one hundred seventy five of the two hundred ninety-seven available crew transferred across. This meant Hoskins must find a further one hundred twenty-five crew, including fifteen officers, two new Rapier Pilots and three senior officers. A new Chief Engineer was already allocated. Tom Royce was promoted from an assistant chief engineer post on another Duke Class vessel and ranked Lieutenant Commander. A Bridge Commander and a new Chief Medical Officer were also needed. The marines and the NCO crew would be recruited via Hoskins’s CPO in the course of the next two weeks leading up to the official launch date of October 17th.

Jonathan Hoskin advised Commander Jean–Luc Jacques of his promotion, twenty-four hours after Hoskins met Admiral Martin. Jacques was happy to accept, and Hoskins’s relationship with his new Number One was developing well. Their mutual respect for each other continued to grow.

Today was the 16th of October, just one day before launch. All crew were appointed and the ship ready for launch. Hoskins sat in his study and opened a comm link to Earth; he planned to have a meaningful conversation with his wife. Sarah Hoskins’s face appeared on the comm link display and Jonathan smiled and said hello.

Sarah replied, “Is she aboard yet?”

“Yes,” was Hoskins reply. He didn’t want to get involved in discussions about Obeya, but thought his best response was to be truthful and brief and hope that this would illicit the right response from Sarah.
“Do you really think I want to talk to you when you have told me you are no longer seeing her and yet you have still sanctioned her posting to your new ship?”

Jonathan realized this wouldn’t be easy. “Sweetheart, it is all over. I transferred her to this ship as part of my new commission. There was no military reason for not doing so and she is a good jump pilot.”

He hated lying, but he wanted the best of both worlds. He knew it was wrong, but he just could not stop himself.

“I have your word?”

“Yes.”

“Then you need to make a promise to me, two promises in fact. You need to stay faithful from on, and you need to make sure you are back home by March.”

“Why March?”

“Because I am pregnant and I am not doing this on my own.”

“Pregnant. Oh fuck, I mean, oh my God, that’s fantastic. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I think that’s obvious, isn’t it. Call me in a couple of days and we can talk further. Do I have your promises?”

“Yes.”

The comm link went dead. It all made perfect sense. Sarah accepted his indiscretions a bit too easily and now he knew why.

She didn’t look pregnant, but had he really looked that closely? No. Then again they had been trying for a child, albeit few opportunities presented themselves, but the dates tied up. He agreed with Sarah that he would take a one-year sabbatical when they had a baby so he could be involved as much as possible. that first year was imminent. This changed things dramatically. He would have to finish with Obeya. Not yet: he had the whole tour to get around to that.

Obeya Temsouri arrived on Venus two days ago, following three weeks on Seta Nine visiting her parents. She felt refreshed and ready to start her fourth tour, in the knowledge that she was the Sabre lead aboard the new ship. She was not immune to the problems her relationship with Jonathan caused. He called her and told her his wife knew of their affair. It made Obeya extremely anxious; she was not, she told herself, someone who would condone extramarital affairs, and certainly would not have entertained Jonathan’s advances had she known he was married.

Her hybrid Barcudian senses told her enough was enough. She would make it clear how they should bring their relationship back to a professional footing. Her Dactorian genes controlled her emotions however; she loved Jonathan and would find it difficult to stop seeing him. This blend of rational thought set against human-like emotions was often a useful tool, and she thought it gave her an advantage over her peers. Today, these two aspects of her psyche were in conflict and she had no idea which way this would go.

Commander Jacques stood at his station awaiting final confirmation of their launch parameters and the entrance of his Commanding Officer. The Halo 7 was about to be launched officially for the first time.

Jacques, a thirty-nine year old Frenchman, was passionate about his chosen career. He was a jump ship veteran who, at the age of thirty-two, decided to move from Rapier command to Bridge command. He was on his second tour under Hoskins’ command and had learned a great deal from his commanding officer. Although he respected Hoskins, he learned his CO was impulsive, head strong and a womanizer. He didn’t particularly respect him, but he did like him and he was currently comfortable in his role as Executive Officer. He reasoned that while this was an important stepping-stone in his career, at the end of this tour he would look to secure his own command.

Hoskins entered the bridge and his crew saluted and, then, guided by their Executive Officer, began to applaud their commander. This was a fantastic new ship, and each one of his crew knew their lives were made a little better.

Hoskins smiled. “Thank you everyone. I agree with your sentiments. We have a marvelous new ship here; are we ready to take her out?”

“Yes,” replied Jacques.

“Then let’s make it so.” Hoskins sat down at his station and allowed his Executive Officer to complete final checks and initiate their departure.

Alpha control came back and confirmed clearance and the docking clamps released. The new ship reversed and was moved via remotely-controlled equipment into its launch position.

“Thank you, Number One.” Hoskins took over.

“Take us out, heading Kuiper Belt ST5, maximum auxiliary thrust.” Hoskins guided the ship towards the Kuiper Belt and the Oort cloud on the edge of the solar system. They headed toward a region currently free from conflict, to allow the ship and her crew three weeks of extensive testing and evaluation of her capabilities. The Halo 7 would maintain maximum auxiliary thrust while diagnostic checks were carried out to ensure all systems worked correctly, and within expected tolerances, before committing the vessel to light speed.

Over the next two hours, the bridge and engineering crews busied themselves with a comprehensive series of diagnostic checks. The ship passed Earth, Mars and then Jupiter, before rounding Saturn’s rings and heading to the outermost sections of the solar system via Quaoar and Sedna.

Finally the checks were complete. Hoskins verified with his Chief Engineer that the Stellar Drive was on line. The main stellar drive was the larger of the two twin ion reformatting drives. It was capable of SD6, but today, Hoskins would not push his new ship to extremes. He was feeling his way around his new ship, getting to know her nuances. So far, all was as expected and the launch remarkably smooth.

“Engage the Stellar drive and accelerate to SD1. Maintain heading.”

The Halo 7 Bridge went quiet and then the ship accelerated almost instantaneously to light speed. The bridge remained silent until Hoskins and turned towards his colleagues, whose workstations all lay behind him.

“Carry out diagnostics on the S-drive and related systems. Number One, you have the bridge. I shall be in my study.”

Hoskins took time this morning to visit all his department chiefs. He started on the bridge, where his First Officer had just taken over from his Bridge Commander. He spent a few minutes discussing the morning’s events, which had included some minor course adjustments, a buildup of ice deposits on the outer hull, and some tinkering with the bridge staffing timetables with Sahib Mahmud, his Duty Bridge Commander.

He headed to main engineering and spent fifteen minutes with his new chief engineer, discussing the drive variables and establishing performance improvement targets. Tom Royce made some interesting recommendations. Royce was a valuable resource, as he was the only crew member who thoroughly understood the mechanics of the various new systems. Royce felt the two variable stellar drives should be used concurrently to avoid freeze-over in one unit and to ensure polarity of ion matter disbursement. Hoskins understood the theory, but this was not his forte. The almost-limitless number of drive variables concerned him. He was pleased to find Royce approachable and that he took a proactive approach to his new job role.

Hoskins then headed to his CAG, Lieutenant Eileen Collins, on the main forehangar deck. Collins headed up the entire fleet of jump ships aboard the Halo 7 including her lead Sabre Pilot, Obeya Temsouri. Lieutenant Collins was aware of the ‘relationship’ between Obeya and Hoskins, who had a sneaking suspicion Collins provided her husband, a three-star battleship commander, with the details of the relationship. Collins and Obeya were close and it seemed too obvious a connection to ignore. He made a mental note to have a quiet word with Lieutenant Collins in the next few weeks.

Hoskins was introduced to three of the new Rapier pilots, one of which was a certain Joanna Black. Second Lieutenant Black was a newly qualified academy Rapier pilot who had made a name for herself in a previous tour. Hoskins left the hangar deck and had brief discussions with his new Chief Medical Officer and his CPO and security heads before heading to the Marines section of the ship.

The marines were commanded by Major Richard De Vere, who was very much a product of the English Public school system. Old school, but clearly confident, good at his job and likeable. Hoskins observed that De Vere was unlike many commanders from the mobile infantry division of Alpha—he was generally more aware of his surroundings. Hoskins made a mental note to include De Vere in his senior officer meetings. Involvement of the marine’s CO would make the mobile infantry seem more involved, and he wanted the whole crew to gel as one unit.

He made his way back to the bridge via the main corridor and the speed lift. He met his Comm Officer, Lieutenant Peterson, in the corridor outside the bridge, and briefly chatted with him before heading through into the conference and observation room located in front and just below the bridge. Hoskins’ small ‘ready room’ sat just off the observation room.

The ‘ready room’ was a sign of the Duke class’s original designation as a B class ship of the line. It was the
Commander’s day room, where senior officers conducted the day-to-day affairs of their ships, allowing the first officer and bridge officer to carry out the actual functions and operations of the ship. This was a less hands-on approach than Hoskins was used to, but the ‘ready room’ was well-located. He knew it could prove a useful facility in the future.

Hoskins took the opportunity to catch up on some messages before he was interrupted by his Comm officer. Admiral Martin called on a priority-one secure comm link. Hoskins took the call, and Admiral Martin’s aging features appeared on the screen in front of him.

“What’s your state of readiness Jonathan?”

“We are about ninety five percent ready, Admiral. I would think a further three to four days and we will be ready for active service.”

“I need you to be ready. We located the Sentinel Southern fleet. It is larger than we anticipated, so we are therefore looking at a two pronged offensive. Our main fleet will approach the enemy head on, while a smaller battle group will head through Partacian space and attack from the rear. I need you to depart A.S.A.P. and head for the Partacian star cluster, where you will report to Rear Admiral Shenke.”

“I will ensure we are ready to depart in less than twelve hours, Admiral. We should be with Admiral Shenke within five days.”

“Excellent, Jonathan. Keep me informed.”

With that, the waiting was over and the Halo 7 was about to go into operational status. It was only two weeks since launch, but he knew that his ship and crew were ready.

Hoskins opened a comm link to his First Officer and asked him to join him in his ‘ready room’.

Commander Jacques appeared momentarily.

“Bring the ship into Operational Status and make ready to depart for the Partacian system. We are about to find out what this ship can really do.”
Chapter Seventeen

Carla

Carla Stevenson sat at her desk in her apartment. She decided to stay in again, despite Steve’s remonstrations. So far this month, she had only been out with Steve twice, and both times they accompanied Jake and Maria. Was this a deliberate act?

She had spent plenty of time thinking about this. Her feelings for Steve had been on the wane for some time and she could not put her finger on why this was. Not until now.

Jake called earlier this evening to ask whether they could put off their tennis match this weekend. Jake wanted to take Maria away for the weekend. This annoyed Carla. She accepted and made the usual reference to him being a ‘dirty stop out’. She was annoyed. When was the last time Steve took her away for the weekend? Steve Costella was far too obsessed with his jump ship and the bloody ‘Top Gun’ tournament. She was more annoyed for another reason. She finally realized she was jealous of Maria because she wanted Jake. There was no disputing it. She wanted Jake and could not have him. Jake’s and Maria’s relationship flourished, and she had encouraged Jake to pursue it. Carla reasoned that she was happy enough to go out as a foursome because it meant this was the only real chance she could spend time with Jake, apart from the tennis—and even that was in jeopardy.

Carla turned her attention back to her dissertation. She tried to complete an assignment on the political changes between Alpha and ECG for the last week, and while she completed the detail, she found the conclusion difficult to finish.

This is ridiculous, she told herself. This was a simple-enough exercise and she just needed to knuckle down and complete it.

“Admiral Koenig,” she wrote, “made it clear that he wishes to continue to widen the divide between Alpha Fleet and Earth, and, conversely, he wants to nurture the relationship Alpha has with the AFP and commercial organizations. It is almost as if Koenig and his fellow senior Admirals wish to…”

She was interrupted by a comm link. It was Joely. She and her sister had not spoken for some weeks following their reintroduction to each other’s lives, nearly eight weeks ago. Carla had begun to get a little concerned.

“Hi Carla how are you?” Her sister’s accent had lost none of its Australian drawl.

“I am good, how are you. I have been hoping you would call, it’s been too long.”

“I’ve been away. You remember, Professor Winterburn told you when we met on Titan. The Collective has been away and we are back.”

“On Titan?”

“No we are in London.”

“You’re kidding, you’re in London! That’s great; have you spoken to Mum and Dad. When can we meet up?”

“Mum and Dad have waited for six years and can wait a little longer. I am in London for three more days and then we will return to Titan. I can’t come to you, but we would like to see you again.”

“I can’t get to London. I am doing my finals. Can you not get down to the Academy.”

“No,” snapped her sister. “Professor Winterburn is keen to meet with you in London. It is important you come here so we can show you more of what the Collective has been doing. Can you come to The Savoy on Saturday? We are in the Elvedon Suite.”

“I don’t want to meet Winterburn. I want to see my sister again. Can’t we just meet up in Piccadilly or something? Yes, I can come on Saturday.”

“That’s great Carla. Come to the Savoy first, and I promise that you and I can go out for a few drinks afterwards. I’ll even call Mum and Dad if it helps.”

“Yes that would be cool. Okay, I’ll meet you at the Savoy at midday on Saturday.”

With that Joely hung up. Carla thought the whole conversation to be strange. Why had Joely snapped at her? She didn’t dwell on it, and opened a comm link to her parents’ house in Melbourne. Despite the hour, they would want to know Joely was on Earth.

Carla took a private shuttle from the Academy directly to the roofline of the Savoy. It was Saturday morning and
she entered the foyer of the luxurious London hotel and took a seat at the bar. Joely entered momentarily. They embraced briefly and Carla offered Joely a drink. Joely declined and advised that they had much to discuss and that they needed to get started straight away. Carla started to object, but realized she wanted to keep this meeting with her sister going and would do just about anything to avoid jeopardizing that.

Joely led her via the turbo-lift to the eighty-eighth floor and the Elvedon Suite. They entered, and there stood Professor Winterburn, this time wearing a smart business suit rather than the Betanic Robes he wore during their first meeting.

“Ah, Carla, do come in and take a seat, we have been expecting you. “

Carla entered the suite and took a seat near the window. The view of the London skyline up here was fantastic.

“We have been busy since our last meeting,” began Winterburn. “We have been to the Sentinel home world and to the site of the Tri-stars. We are concerned.”

“Concerned about what? Whys does this affect me? What were you doing in the middle of the Tri-Star region?”

“I will answer your questions in a different order if I may,” said Winterburn. “The Betanica Sect was established fundamentally to protect the Tri-Star region from insurgence and infiltration. It is vital that the twin wormholes remain closed. If they are opened then we have failed, and the galaxy will perish. We were there to represent Earth and to ensure that Earth Central Government and Alpha don’t try to breach the wormholes.

Carla had begun to feel Winterburn’s power start to gain strength inside her. He tried to enter her mind again. She resisted and tried to exert her own mind over his to gain the initiative.

“What has this got to do with me?”

“All in good time Carla. Before we divulge the full impact of our knowledge and the danger that the wormholes represent, I need you to do something for me. “

“What? Joely is this for real?”

Joely stood motionless and Winterburn’s continued. “You need to understand the information we have is sensitive and is not available to just anyone. We believe your position as a soon-to-be communications graduate of Alpha’s academy—and because of your aptitude and ideology—makes you the perfect candidate to represent the Collective within Alpha. We wish to recruit your services if you like.”

“Recruit…forget it. Look, I am here to see my sister. I have listened to what you have to say, and I am sure it is really interesting, but…”

Winterburn interrupted “Fine, that’s fine. You need time to reflect on this. Joely take Carla for a good meal and explain further about our role.”

He turned again to Carla and said “You will shortly find the need within you to assist us. You and I will meet again on Titan.”

With that, Winterburn stood up and left the room.
Chapter Eighteen

Jake’s Passion

Jake Carter never had any doubt what he wanted to do. Ever since his first off-world experience when he was just six years old, when his father had flown his wife and son to the Alpha base on Mars on a one-day sightseeing trip. Jake had stared first at the moon as it grew closer and closer, and then as they landed he was able to appreciate for the first time the splendor and beauty of Planet Earth. Aged six, he didn’t perceive things in these terms, but he never forgot this first experience in space. In time he would regard it as one of his most special childhood memories.

Today, Jake stared once again at his home planet. He never grew bored of the view in front of him. From here in standard Earth orbit, the spectacle was as magnificent today as it was sixteen years ago. Jake was on a training reconnaissance mission. The objective was clear: to observe over a four-hour period as many vessels, satellites etc as he possibly could and then report back. A simple but laborious task, which reminded the students they were not just here for combat. The Rapier 6 was about many things, but today the Rapier and its pilot’s task was simple: maintain orbit and observe.

The mission was productive, with over one hundred individual sightings reported. Jake was in his last hour of observation and his mind wandered away from his current task and on to other things: specifically, Carla and Maria. He had strong feelings for Maria but his relationship with Carla was changing. He found himself thinking and worrying about Carla more and more, especially since she started to go on about the Collective. Jake had tried to talk to Steve about it, but Steve had just dismissed it, saying that it would pass. It was clear that Carla had not yet told Steve that she had invited Jake to come with him to Titan.

The Rapier 6 comm system came to life.

“Are you bored yet?” Steve asked.

“This is what it is all about. Not always the glory, my dear chap.”

“Well, by my reckoning, the four hours are nearly up and we can start heading down. What say we do a little satellite chasing?”

“The next Top Gun Trial is at the weekend, Steve. If you screw up you won’t be on it.”

“Ah come on Jakey. Just a quick go. I’ll go first.”

Jake sighed and accepted the inevitable and pulled his ship into line behind Steve for their first run.

Steve lifted his ship first upwards and then into a steep descent. At this altitude, thousands of satellites orbited the Earth. Two hundred fifty years of satellite launches had left its toll, with all manner of satellites, space junk, satellite debris and a whole host of other manmade objects orbited the Earth. Most of the intact satellites were dormant and had either been forgotten about, or were triggered for return but their re-entry mechanisms had failed.

The object of satellite-chasing was to pick a target (preferably a non-functioning one) and blast the satellite into outer space, the only problem being that sometimes the blast impact made the satellites go the wrong way and, instead of their floating safely off into the ether, they would suddenly be drawn into re-entry and be dragged into Earth’s shields, where it would disintegrate on impact. The actual policy on satellite-chasing was that it was somewhat reckless, but if the number of satellites were reduced it was a good thing. The Academy’s stance differed slightly: the activity was barred and, if caught, pilots could expect a good ticking off. Getting caught was unlikely, though, and Steve and Jake knew that, given their proximity to the satellites, they would not be the only trainee pilots today who took their chance in the firing range.

Steve went first but missed his original target. He then blasted an old telecommunications satellite, which split into two, and both parts floated off into space.

Jake then moved in for the kill. He lined up a spherical transmission probe and, having visibly checked its functionality was zero, he turned sharply and pulled away from the object before heading straight for it at high velocity. His blast cannons ripped the spherical object into shreds and the remnants again headed away from Earth’s orbit.

“Great shot, old man,” said Steve.

Jake and Steve targeted another satellite each, both successfully, before they received their clearance to return to Earth. The two jump ships followed each other down slowly having exhausted their main power cells through four
hours of relative inactivity. Ahead of them, a further three jump ships were already clearing the shields. Steve was just about to go through himself when their clearance was cancelled and they were asked to make way for the return of a star ship.

The Viceroy was a Type 15 interstellar star ship. The huge Class A ship of the line was the epitome of Alpha’s new fleet. She was testing in the Jupiter void and was being brought back to Earth for her official commissioning. Jake and Steve looked on in awe. This was Jake’s passion. It was the *raison d’être* for his existence in Alpha, and the prospect of commanding such a powerful—and yet somehow beautiful—thing was almost spell-binding. This was why he had joined Alpha Fleet; one day he would command a star ship…

The star ship cleared the shields and quickly disappeared from range. Steve and Jake were then given their clearance, and they began their descent to Earth. The two Rapier 6’s came down together, landed, and came to a stop just outside the Academy training hangar. They cleared their decks and headed straight to debrief. They would find out who was the most observant.
Chapter Nineteen

The Partacian Dilemma

Admiral Koenig was troubled. The logistics of planning a two-pronged attack on the Sentinels’ Southern Fleet had met an obstacle in the form of the Partacians. They blocked a request for Alpha to attack the Sentinels from within Partacian Space. This was unexpected. The Partacians had no quarrel with Alpha or the APF in general, but they would not grant Alpha access to their territorial space. This was despite the fact that, militarily, the Partacians were defeated by the Sentinels and they wanted nothing more than a successful Alpha campaign against the Sentinels.

The Partacian ambassador’s directive to the APF was specific: Any insurgence into Partacian air space would be treated as an offensive stance against Partacia and would be resisted by force. The physical threat by the Partacians was not relevant thanks to the Sentinels, but they were associate members of the APF and were not a warring race by any means. The Partacians were commodity traders. They expressed interest in the Tri-Star region because of the wormholes, and entered the region with a view to opening one or both of the wormholes and going through them. They could not know what lay on the other side, but there was sure to be a new supply of natural resources which could be traded. They had no prior knowledge of the Sentinels’ claim to this region, and at the time they certainly had no intention of going to war over such an issue.

The Partacians didn’t make good warriors. They were not technologically advanced, and their armed forces were limited by the physical attributes of the Partacians themselves. Small in stature and with limited instinctive fighting capability, they were always going to be on the losing side; and so it proved against the Sentinels. What remained of their fleet was heading for a confrontation with Alpha, then to regroup and head back to bolster their defenses on their borders with the Sentinels’ air space.

Koenig summoned a meeting of his Inner Cabinet. Admirals Kohn and Clarke were Koenig’s closest supporters and, with Koenig as CIC, they formed the quorum that made up the unofficial Alpha Fleet Inner Cabinet. They met periodically when summoned by Koenig.

“Admirals. We need to persuade the Bench that we have to enter Partacian space no matter what happens. I know I can count on your support, but how likely is it we will engage the support of others?”

Kohn replied “We won’t. As I see it, we have three alternatives. We can send our task force over and wait to see whether the Partacians carry out their threat; we can try to deal with this diplomatically, which is not their strong point; or we can revert to Plan C and send the fleet in via APF space with two flanking smaller fleets. I assume that the final option remains unpalatable.”

“Yes,” replied Koenig. “Admiral Clarke?”

“The Partacians are no threat to our fleet. They will roll over. We should just go in via Partacian space and enter Sentinel Space by the back door. It is a simple and effective plan which need not impact on Partacia one iota. We would only be in their territory for a matter of weeks.”

“Without the support of the majority of the Bench, we will be leaving ourselves open to a vote of confidence in our CIC. We could face the prospect of a challenge to your leadership, Admiral Koenig,” said Kohn. “I feel that we should try high-level diplomatic channels. How about using APF diplomats?”

“That would take too long and we would lose the element of surprise,” snapped Koenig.

“I see that we have only one choice, and since presenting this matter to the bench would be futile, then I propose that we order the task force to cross the Partacian border immediately.”

“I agree,” said Clarke.

Kohn nodded his head and said, “I will give the order to Rear Admiral Shenke. I believe they will be ready to commence in less than seven days.”

Koenig agreed, but, as a contingency, he asked Kohn to make contact with the APF diplomats to commence discussions with the Partacians, with a view to the use of their airspace. This would ensure that both the Bench and the Partacians believed that Alpha was going down the diplomatic route than the offensive one.

“Gentlemen, I want to move our discussions on to the wormholes. As you know, we have received a request from a commercial carrier to allow them to send a ship into each of the wormholes in the Tri-Star region—under protection of Alpha. I have agreed to this in principle, on the basis that this particular sponsor has offered us
additional funding if we grant their request.”

“They will have to wait,” continued Koenig, “until we have cleared a path to the wormholes themselves. I assume this will take weeks rather than months. It is important, in the mean time, that we familiarize ourselves with the issues at stake here.”

Admiral Clarke headed up Alpha’s information division. His brief was wide but included the chairing of a committee which looked at off-world anomalies and, in particular, wormholes and ‘gateways’ to other galaxies.

The conventional wisdom was if you wanted to travel to distant galaxies, then you needed a high-velocity propulsion system to get you there. There was however a ‘cheat’ card. Wormholes were a means to propel a space craft thousands of light years in just a few seconds. From an exploration perspective, this was clearly a good thing, but in the real world—and especially in the commercial environment in which Alpha found itself—it was the availability of scarce natural resources that drove the exploration of space. A huge industry established itself over the last hundred years whose protagonists scoured the universe for new ‘gateways’ in the hope that they may pass through them and seek supplies of precious ores, metals compounds, etc.

The Tri-Star system had always been somewhat of a conundrum. The system lay between the Great Central Void, the Turan System and the Nouvarel System and, as such, was far from Sentinel space. It was new to Earth’s stellar cartography teams, having been hidden by the giant gas nebula of the Turan system. A star ship had first mapped its location some ten years ago and, within weeks, all manner of exploration vessels had set off to enter the system and enter the wormholes.

None were successful, as the Sentinels prevented them. Alpha also wanted to explore the system, and it was when an Alpha survey vessel entered the system that the Sentinels first attacked. War with the Sentinels started less than two weeks later.

The survey ship had also discovered a peculiarity in their findings. The situation of the wormholes—in relation to the three stars and their orbiting planets—led to the realization that, if both wormholes were opened together. a third hole, a blue wormhole, would materialize.

Unlike conventional wormholes, little was known about blue wormholes and what lay beyond them. What was clear was that they had their own immensely powerful gravitational pull, which to date had only ever resulted in the loss of any space craft that got too near one.

The Sentinels’ religious beliefs were clear: The wormholes must remain inactive to prevent the blue wormhole from materializing. They believed that, if the blue wormhole was opened, something terrible would come through it.

Alpha’s stance on this was pragmatic. The present-day consensus was that a blue wormhole could lead to another galaxy, but more likely than not would lead nowhere and anyone trying to go through one would probably be destroyed trying. Conversely, it was highly unlikely that anything untoward would be able to exit the blue wormhole for the same reasons. Notwithstanding this, the Alpha off-world anomaly committee was always keen to support properly-constituted and -funded mission proposals. The premise was that Alpha would front such missions, funded by the proposers, with the assumption that their personnel would join the mission in a non-military capacity.
The proposal from Nexus Thru Space Incorporated was submitted to the Off-world Committee in the first instance. Admiral Clark approved the proposal in principle and presented the plan, including Alpha’s proposed involvement, to the ‘Cabinet’ at their last meeting. An amendment by Alpha had included a proposal to ‘open’ both wormholes together in a controlled environment, with a view to prove or disprove the blue wormhole theory.

“Gentlemen, Nexus agreed for Alpha to send two research vessels to the wormholes once we have control of the Tri-Star Region. I am in the process of arranging this and will report back in due course,” said Clarke.

“We are also looking further at the Betanica sect and what they stand for. It is not just the Sentinels who believe something sinister lies beyond the wormholes. There is a division of the Sect on Earth known as ‘the Collective’. We are being prudent and investigating the matter in detail prior to any exploration which might take place.”

“Excellent, Admiral, thanks for the update,” said Koenig. “Let’s return to the Partacians.”
Chapter Twenty
Top Gun or not Top Gun

It was Wednesday morning and it was raining, the first wet weather for two and a half months and everything was drenched.

Steve Costello waited patiently for his tutor who had asked him to come today, presumably, Steve assumed, to discuss his poor grades. Yes, they were poor in recent weeks. He was in trouble, and he guessed his tutor was going to make some suggestions to improve his grades. His tutor arrived on time, they entered the office and Steve took a seat in front of the tutor’s desk. Meetings with tutors were non-military and informal; salutes were not necessary.

“Hi Steve, thanks for coming in. I wanted to discuss your grades, which have taken a plunge since the start of term.”

“Yes, I have been expecting this meeting.” replied Steve.

“Expecting? Why didn’t you come forward if you were concerned about your grades?”

“I guess I have been a bit pre-occupied.”

“That much is clear. You grades are down in five classes. We also have to bear in mind your one-point deduction from your Disciplinary Panel Judgment. With your grades as they are at present, your graduation is in jeopardy.”

“I can catch up. It’s only midway through the first semester. I think I might need a little extra coaching with my geometrics, but the rest will all fall into place. I have had a rough few months.”

“That is an understatement. Your grade predictions stand at between 5.9 and 6.2. You need to understand the severity of the situation. I am pulling you out of Top Gun.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I am not. I have also taken the liberty of requesting a further psych evaluation, and a voluntary grounding of two weeks.”

“You can’t take me off Top Gun. With or without the sponsorship, this was still my application.”

His tutor interrupted. “It is. However I can ask you for your DOR.”

It suddenly dawned on Steve how serious this was. DOR (dropped on request) was a voluntary resignation from the Academy, usually reserved for students. allowing them to resign rather than be pushed. It was rare, and you had to be in serious trouble for DOR to even be mentioned.

“What’s the point of the psych evaluation? It will be the same as last time, and I will get behind on my jump pilot course. That is my chief specialty. You can’t ask for my DOR.”

“I am sorry, Steve. Top Gun is not an option. It is too significant a distraction for you right now. Please accept my judgment, for which I have sought the opinions of your flight instructors and your other tutors. I don’t like doing this, but we need to graduate our best pilots. That is your and our priority.”

Steve reflected for a few moments. “I understand your position and you are just doing your job, but I am going to challenge this.”

“That is your prerogative. You won’t take any further part in the academy’s Top Gun competition.

Steve left the tutors office in a bad mood. He felt angry and let down by his tutor and the academy. He would fight this.

* * * *

Jake Carter sat at a terminal in the resources block. He was researching Quadroponics as part of his Stellar Cartography class and his mornings work was successful. Quadroponics was the study of plant life in biospheres, or, more specifically, in a vacuum or on a Beta Forming Planet.

Jake glanced up and saw Steve marching towards him with a scowl on his face. Clearly he was not happy. Steve threw his utility bag on the table, grunted and slouched down on a chair beside Jake, continuing his sulky impression.

“I didn’t know you had a free period.” Jake tried it on to see if he could get Steve to bite. Steve sighed; Jake’s
attempt to wind him up passed him by. He explained the reason for his melancholy expression.

“Oh my God,” said Jake. “You are in shit. Why didn’t you tell me your grades were so low? I could have helped, so could Carla.”

* * * *

Maria refrained from getting directly involved because she wanted to avoid what she termed a ‘conflict of interest.’ She referred them to the Academy’s Legal Consulate, a student resource where grievances against the Academy could be addressed.

* * * *

The Consul beckoned both students into her office. Over coffee, Steve detailed the events leading to his imposition. She reflected for a moment.

“I think there is a case for saying you were placed under undue pressure by enforcing a one point reduction in your final graduation score, and we should pursue this with the Chancellor’s office. However, your tutor acted properly and is really looking after your best interests. I don’t see any precedence for him to stop you from continuing as a Top Gun candidate, but I can’t do a thing about the scheduled psych test. If you fail this, you will have to sit out the next month grounded, as every other person would.”

“I will be out of Top Gun whatever happens, so I am wasting my time.” Steve started to stand up, but Jake pushed him down.

“Is there a precedent for grounded pilots to re-enter the Top Gun competition if they are already candidates?” Jake asked.

“Possibly,” said the Consul, “Although this is not really my jurisdiction. We need to ensure we don’t get away from the big issue here. This is not Top Gun. It’s about your graduation. You need to speak to the Top Gun administrators if you are grounded, and they can advise further on this. If you in agreement, I will discuss the relevant issues with the Chancellors office and get back to you. I suggest you don’t do anything until you have heard back from me, other than take the psych test as planned this afternoon. Assuming I can get back to you by tomorrow evening, and your tests are negative, it is possible you may be able to participate in the Top Gun tournament.”

Steve and Jake left the Consul’s office and headed straight for the OT Clinic. Jake waited outside while Steve had his psych test. Steve wasn’t happy with the Consul’s suggestions, but Jake managed to bring him around. Jake persuaded him to have the test and then sit tight until the Consul came back to them.

Jake picked up the pieces of Steve’s life once again. Yes, he wanted to win the Academy Top Gun Tournament, but not due to the exclusion of his best friend and closest rival. Jake decided he would have a ‘hypothetical chat’ with one of the event organizers while he waited for Steve to return. He opened a comm link, and the Academy intranet located Commander William Golding, the Top Gun supreme at the South Downs Academy.

Steve returned five minutes later. “I failed the test and they hooked me up for another twenty-four hour test… what a surprise.”

“Okay let’s get you back home and into some quiet space. The good news is there is a precedent for returning to the Top Gun course if you are signed off and if you are already a Top Gun candidate. I checked with Commander Golding, without going into any details.”

True to her word, the Consul came back to Steve the following evening by comm link. “The Chancellor agreed to reduce the one point graduation fine to half a point, but only if you take the voluntary two-week grounding as proposed by your tutor. I understand your twenty-four hour psych evaluation came back clear again. The Chancellor says you can return to flying in two weeks. Use the time wisely to catch up on your Geometrics etc. You will have to miss Top Gun tomorrow.”

“Can I not commence the two weeks after the Top Gun tournament?”

“You have to discuss that with your tutor. I have done all I can; it is up to you. Get your head down and graduate. You have no excuse.”

Steve already heard his twenty-four hour test was clear again. He felt briefly heartened before the Consul said her piece; now he was angry again.

“I am in the clear and I still can’t do the Top Gun.”
“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” said Carla, who had joined them in Steve’s apartment. “I am free. Let’s go see your tutor and see if we can sort this out.”

Steve’s tutor was remarkably receptive. The Consul spoke to him following her conversation with Steve and the Chancellor. She diplomatically suggested that while she thought Enson Costello would accept the two week grounding, perhaps, given his proven abilities, it would be pertinent to wait until after the Top Gun round this weekend before the ‘voluntary’ grounding commenced.

“I need you to turn your grades around, Steve. There is no hiding from this. This is as transparent as it gets, especially with the Chancellor involved in your affairs. You can commence the ‘voluntary’ grounding on Monday.”

Steve showed his relief and accepted the tutor’s judgment without further comment. He knew he was on a knife’s edge, but he could concentrate on the Top Gun.
Chapter Twenty-One

The Partacian Border

Admiral Shenke gazed out of the Conference Room window, which ran along one side of the room. In front of him lay the newly-assembled battle group charged with the responsibility of attacking the Sentinel Southern fleet from the rear; meanwhile, the main fleet would attack the enemy along the Ionian front. He assembled a fleet of some fifty ships of the line, together with twenty support ships and a jump ship contingent of three thousand. All in all, the mini-fleet contingent included fifty thousand marines. The assembled collection of Alpha’s finest was impressive: in addition to his star ship, there were two star cruisers, fifteen star destroyers, ten battleships, eighteen battle cruisers, one carrier and three patrol vessels. A formidable force, and he had every confidence in their combined ability for the job ahead. He turned to face the commanders of his fleet, invited to join the Admiral today aboard the Fleet’s Flagship, the Illustrious.

“Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for joining me today. As you know, over the last three weeks we assembled this battle group with a view to confront the Sentinel Southern fleet. We will attack them from behind while our colleagues in the main battle fleet will attack along the Ionian plains.”

“To do this,” he continued, “we have elected to cross through Partacian airspace en route to our destination. Unfortunately, despite our best diplomatic efforts, it looks as if our presence in the Partacian system won’t be welcome, and it is likely we will encounter resistance.”

“The Partacian forces are weak and will prove no obstacle to our passing. However, we should prepare for a combat environment and remain at high alert status while we pass through their system. I propose we deploy as few jump ships as possible during our crossing. We don’t wish to swell our numbers and provoke an unnecessary military incident. It is likely the Partacians won’t attempt to take us on at this level, but we should be cautious. I foresee little difficulty, and we should look to this period as being little more than an advanced training exercise.”

“However, within a matter of weeks we will engage the Sentinels, and this will be a full-throttle battle with the likelihood of significant losses. I am confident the combined efforts of our two fleets will be successful and we will eliminate the threat from the Southern Fleet, just as we did with the Northern Fleet.

Shenke looked around the conference room table at the expressionless faces of the commanders. He had been here before, and he knew he should make some kind of motivational finale to his speech to send his commanders on their way. Shenke was well versed in motivational rhetoric, and delivered his words calmly, but clearly.

“It has always been the quality of our people which underpins all that Alpha Fleet does. We are dedicated, motivated, well trained and loyal. Our determination, courage and selfless attitude are displayed time and time again. As I look around this table, I see many faces I recognize and some I don’t. In time I will get to know each and every one of you. You are the bedrock of Alpha and its greatest asset, and together we will be formidable.”

With that he sat down, smiled and said. “Thank you for your time.”

Commander Jonathan Hoskins enjoyed the briefing. He came across Shenke before and knew what to expect. Shenke was a one-off. He was impressive and a good orator, if a little unpredictable, but overall Hoskins felt more comforted by the presence of a ‘real’ Admiral in command than one of those puppet Admirals Alpha made a habit of bringing through the ranks without any real military experience.

Hoskins’ ship arrived three weeks ago and was combat ready. He could not wait to re-engage the Sentinels. He did have concerns about the Partacians; even in their currently-disheveled state they represented a threat. Hoskins’ prior experience of the Partacians left little doubt that any ensuing battle would be more complex than a simple training exercise.

The order to move out came at midday, and the battle group moved slowly into Partacian space. The fleet flew in close formation, creating an additional layer of shielding and presenting a unified front. Short range scanners revealed nothing and the Battle Group began to trawl across the vast region of space which the APF legally defined and specified as Partacian Territory.

At 13.50, a group of thirty Partacian warships came into short scan range. They adjusted their course and headed directly for the Alpha Fleet.

Grand Sol Tarangi, the commander of the truncated Partacian fleet opened a comm link and addressed Admiral Shenke directly in fluent English.
“Admiral Shenke. You are warned not to cross into Partacian territory and you have done so. We will open fire on your fleet unless you return to neutral space immediately. This is not negotiable.”

The lead Partacian Solship fired a barrage of plasma cannons immediately above the Alpha Battle group—clearly a warning.

He continued, “Leave or your fleet will be destroyed.”

Shenke expected this. The bluntness and the audacity of the Partacian Grand Sol surprised him. He opened a comm link.

“Grand Sol, we would like to reopen diplomatic discussions. I presume you have the authority to discuss these matters?”

This was meant as a deliberate challenge to the Grand Sol. He knew all Partacians felt they had the authority to negotiate. It was part of their make-up, and this was a challenge to the Partacian leader to enter into a dialogue rather than take action.

The Grand Sol didn’t take the bait. He closed the comm link. Moments later, his fleet opened fire. The Partacian vessels commenced an attack on the Alpha Fleet, which packed together in a tight formation to ensure the maximum protection from the fleet shielding system. The Partacians formed a circle surrounding the Alpha Fleet and fired at will, like a Native American assault on a US cavalry wagon.

The offensive went without reprise, but Shenke knew the shields would weaken. It was only a matter of time before Alpha must defend themselves.

“Grand Sol” said Shenke. “You must cease this futile attack on us. You have no prospect of defeating us. Don’t force me to defend the fleet.”

Once again there was no response.

Shenke’s team of advisors and fleet controllers stood staring as the Partacians continued the assault. His lead Advisor, Commander Chris Willis, was old school and paid no attention to any diplomatic sensitivity which prevailed. “Admiral, we should launch one hundred jump ships and let them take the Partacian ships out. There is a risk that if we allow this assault to continue; our ships will take some damage.”

“No, our response must be appropriate. The Partacians are not the enemy. They are merely protecting their airspace. We don’t want them to feel threatened by us, but they have every reason to feel sensitive about ‘alien’ ships entering their territory.”

“Control, organize twenty Rapiers to be launched from the outermost Battle Cruisers. “

Hoskins expected the order, and asked his CAG to place two Rapiers on standby. In the event only five Rapiers were required from the Halo 7, but curiously no Sabres were requested as back up. Forty-five seconds later, five Rapiers launched and headed out to join the others under fleet control.

Jonathan Hoskins didn’t lose his temper often. As he watched his Rapiers launch he noticed two trailed the leaders. “CAG. Why have we launched two Rapiers 6’s? Are they being piloted by rookies?”

Lieutenant Eileen Collins responded immediately. “I had the rookies on standby as we were not in enemy territory.

She knew she had broken the CAG cardinal rule: Don’t send Rookies out unless you have to. “I am sure they will be fine Sir, they are both competent pilots.”

“Then why are they flying behind and out of formation? Get them back in and send Rapiers 7’s to replace them.”

“I can’t, Admiral. It’s too late. They are under fleet control and have engaged the enemy.”

Hoskins cut his CAG off and opened a hot link to the Fleet Control Team. He would deal with Lieutenant Collins later.

“Admiral Shenke, Commander Hoskins requested we launch Sabres as there are rookies out there.”

“What? Launch five Sabres and get them to screen the rookies. How many are there?”

“I am checking…two, possibly more. We will coordinate them directly and make sure they stay in formation.”

It was an unofficial policy not to launch rookie pilots into an offensive assault unless absolutely necessary. Rookies’ piloting skills were raw, and with no combat experience they were still learning their trade. They were usually kept back for defensive and non-combat operations and as a force of last resort until they built up sufficient
operational flight time to be classed as combat ready.

Lieutenant Joanna Black was not combat-ready. She managed to keep up with the faster Rapier 7’s and fired several rounds at the Partacian ships. One of her plasma bursts pierced the shielding of a smaller Partacian vessel. She witnessed her first ‘kill’ as the Partacian vessel ripped apart. She was out here for nearly forty minutes and she was getting tired from the immense concentration required.

Joanna took her Rapier in for yet another attack. She fired her plasma cannons and pulled back quickly to avoid being tangled up in the Partacian fleet in disarray. Unfortunately, she neglected to check for cross fire when she pulled away from the enemy. Partacian plasma cannons caught the Rapier on the underside of the hull as she pulled up. She knew she was in trouble. The Rapier suddenly felt sluggish and her shields failed. Her ship spun back towards the Partacians, and then, in an instant, she was gone.

The Partacians fired on her once again. The plasma cannons tore into the side of her ship and within a microsecond the Rapier was ripped apart. The young life of Lieutenant Joanne Black was extinguished.

* * * *

Shenke waited for his drink to arrive before speaking. He invited Commander Jonathan Hoskins to his state room to discuss the loss of three of Halo 7’s Rapiers in yesterday’s skirmish. On the side of the Partacians, seven ships were lost.

“So your CAG sent rookies into combat and you lost both of them. Did you have any part in the decision to engage rookies?”

“No sir.” Now was not the time to defend one of his own. She broke a simple rule and he had made it clear she would not be given another chance. “I played no part. I should have checked, but this is not normally an executive decision.”

“This is a serious breach, resulting in the unnecessary loss of three good pilots and three Rapiers, including a Rapier 7. I understand seven were lost while assisting the 6’s. Was that not the Sabres’ job?”

“Yes, but this happened prior to their inclusion. I know the loss of three ships arose from the one decision. I should point out we have recovered the Seven and it is salvageable.”

“You still lost three pilots unnecessarily. You have no choice but to replace your CAG.”

“I have already reprimanded Lieutenant Collins, sir. I don’t think she will repeat this.”

“No, we need to send a message to the rest of the fleet. We cannot miss trivial issues like this. If we lose seven ships in nothing more than a combat exercise, then how will we fare against the Sentinels? I am aware this is your decision Commander. I need you to follow my lead on this.”

Hoskins agreed reluctantly, “I will speak to her.”

“Good, Commander. I don’t hold you personally responsible and I trust you will see that this is the correct decision.”

Hoskins left the Admiral’s state room and headed to the hangar. He was angry. Lieutenant Collins was a good CAG, who had made a mistake. He must bust her down, having already disciplined her, which would make him look bad; he then needed to find a suitable replacement. There was only one internal candidate. Obeya was the obvious choice. She had experience in both Rapier and Sabres, and was the only pilot with sufficient deputy CAG experience and who could assume control immediately. First he would speak to Lieutenant Collins.

Eileen Collins took it badly, but demotion was reversible. Hoskins offered her the choice to take a lead Sabre (i.e., to replace Obeya) or to assume a deputy CAG position She opted for the Deputy CAG. She didn’t wish to return to the front line, especially with a Sentinel battle imminent.

Obeya was delighted and accepted the position of CAG immediately. This was a position of responsibility and an excellent career move. Hoskins, too, was pleased because he no longer must make the decision to send Obeya into battle.

Hoskins turned toward the loss of his three pilots. His career losses numbered forty-nine. He always convinced himself that below fifty was not a significant a number. It looked large and inevitably there would soon be more losses.

He turned his attention to Lieutenant Joanna Black. She had no family listed and noted Enson Jake Carter c/o South Downs Alpha Fleet Academy in England as her next of kin. Protocol meant he didn’t have to communicate
with Carter directly, as reporting ‘non family’ loss of life within Alpha was usually dealt with by the recipient’s immediate superior; in the case of an Academy, the students tutor. Hoskins put together two appropriate paragraphs praising the pilot, her life and her achievements. He repeated the exercise with the other two pilots and then despatched the messages.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Top Gun: The Next Round

Jake sat at his tutor’s desk with his head in his hands. He was alone. His tutor left him for a few moments to gather his thoughts. Joanne was dead. How could this happen? I spoke to her on the comm link two days ago! How could anyone be idiotic enough to send a rookie out into battle? Jake continued his reflection. Why did she choose me as next of kin? Maybe she didn’t have time to change it or had not wanted to. Why didn’t she list her parents as next of kin?

Jake suddenly realized that it was his responsibility to tell her parents. Oh, crap. How the hell am I supposed to do that?

Jake’s tutor re-entered the room and took his seat.

“Jake, I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am. This is terrible news. She was such a promising pilot.”

The tutor’s words didn’t register. Jake’s buried feelings for Joanne were resurfacing. He must be strong for Joanne’s sake. She listed him as next of kin for a reason.

Jake looked up and apologized to his tutor. “I am sorry, Sir. This is a complete shock. You know these things can happen, but you just don’t expect…”

The tutor was used to these conversations. Over the years he learned the best tonic was to try to move things on and give the grieving person something to work towards. He interrupted, “The Academy will help you with your next-of-kin responsibilities. Do you wish me to contact her parents?”

“No. Thank you. Joanne gave me that job for a reason and I need to do this. I will get in touch with them straight away.”

“I know. Now hardly seems the time, but there is the small matter of the Top Gun event this afternoon. I know how important the competition is to you. I can probably arrange for a temporary deferral for you, especially given your placing in the Top Gun table.”

“God, how can I think about the Top Gun at a time like this?” Jake reflected for a moment. “You’re right. I have to participate. Anything you can do with the Top Gun organizers would be appreciated. Joanne’s parents are local; I should be able to speak to them this morning. I will get to it right away.”

“Send me a comm message when you are done, and I will speak to the Top Gun organizers.”

Jake’s Personal Transportation Vessel (PTV) was charging in its allocated bay next to his apartment block. Jake climbed aboard and disconnected the charger. He carried out his pre-flight inspection and entered his destination details into the Automated Flight and Navigation computer (AFN) before firing up the PTV. The ground thrusters roared into life and the PTV took off vertically at first. When it reached the allocated cruising height of 110 meters, it accelerated briskly and turned in the direction of Joanne’s parents’ house.

Jake already checked that Joanne’s parents were in. He made an excuse that he was in the area and thought he would pop in to see them. His three-year relationship with Joanne brought him close to her parents and, to be honest, he did miss them. He didn’t cherish the prospect of seeing them, for the first time in over a year to tell them that their daughter was dead. Ten minutes later, the PTV landed on the spare charging bay on the roof of Admiral William Black’s substantial property.

Jake carried out the ‘official’ task and left the Black’s home ten minutes later. Jake felt awful and had an inclination as to why Joanne never listed her parents as next of kin. Admiral Black disapproved of Joanne’s jump ship specialty, largely because of the danger. It seemed his anxieties proved correct.

The retired Admiral cried out, “Why the hell did she not listen to me?”

Jake comforted them both as best he could, then said his goodbyes and left promptly.

He fired up his PTV and reset the AFN for a return to the Academy. He then opened a comm link to his tutor, who confirmed that his place at the Top Gun event had not been jeopardized. He would not fly until mid-afternoon. Jake headed back to the Academy at half-cruising velocity. The AFN controlling the vessel allowed Jake to make contact via comm link to the other parties on his hastily drafted contact list, including Steve, Carla and his own parents—the latter being a call long overdue. The events of the morning brought his own relationship with his parents to the fore and, although the conversation with his father was brief, he took the first step.
The Hunter lifted briefly, then plunged downwards, spiraling out of control and heading for the moon below. The inexperienced pilot faced his own mortality. He stared transfixed at the looming crater—his final resting place. He tried to pull the craft up again, but there was no movement. The moon’s gravitational pull was strong and the powerless Hunter had no answer. The pilot pulled the manual canopy release lever once again, but this was futile. The lever stuck. He was going to die.

The Sabre 4 was on its second phase Alpha test run. The test pilot came to grips with the new set up all morning, and finally felt comfortable enough to engage the SD and head out beyond the Kuiper Belt. Satisfied, he engaged the ship’s NAVCOM, which assumed complete control and allowed him to observe and make notes on his lap pad as he returned to Earth.

The distress call from the Hunter and from the ensuing Academy Top Gun ships was barely audible, but he caught a glimpse of the small moon as he passed Jupiter. He noticed a hive of activity, and realized something was going on. The Sabre 4 was an incredibly adaptable craft. As soon as the pilot realized the Hunter was in trouble, he assumed immediate control and was able to loop the Sabre backwards at high velocity, putting it firmly on an intercept course with the Hunter, which spun out of control, falling to its inevitable demise.

The test pilot knew he could prevent this. The Sabre accelerated briskly into a low moon orbit, and he brought the Sabre to a halt below the Hunter. He then waited. The Hunter appeared from here but the test pilot was ready. He fired up his afterburners at maximum thrust, kicking up enough energy to force the Sabre to shoot forward, and, at the same time, created a vortex into which the Hunter would fall and hopefully stop the spin. The vortex worked and created a negative force in the direction the Hunter was spinning, reversing and stopping the spin almost instantly.

The Sabre had done enough. The Hunter leveled off and the Top Gun pilot was able to gain partial control, sufficient to lift the ship from a head-on impact with the moon’s surface.

The Hunter pilot had control but he would still crash land. There was no time left to pick up momentum so he clenched his teeth and pulled back on the yaw control, yanking the thrusters forward. The action saved his life and allowed the craft to bed down in a clearing, skidding and spinning across 500 meters of flat terrain. The Hunter came to a halt between two large boulders. He was very lucky.

Jake witnessed the crash landing and the incredible maneuvers of the Sabre 4. He waited for his turn to commence his time trial which ran from Jupiter’s moon, Callisto, to the Kuiper Belt and back. The unfortunate pilot completed his run back from the Kuiper Belt in good time, but rather than turn to the right, the Hunter veered left unexpectedly. The pilot was unable to gain control and the Hunter started a flat spin.

Jake and the other witnesses held their breath, expecting the inevitable explosion. They didn’t expect the Sabre to appear from here, get into position below the Hunter and pull off a large-enough vortex to stop it from spinning. This is brilliant flying, thought Jake. It was instinctive, a bit like Steve. Such a maneuver could not be achieved by a Rapier and certainly not a Hunter. The new Sabre variant was streets ahead of the opposition. The Sabre’s engineers had created a phenomenal machine.

The time trials were suspended for the remainder of the day after the Hunter pilot was recovered. Hunter engineers and the crash investigators needed to determine the reason for the failure.

Steve and Maria completed their time trial earlier this afternoon and would leave campus at the end of the academic day, but Jake and his compatriot’s day would last a good deal longer. The engineers and the trainers had asked for the Hunters to keep their velocity below SD1. Jake was stuck on a jump ship, mid-solar system at low velocity. The journey home would be tedious. This was the last place he wanted to be right now. He just lost Joanne to a jump ship, and here he sat in jump ship training with a view to graduating, then going out to do the same thing. I must be mad, Jake thought to himself.

The reality of his loss had not sunk in and he was in denial. I’m surrounded by friends who can help me through this, he told himself, but he hadn’t yet grasped the fact he would never see Joanne again.

He had told Carla this morning. She took it badly and Steve was supportive. Maria grew distant. Her reaction was almost non-committal—a shrug of the shoulders, suggesting she didn’t care because she didn’t know Joanne. She did. Everyone knew Joanne. She was a legend in her final year, when she won the Academy Top Gun competition outright with one of the best scores ever recorded, but elected not to participate in the Alpha Top Gun tournament. This was a two-finger gesture to the Academy: their best pilot refused to represent them at the Top Gun. Joanne had her reasons but only her closest friends were privy to them.
Jake reflected further. He was not sure whether his relationship with Maria would last. She had moments of insularity, and this was beginning to get annoying.

The chief trainer’s distinctive South African accent boomed through the Hunters’ comm link. The Hunters were grounded until three p.m. tomorrow afternoon and the cause of the incident established.

Pilot error caused the crash. He came in too fast as he approached the turn. The trial completed one thousand kilometers before the turn. He came in far too wide. The excess speed, with the significant gravitational force of the moon below, meant when he tried to compensate for his error he overestimated the ability of the Hunter. She stalled, forced into a flat spin.

The second—and more important—issue of the canopy failure needed to be rectified. The canopies were due for an overhaul and replacement within six months. The Alpha engineers would spend the next twelve hours refitting the ejector systems and new canopy hoods to each of the ten Hunters before the Top Gun event recommenced tomorrow.

The speed restriction was lifted when the Hunters were cleared mechanically. Jake accelerated to SD4 and began his approach to Earth. What a day, he thought. He lost a good friend and nearly witnessed the death of a colleague—all because of a jump ship. He must be honest; Sabre 4 was fantastic. It was worth the risk to continue with his training. One day soon he might be piloting one.

Jake finally arrived home at 11 p.m. with no sign of Maria. He ate a sandwich, showered and went to bed. He woke at 8 a.m., by the roar of a huge Galaxy-class commercial carrier coming in low above the apartment, touching down at the space port. He washed, dressed, and then took the first comm link of the morning. It was Carla, checking that he was okay.

As the morning went on, the comm link port was non-stop. Mostly from old friends of Jake and Joanne. The recurring theme was one of deep sympathy, but Jake grew tired of repeating, yes, it was a shock and yes, he would miss her, but they hadn’t been together for over a year.

Admiral Black called at 11.15 a.m. to thank Jake for his visit and his kind words. He advised of a Memorial service scheduled for the first Friday in December.

By 1 p.m., Jake changed into his pre-flight fatigues and was just about to leave his apartment when the comm link port buzzed once again. This time it was his mother. She was out when Jake called yesterday morning, and wanted to express her sympathy in a way only a mother could. She started off saying how much she would miss Joanne, but moved on to the inert danger of jump ships and she was glad Jake wouldn’t be flying them post-Academy. Jake smiled. He told his Mother umpteen times he would start his career as a jump ship pilot but she hadn’t grasped the idea, despite his father making his opinions on this decision known very clearly.

Jake’s mother moved onto when they might see him. This was inevitable, as it had been months since his last visit. Jake wanted to see them and his parents Border collie, Barrat, but he was so busy with his Academy commitments. This was a ruse. He did want to see them but he didn’t want another row with his father about how he should progress with his career.

Commander Simon Carter started as a weaponry specialist aboard a Star Cruiser, two weeks after leaving the Academy. He progressed to his first command within five years. There was no question in Commander Carter’s mind that wasting time running around in a death-trap jump ship would do nothing for Jake’s career and probably end up killing him.

Jake reluctantly agreed he would visit in the next few weeks. His mother told him she would hold him to it and would harass him if he didn’t turn up soon.

He arrived at the Academy hangar just before two and headed directly into the lecture hall, joining his fellow Top Gun candidates. Steve arrived a few minutes later, but there was no sign of Maria or Carla. The two female Ensons arrived together just before the Top Gun Coordinator entered the hall. He stood and addressed his congregation.

“Good morning. Before we go any further, I must advise that the Top Gun timings from yesterday have been scrapped, as not all candidates completed the circuit.”

The coordinator paused as the congregation voiced their objections before continuing.

“Progression and elimination from this round will be decided on positions as of the last Top Gun event and the one run today. I need hardly remind you there is no room for cock-ups. We saw yesterday just how easy it is to get it wrong, with nearly devastating consequences.”
The coordinator paused briefly before continuing. “We will fly the same course as yesterday, but in the order of current ranking in the Top Gun tournament, meaning the current eight highest rank pilots don’t fly until about 20.00 hours. The chosen course is the same, because we all need to learn from the errors made yesterday. I should mention all Hunters have passed fit for flight. New canopies and release systems have been fitted to each one overnight. Good luck everyone.”

The co-coordinator and his team then took questions, and then, a few minutes later, the first ten pilots, including Carla, were lead into the hangar to commence their pre-flights.

Maria joined Steve and Jake. They watched the Hunters launch before heading to the refreshment suite. Maria perked up a bit and embraced Jake as they sat down to take coffee.

“I am really sorry about yesterday,” she said. “I can’t get my head round why I was upset. I guess someone special to you, from your past, is likely to have that kind of effect.”

Jake responded and kissed Maria on her forehead. “That’s fine, sweetheart. Yesterday was just a fucked-up kind of day. Let’s forget about it.”

Jake showed affection on the outside; but deep down, he felt this girl was just too high-maintenance for him.

After Maria joined the third batch of pilots to take her turn, Jake, Steve and Carla took a stroll along the run strip before returning to the refreshment suite for some food. Jake and Steve reported to their respective Hunters at 20.05.

The eight remaining ‘higher ranked’ pilots were led out to the jump pads and launched in quick succession. They cleared the shield system and the space lanes, and headed directly to Jupiter.

All jump ship controls were intuitive, and were linked directly with the pilot’s cerebral functions via the pilot’s helmets. All the Hunters’ controls could be operated in this way, although manual back up controls were available should malfunction or pilot preference require them to be. The Hunter’s main display screen listed key information throughout the flight, with the cerebrally-controlled heads-up display either duplicating this information or detailing additional information.

Despite the capability for a jump ship to fly without the pilot lifting a hand, the joystick remained the usual control for acceleration, roll, pitch and yaw and for the main weaponry system aboard the Hunter.

Jake believed he created a perfect symmetry of mind and joystick control for the Hunter to get round the circuit in the best possible time. As his time approached, he held the ship at zero velocity and released the thrust within a split second of the start signal firing.

Jake had honed his skills on the Hunter to perfection. While it lacked the absolute power of the Rapier or the maneuverability and pace of the Sabre, the Hunter was still a fine vessel. He felt totally in control as he accelerated to full velocity. In no time, he rounded the Kuiper Belt, hugging the ice formation closely as he looped under and over the ice rocks. Next, he headed back towards Jupiter in a near perfect display of balanced high speed jump ship piloting. Today was Jake’s day, and he finished twenty seconds faster than the rest of the field. He finished the day in second place overall with Steve thirteen seconds ahead.

Carla didn’t fare so well. She was unlucky, and was eliminated as the number of Top Gun candidates were reduced to thirty-six. Maria continued her excellent flying and finished the day in fifteenth.

Back on solid ground, Jake allowed himself the luxury of reflecting on the day. The events of the last twenty-four hours were not forgotten. His grief manifested itself as first anger and then passion.
Chapter Twenty-Three
The Pressure of High Office

Admiral Koenig sat at his desk and stared at the figures in front of him. The costs of the Sentinel offensive escalated by the day and were way beyond budget. He was not an accountant, but it was clear funds would not be adequate to cover the offensive as planned. He had three options. The first was cut costs for the operation itself and run the risk of jeopardizing the offensive overall. Alternatively, he could approach Alpha’s funders for additional resources. The third was unpalatable. Cutting costs across the board was a transparent move portraying Alpha as financially stricken. It reflected badly on Alpha’s decision to cut itself from Earth central funding.

Earth’s central government cushioned the blow of budget excesses in the past, by allowing the overspending, funding it and worrying about the consequences after the event. His new funders would not be as forthcoming. The dilemma began clear but was quickly clouded by a suggestion from Admiral Tresco, suggesting a fourth option. Perhaps given Earth’s continued vested interest, it might be acceptable to ask for funding again from Earth. Koenig was troubled but decided to push his worries to one side and enjoy the evening with his family. He would sleep on it and decide how best to proceed in the morning.

In the meantime, the small matter of the fiasco on the Partacian border must be addressed. Admiral Shenke’s taskforce destroyed thirty Partacian ships and lost seven crew in the process—one of whom was a star academy graduate sent out into battle and killed in action. She should never have been out there, and the loss of so many Partacian vessels was catastrophic.

The senior Admiralty bench met earlier that day to discuss the latest events and to remedy the growing political problem developing in Partacian space. The general consensus was that the confrontation should never have taken place and that Koenig didn’t have the power to act unilaterally. He should have consulted the bench before the invasion commenced.

The ‘threat’ from the Partacians should have been eliminated by the mini-task force before they were well into Partacian territory. However, this wasn’t the case, and the bench made it clear they didn’t support Koenig’s stance. An unofficial show of hands suggested the mini-fleet should remove itself from Partacian space immediately.

Koenig stood and stated that it was too late. The fleet would continue on its current course, irrespective of the bench’s position. He was voted as CIC and his word was final. The bench stood silent as Koenig delivered his decision. The Articles of his office gave him this authority, but they also gave the bench authority to act against the CIC if his decisions were contradictory to Alpha’s best interests.

This was dangerous territory. Any more confrontations with the Partacians could bring into jeopardy his position as CIC. There is no disputing the pressure of high office, thought Koenig, then he smiled and told himself that he was CIC and he intended to stay CIC.
Chapter Twenty-Four
Carla’s Long Night

“Oh great, the climate control’s packed up again.” Steve grimaced. “Another hot night then.”

Carla invited him over for a meal and a quiet chat.

“Not for you tonight, Steve. You’ve got a Geometric appraisal on Tuesday and you need to be studying for it.”

“Why did you invite me round then?”

“Because we need to chat about you, graduation, and us.”

“That one again.”

“Yes, you have to improve your grades, and quick. If you fail this appraisal, you’ll be in trouble. All you are concerned with is the bloody Top Gun tournament.”

“It wasn’t ‘bloody’ when you were still in it. The Top Gun is important to me but so is graduation. I have been working on my Geos with Jake.”

“Jake says you failed to turn up last week at all.”

“Last week was the Top Gun so I took myself off it. I am back on. My appraisal will be fine. So, can we get back to us getting hot and sweaty tonight? With your CC on the blink, do you want to come to mine?”

“No. I said I wanted to talk about us as well tonight. Let’s eat first, and then we can talk.”

“For God’s sake Carla. We are supposed to be an item, but suddenly no sex? Are you getting it somewhere else?”

“What? How dare you! I wanted to suggest it might be best that we cool off for a while, given our studying and other commitments. I think you can leave.”

Carla felt angry. Steve was abrupt at the best of times, but his comment was uncalled for and typical of the arrogant pig she felt he became.

“Carla…we have been through this already. We need each other and we don’t need to cool off. Okay, perhaps the comment about you sleeping around was a bit unfair. Seriously, don’t you like sex?”

“Not with you.” Carla was exasperated.

Steve pulled back and then jumped straight in with both feet.

“I suggest you leave Steve. I am not in the mood for this conversation right now. Call me in a couple of weeks, but don’t bother calling unless it’s the old Steve who calls.”

He knew he was beaten. He stood up, sighed and headed towards the door. The door opened and he turned around

“Shit, Carla. Can’t we just talk about this tomorrow? I don’t need this right now.”

“Go.” Carla was too cross to talk.

Steve, admitting defeat, left the apartment.

Carla sat for a long time pondering the argument. She tried to rationalize what went wrong with their relationship and kept coming back to the same thing. It wasn’t Steve. It was Jake. Enough is enough, she said to her herself. Tomorrow is another day. Steve and I are on a break, but Jake is with Maria. Let’s get down to studying.

Two hours later and after the fifth unanswered comm link from Steve, Carla finally gave up and settled for the inevitable. She opened a comm link and waited.

Jake answered, bleary eyed. “Hiya. How did your evening with Steve go?”

“Don’t ask. We are on a two week break.”

“Aghh. That’s really going to fuck him up, Carla.”

“It’s for his own good, and mine too. Where’s Maria?”

“She didn’t come over. She wanted to study.”

“So what have you been doing?”

“Just chilling.”
“Cool,” said Carla. “Do you want to come over?”

“It’s a bit late. Can we meet for breakfast in the morning?”

“Okay. Say seven a.m. at Arthur’s?”

Jake agreed and closed the comm link. Carla was disappointed. She had wanted to get her feelings about Jake out into the open; she would have to wait until tomorrow.

Carla slept badly, waking several times during the night. She had a lot on her mind, not just Jake and Steve but also her sister. She hadn’t any contact with her since they met in London. What Joely told her that evening still sent a chill through her body every time she thought of it; so much so that she buried the subject deep in her subconscious.

She wanted to think about her sister. She wanted to see her again, but every time she thought of her, the taboo subject re-entered her mind.

It was time for decisions, she told herself. She decided to confront the issue straight on. She got up, sat at her desk and opened a web link. She explored teachings of the Collective, the Sentinels and the Betanica Sect.

Joely and Carla had talked for nearly two hours after they finished dinner that night in London.

Joely seemed completely normal, cracking jokes and making references to her family life and, in particular, her parents as if she had seen them just yesterday. If it weren’t for the Collective and what Joely believed in, Carla would have assumed everything was normal and Joely had simply moved on.

This was far from the case. Joely described, sometimes in detail but at other times vaguely and almost secretively, the purpose of the Collective. They were Earth’s representatives of the Betanica Sect. They were much more than a spiritual church. They were a political animal, a forum and a pedestal for a specific objective: to persuade ECG and Alpha not to enter the Tri-Star system.

Joely provided a coherent and technically-correct summary of a blue wormhole and what would happen if one opened. Rare, they occurred as a result of changes in the fabric of space, usually resulting from a second or third space anomaly.

Joely continued by suggesting the Tri-Star wormholes were a case in point. Each wormhole provided a gateway to another galaxy. However, when opened together they merged and formed a much bigger and more powerful blue wormhole.

The Sect was not a product of the Sentinels, and the teachings of the sect pre-dated the Sentinels’ first contact with humans by over a thousand years. In fact, the Sentinels were by no means the only race who believed in the Sect, despite Alpha’s and ECG’s assertion that this was the case. Over the centuries, there were many references to the blue wormholes and what lay beyond them.

The teachings of the Betanica Sect were to protect the wormholes and prevent them from forming a blue wormhole. They were also clear on how opening the wormhole would open a channel to another universe. That universe contained an alien race so fierce and powerful that the existence of our galaxy would be at risk. The Kryl were the most grotesque and monstrous alien species ever encountered in the home galaxy: they were demons—powerful, belligerent and hell-bent on the destruction of everything they encountered.

The Sect and the Collective believed the Kryl were the devil itself.

Why is Joely taken in by the ridiculous assertion of a demon-like race from another universe lay in wait for the opening of a blue wormhole? thought Carla. The Tri-Star wormholes are separated by the largest of the three stars which make up the configuration. If the wormholes created a blue hole when opened together, surely the adjacent star would be engulfed within the anomaly, which would prevent a blue wormhole being created. The consensus from Earth’s leading scientists, astrophysicists and those of other leading powers in the region was that a blue hole here was unlikely. For some reason her sister, a rational and intelligent woman who had, prior to her disappearance, no clear faith of her own was taken in by the Collective.

The answer was clear. Professor Nigel Winterburn was an alluring and powerful man, whose presence was both seductive and enticing. Her sister was drawn first to him, and then to his beliefs. Carla would not make the same mistake. She agreed to visit her sister and the Collective on Titan again, and she would use the trip as a further opportunity to research the Sect’s theories in more detail. She already asked her tutor whether the subject was worth investigating, and received encouraging support.

Jake agreed to join her. Despite his current status as unavailable, this excited Carla. She wanted Jake and
somehow she would have him. Perhaps now was not the time to bring the matter into the open. She didn’t want to scare him off. She would bide her time and wait until the opportunity presented itself.

Satisfied, she addressed some of the conflicting issues preventing her earlier slumber. Carla returned to her bed and within minutes she fell fast asleep.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Yoshi’s Frustration

General Yoshi sat in his Salu chair and pondered. He couldn’t understand why his fleet, ready to launch an attack, was hiding in a cowardly fashion behind the Ionian cloud. To complicate matters, he knew Alpha amassed along the Ionian corridor, ready to attack.

The Betanica Sect were at fault. They insisted they were ready and yet they kept reversing their decision ‘requesting a short delay’ to ensure the timing was correct. Why? What did they wait for? Yoshi was prepared to launch an attack without the support of the Sect, but restrained himself for another reason.

The issue, like so many things, was not simple. Certain Sentinel power lords noted Alpha had not infringed the Tri-Star territorial limits for some time. They felt they couldn’t engage in a battle with Alpha based on a prior incursion into the forbidden territory. To complicate matters, some felt war with Alpha was no longer about the protection of the Tri-Star region. They saw an infringement of the Tri-Star territory itself as akin to an infringement of territorial limits within Sentinel space.

The power lords each headed a regional power base in Sentinel territorial space. Each governed their own planet within the sector. They were Sentinel governors, and collectively determined both regional and central policy. At present, they were at loggerheads about whether the attack should proceed. Neither side created a sufficient working majority on their side to force the issue either way.

Yoshi’s hands were tied and he just must wait until the power lords ruled in his favor. Yoshi was a war lord. He was powerful and, should the delay continue, could take matters into his own hands. There would be a battle anyway. What did it matter who started it?

Yoshi sat quietly for a few moments before concluding he would wait for a while longer, but not indefinitely. When the attack commenced, he would destroy the humans.
Chapter Twenty-Six
The Partacian Delta Cloud

The Alpha mini-fleet was half way across Partacian space. There were no further confrontations with the Partacians but Admiral Shenke and his team were aware of a group of twenty Partacian ships following the mini-fleet for the last few days.

Partacian space was small in comparison to many of the territorial boundaries in this section of the galaxy. It was dominated by a huge anomaly: the Partacian delta cloud: a massive gas cloud, which, billions of years from now, would form a new star. The cloud was too large to avoid going through it if you wanted to travel from one side of the territory to the other. Nebulae of this intensity and size were not usually particularly problematic. They did mean a significant reduction in velocity for vessels travelling through them. One must be careful to avoid the thicker, more impervious areas of the nebula, for fear of igniting the gas and causing a huge explosion.

The Partacians charted the nebula and plotted safe routes through the cloud long ago. These were passed on in friendlier times and loaded to the Alpha fleet’s navigation systems to ensure safe passage.

What concerned Admiral Shenke as they drew nearer the nebula were the Partacians and their intentions once both fleets were inside the cloud. Certainly, Alpha’s defensive capability would be severely restricted. Jump ships could not be used as their close-fire weaponry ran the significant risk of destroying them all should they fire their weapons. The plasma weaponry was far too volatile in a gas cloud, which left Shenke with few options. Most of these were ineffective, again because of the cloud, which left Shenke with the unpalatable decision to use his precious teutonic torpedoes as his main form of defense.

Over the years, the Partacians developed Plasma weaponry effective within a confined gas cloud. This gave them an advantage. It was possible the Partacians might fire upon them. Despite Alpha’s numerical supremacy, the Partacians could obtain a significant advantage before the two fleets exited the giant gas cloud.

Shenke pondered his next move. It was again a political decision, resting on his shoulders only. He could not take unilateral action against the Partacian ships, but he would most certainly take action if they fired upon him. This time he would not waste time with warning shots. He decided the best course of action was defensive. He would increase velocity just prior to entering the gas cloud. This could give the mini-fleet vital extra minutes when travelling through the anomaly. He rearranged the fleet so the least vulnerable ships were positioned at the rear of the fleet and all vessels set their shields to maximum. Any fire from the Partacians would have to be delivered head-on. The rear ships would deliver a salvo of teutonic torpedoes consecutively until supplies were exhausted or they left the anomaly, which ever came soonest. His team had calculated that, at 100,000 kilometers per hour, following roughly the established navigational path, it would take up to thirty hours to clear the cloud at its narrowest point. The teutonic torpedoes from the vessels deployed at the back would run out before they cleared the cloud, but they could revert to more specialist forms of weaponry.

There was never any question of troubles in the Partacian leg of his fleet’s latest voyage. The Partacians proved amicable and helpful to the extreme. Not so, he thought. He had the power to knock out their archaic vessels with ease, but politics was a greater power. He had no choice but to play the waiting game and see what happened.

Two hours later, the cloud became visible to the rear of the mini-fleet. Jonathan Hoskins briefed his crew, and the Halo 7 took its place alongside seven other Battle Cruisers. He transferred thirty percent reserve power to his rear most shields and took his ship to Condition Blue. Fleet command issued the order to increase velocity to SD5, and he could already see the Partacians had not responded. They would try to match the speed, but their vessels’ acceleration was limited and they were too slow to increase to sub-stellar speed as they entered the nebula.

Hoskins was relieved that he didn’t have to call on his jump ships once again. The loss of his pilots affected him badly, probably because losses in this region of space was unexpected. It was not thought a bad thing to be anxious over the loss of his crew. It was best not to be blasé over such issues. You could never get used to the loss of human life.

The order to slow to sub-stellar speed came and the mini-fleet decelerated swiftly, the fleet shield system compensating for the minor discrepancies in velocity to ensure the fleet cohesion remained intact. Momentarily the fleet entered the nebula.

Almost immediately, the cloud yielded its deadly influence over the fleet. Gamma radiation levels increased tenfold, and the radiation made communications with Fleet command impossible. Hoskins was on his own, but he
was ready for battle.

Admiral Shenke didn’t understand. He was certain the Partacians would follow his fleet into the gas cloud, but after forty minutes there was no sign of them. Surely the diplomats had not resolved the trespass issues?

Then reality set in. They entered the cloud, but by a different and faster route known only to themselves. The bastards were sitting on top of them, and they would shortly be in range for an assault on the Alpha fleet below. This made the fleet vulnerable. He must think quickly.

*Their cunning will be their undoing,* thought Shenke. The Partacian fleets position on top of the Alpha Fleet meant they were at risk from multiple warhead fire from over forty Alpha vessels. The fleet commanders had the foresight to arm all their torpedo tubes in advance, and instead of facing sixty-odd teutonic torpedoes in one go they faced hundreds.

Shenke gave the order to fire almost immediately. He no longer cared if his actions prejudiced the political situation. It was survival of the fittest. The missile placement was perfect and the small Partacian fleet was decimated in the first salvo.

The huge explosions ripped through the gas cloud like a backdraft fire escaping from a burning building. The force of the explosions created a huge fireball which headed directly towards the Alpha Fleet. The impact rocked the fleet, but shields held and, within minutes of starting, the fracas was over and so was the Partacian threat.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Steve’s Test

Steve Costello woke early, dressed and jogged to the park. He had a lot on his mind this morning and wanted to clear his head before the day’s events unfolded.

It was the third Tuesday in November. A day unremarkable for most, but for Steve it was important. It was make or break time. Geometric mathematics was compulsory in year four and, at this level, was complex. The simple arithmetic models of differential geometry, curvature and flat space were challenged and disproven in the current millennia, in favor of a series of theorems relating to four dimensional properties. This was the basis on which the universe existed and in which humans’ understanding created the possibility of interstellar travel and the development of the stellar drive.

Alpha graduates were required to understand the complexities of the various theorems. In today’s world, their practicality was evident everywhere.

This was unfortunate as, like many complex issues, if you didn’t comprehend the basics then there was little point trying to move on to the advanced theorems. Steve never really comprehended the basics, and that was why he was in trouble. His tutor had made it clear he needed to get his grades up to average quickly. The assessment today was part of an agreement laid down by his tutor to ensure he caught up.

He took the ‘voluntary’ two week flight grounding following the last Top Gun event and studied hard in this subject, as well as the other four for which his grades was classed as unsatisfactory. He felt ready to take the assessment. He had received a great deal of help and advice to this point, had taken additional math tutorials. He also studied with Jake on two or three occasions, but it was down to Steve. If he failed, he could be in serious trouble.

By the time Steve returned from his run, the weather turned and it was raining heavily. Not just a downpour, but warm and muggy Monsoon-type conditions. This was typical for mid-November with flash floods commonplace and Flood Warning systems at high alert. The Global warming predictions of the early 21st century proved correct and temperatures rose around the globe. In England, the average temperature in November was 15 degrees Celsius, some eight degrees more than one might have expected perhaps 200 years ago when the first projections were made. The Earth shield systems helped suppress the Sun’s powerful rays, but there was no escaping the fact the planet was slowly dying.

Steve didn’t care too much for climate change. The planet’s stability was just fine right now, and would be for another million years. Not a problem for him and any of his offspring, should he live long enough to have any. In any case, he would probably be resettled on Titan by the time he got into all that stuff. The rain was a nuisance, but when it dried, the humidity would reduce. He could not help thinking the rain today was sent to test him even more.

No question he had a bad few months. What the hell was Carla up to and why was the Academy picking on him so much? Bastards, he thought. All I have to do is graduate and then I’ll be flying jump ships full time. He needed to get this assessment right.

Jake joined him at the front of Steve’s apartment block at 8.30 a.m. and they walked towards the Academy main entrance. The downpour finally stopped.

“So, are you ready?” Jake asked.

“I guess so. Not much choice, have I?”

“Just stick to what you know. The Hargreaves theory, stellar mechanics and folding space theory. You’ll be fine. How long does it go on for?”

“About three hours. Less if I can’t answer the questions.”

Jake ignored Steve’s negativity, putting it down to last-minute nerves. His friend had run out of chances; today was critical. “We’ve got Sabres to take out today, so make sure you don’t get yourself grounded between and this afternoon.”

“Yeah, no worries. I am not missing any more flying…see you at the Refectory at mid-day”

Jake wished Steve good luck, and Steve strolled purposefully towards the tutorial block while Jake headed for the Resources block. He had a double free period and he wanted to continue his work on Quadroponics.
He felt sad for his friend. Carla dumped him, his grades were appalling and even his flight training was behind schedule. To make matters worse, Carla had planned to tell Steve she was going back to Titan and that she took him and not Steve.

Steve exited the tutorial block at 11.55 and headed for the Refectory. He passed the assessment, just barely. A pass was a pass, and this would get them off his back. He could concentrate on getting Carla back. Until then—on the Sabres this afternoon.

He joined Carla, Jake and Maria, who sat outside enjoying the hazy sunshine and the clearer air that had arisen following the rain storm. The humidity was returning though. There will be another storm tonight, thought Steve.

The four friends conversed and enjoyed a pasta-and-fish lunch. Carla was much chattier today than she had been of late. Steve hoped this was the start of reconciliation. They took coffee after lunch, and it was then Carla announced she was returning to Titan in a couple of weeks to see her sister again.

Steve was just about to offer to go with her, when Carla spoke again.

“I asked Jake to come with me. I hope you guys don’t mind if I borrow him for a few days.”

Both Steve and Maria looked shocked.

“Did you know about this already Jake? Why didn’t you tell me?” said Maria.

“That’s because they didn’t want us to know about their affair,” shouted Steve. He slammed his glass down on the table, knocking plates and cutlery towards the floor and then stormed off.

Maria made her excuses. Jake shrugged and said he would talk to her about it properly later. She departed, embarrassed, but also annoyed.

“That went well,” said Carla.

“Yeah, perhaps on reflection we should have spoken to them separately.”

“Don’t you think you should go after Maria?”

Jake sighed and stood up. “Yes that sounds like a good idea.”

He eventually caught up with Maria as she headed into the Resources block.

“That was not what you think,” he said.

“So why did you not just tell me? You must have known for a while.”

“Carla mentioned it a few weeks ago. To be honest, I forgot until yesterday. There is nothing in it. She said she would feel more comfortable if I went with her.”

“So there’s no reason why I can’t come?”

Jake put his face in his hands and sighed. “Sweetheart, this is something Carla needs to do on her own or with just me. She is not going to want anyone extra towing along.”

“Because she has ‘special’ plans for you.”

“No. Look Maria, I am going and it is best if you don’t come. Can’t we just leave it at that?”

Maria sighed and turned to enter the building. “Jake, I think you and I need to have a chat about how we feel about each other.”

Jake frowned. He knew this was coming. “Fine, but not now. I am on a Sabre mission until tomorrow midday. We can talk tomorrow night.”

Maria blew Jake a kiss as she walked up the steps and Jake responded in kind, before turning and heading towards the sub rail station. She was really beginning to bug him.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Venusian Void

Jake arrived at the Space Port Training building, just as the doors were opening. Steve was already here and took a seat at the back of the lecture theatre. Jake climbed the steps to the back row and asked Steve if he could sit with him.

Steve nodded, Jake sat down, and they waited for the tutors to arrive. Jake set about trying to assure Steve that his relationship with Carla was purely platonic and always would be. Satisfied, Steve said he was not upset with Jake, but he could not understand what came over Carla. Jake agreed and they proceeded to discuss the matter further.

They were interrupted by the bellowing voice of Lieutenant Commander Teddy ‘Night Hawk’ Taylor, who had entered the theatre from the back together with his two instructors. He addressed his students from the front of the room.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, today you will be flying a twelve-hour training endurance mission in Sabre 2’s. Please group up, sit in twos and await your jump ship allocation and pre-flight. Those on your left will be the pilots for this mission, those on the right will be co-pilots, just as we did last time with the Rapier endurance mission., I am going to mix it up a bit. I don’t want my best pilots grouping together. Enson Costello, please come down and replace Enson Maguire on the left. Maguire please go and join Enson Carter on the right.”

Taylor made a few additional crew changes. Once satisfied, he began the pre-flight.

“Today’s mission will center on Alpha Two. You will be clear to launch under your own timing, but I do not expect anyone to still be on the ground fifteen minutes from now. You will control your own flight clearance and make your way to Alpha Two A.S.A.P.”

Teddy Taylor was in a confident mood today. Clearly it pleased him that someone else would have the responsibility to guide his students to safety today and he could relax.

“You will be guided by the A2 CAG to their Earth Defense Unit, and will be asked to put down and attend today’s live mission pre-flight. Please remember the basics, students. If you land on the Moon’s surface, you need to be aware of atmospherics and reduced gravity. Basic stuff, I know, but you’d be surprised how often people get this wrong. You will be joining the qualified Sabre 2 and 3 pilots in their color-coded operational groups. You need to keep up and follow the lead of the group leader. You will be at operational status for eight hours. I expect all Sabres back here by 3 a.m. tomorrow. You can revert to your original crews for your return leg from Alpha Two.”

“Finally, pilots need to allow co-pilots equal piloting time. Co-pilots. you will need to take your instructions from your pilot in the first instance. Questions?”

“What chance of some real action today?” Steve called out.

“You will be operational and anything can happen. You will be using live rounds, so I urge extreme caution. If there is any doubt, speak first to your pilot and then group leader or CAG.”

The pre-flight completed, the trainee pilots headed to their allocated jump ship. Jake Carter and Siobhan Maguire were allocated a Sabre 3 (AA5). This was an unusual derivative. It was only about five years old and certainly looked the part. Its streamlined swing wing format made it stand out as a prized possession for the Academy. This was a superior vessel compared to the standard Sabre 2. Jake Carter could not have been more pleased.

All fifteen Sabres cleared Earth’s defenses and set a course for the Moon within eight minutes of the end of the pre-flight.

The Alpha Two CAG brought all fifteen ships into the same jump ship bay. The huge pressurized hangar was on the near side of the Moon, allowing a rapid response to any threat to Earth’s defenses. The local Earth Defense Unit CAG assumed control of the jump ships as they entered the hangar, and the vessels were landed in three different sections. Jake’s ship received instructions to put down in section five-green, together with four other Sabres, including Steve’s. The trainees landed their crafts and were promptly directed to their section’s operations center, and from there into the Pre-Flight meeting rooms.

Alpha Two was a colossal base. At peak, it could hold up to half of Alpha’s Fleet capacity. The main fleet operations center was on the far side of the moon and formed part of the Alpha Two Command and Operational headquarters. Today the base was very busy, with the buildup of reserve and support craft for the main fleet’s offensive on the Sentinels in full swing. The logistical complications of serving and supporting such a large fleet
were extensive, and there was continuous movement of Alpha vessels of all shapes and sizes both to and from the base.

“Afternoon everyone.” Green Squadron Commander Harry Wong stood at the front of the meeting room and addressed his audience. “We have been joined today by the final-year trainee jump ship pilots from the South Downs Academy. Welcome to our world, people. You will all be joining us today in an operational sweep of near-Earth Defenses, by near I mean sunny-side Venus and Mercury.”

Steve was distracted. He was paired today with Lydia Lyons, a particularly fascinating young lady. She was not attractive in the conventional sense, but her pale unblemished completion made her look almost pure. She was bright too. *Beauty and brawn*, he thought to himself.

“Three groups of five ships coded Green 1 to 15 will launch today,” Wong continued. “Squadron Leader Dempsey will command Green 1 to 5 with group leaders Paris and Lambini leading 6 to 10 and 11 to 15 respectively. The five Sabre 2’s will be split between Lieutenant’s Paris and Lambini. I will let you draw lots, gentlemen, as to whether you have two or three trainees in your group,” he continued, smiling at the two group leaders sitting to his left.

Lydia Lyons was an interesting person. She was eccentric in an unassuming way, so typical of English girls, thought Steve. He found himself suddenly distracted by Lydia. He had known her for nearly four years, but had never partnered with her in a jump ship before.

“probably just as well*, he thought.

Steve maneuvered the Sabre into position behind group leader Green 6 and handed the controls over to Lydia.

“Thanks,” she said. “I was hoping to have a go sometime today.”

“Sorry if I hogged the controls. You can have the con for the next hour, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine, keep your eyes peeled. Soon we will enter the Venusian Void.”

The Void was an area of space between Venus and Mercury. It had no real significance other than being an area of the space way between the two planets, frequented by ‘Wasps’. The Green group’s main responsibility today was to cover the area and seek out the ‘Wasps’. They were here to support the Alpha Patrol vessels covering the space way 24/7, mostly to prevent the ‘Wasps’ from attacking tourist or cargo vessels.

The “Wasps” were modern-day space pirates. They were highly-organized and skilled pirates whose treasure was routed out by firing and disabling their prey, then boarding and hoarding their cargo. They were unusually aggressive and persistent and earned their nickname for this reason. The yellow color of their ships stood for peril. They wanted their prey to know they were coming.

A group of four ‘Wasps’ were detected, one hundred kilometers to port. They attacked a space freighter and were in the process of boarding. Two patrol vessels intercepted and engaged in a dog fight with the ‘Wasps’, which was proving futile.

The five Sabres entered the fray, just as the ‘Wasps’ gained the upper hand. The group leader, Lieutenant Paris, signaled to the group to spread out, attack and take out the ‘Wasps’ thrusters and weapons. Lydia took the Sabre in wide and Steve fired the Plasma cannons as they made their first pass.

The first ‘Wasp’ continued to attack one of the patrol vessels, which listed, immobile. Lydia’s Sabre, Green 9, aided by Green 7 and 10, worked together to remove the threat. The ‘Wasp’ was powerless to respond and exploded, taking a chunk of the Freight vessel’s outer hull with her.

The second ‘Wasp’ engaged in a one to one with Green 8, Jake’s ship. Jake had it covered, and the disabled ‘Wasp’ ground to a halt, with smoke billowing from its main drive manifold.

The skirmish was not all one-sided, and there were plasma burns down one side of the Sabre with the main thrusters and nose cone badly damaged. Jake tried to push on and continue his assault, but the damage was hindering the jump ship’s maneuverability.

“Green 8, what’s your status?”

“We have lost our main thrusters on one side. We don’t have full control, Should we continue or return?”

“Return to base, Green 8. You’ve done your job for now. Get back to Alpha Two and arrange repairs. Should be able to get out again in an hour or so.”

“Okay, will do.” Green 8, under Jake’s command, banked, returned to main drive thrust and began her return leg back to Alpha Two.
Siobhan Maguire stared at her visor monitor and enlarged the font just to ensure what she read was correct.

“Jake, we have another problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Jake piloted the Sabre 2 back to the Moon base. The plasma burns took out one of his two thrusters, meaning bringing the jump ship in to the hangar would be interesting.

“The aft thrusters are off-line too. I think we burned out a power unit, by overstretcing the drive mechanism.”

“You think…do you know for sure?”

“I need to pull off the internal side panels to be sure. We can access both sets of thrusters internally.”

“Okay, this is your thing, Siobhan. Make sure there is no decompression risk when we hit atmospheric conditions.

Enson Maguire was an engineering specialist. She was a good jump ship pilot. She was still involved in the Top Gun tournament, albeit as a bit player; she was no match for the best pilots in the tournament. She was graduating as an engineer. Jake was grateful for all of it. She could make their landing at Alpha Two infinitely easier if she could get the aft thrusters on-line again.

Maguire pulled off the fascia panel and began to disconnect the thruster compartment unit. The unit was accessible both externally and internally, making it complex. She needed to ensure the external pressures were equalized before accessing the unit, in case the external panel’s seal was damaged. Fortunately the seal was still in place and, within five minutes, she successfully accessed the unit. She didn’t need her palm monitor to analyze the problem; the power unit had burned out.

“Okay, this is not good. The power unit is fried. The coupling welded itself to the free wheel. I don’t know whether the spares inventory has any free wheels. Even if it does, Sabres are not really my forte. I prefer Rapiers from a mechanical perspective.”

Maguire stood up and accessed the spare parts bin. The thruster came with a backup Power unit, within the thruster compartment. She only needed to find the right power coupling within spares to allow the new power unit to attach correctly to the thrusters. Fortunately, the maintenance division at the Academy was thorough, and a full complement of parts was available.

“I am going to need to open up the compartment on the other side to see how the coupling connects to the power unit. My palm monitor diagrams are unclear. I may need you to set up a temporary shield around the damaged thruster to ensure we don’t create a vacuum.”

“No, get some rest. It’s going to be your piloting expertise that will get us out of this one. Especially if we end up with no thrusters.”

Jake didn’t reply. The thrusters were critical to a jump ship. They were used to adjust trajectory and maneuver into the correct position. More importantly, they were the means for both take off and landing. The unit had a 90-degree swivel device which pointed the thrusters toward the landing surface when a jump ship took off or came in to land. If the thruster power unit was not working, then landing must be conventional via a landing strip. This was extremely difficult on a surface where gravity was much lower than it was on Earth.

Ten minutes later, and following Jake’s creation of a shield to prevent a vacuum forming, Maguire accessed the opposite thruster panel and noted the setup of the power coupling. She then looked again at the damaged thruster.

Armed with the correct installation method, Maguire set about disconnecting the old power unit and coupling, then connecting the new one. Within forty minutes, the aft thruster was repaired. She also decided there was no possibility of repair to the damaged front thruster. While it was important for maneuverability, it would not prevent them from landing. She retook her co-pilot seat.

They both felt relieved. The remainder of the return trip to Alpha Two was uneventful and, within a half hour, the Sabre 2 neared its destination.

It was Jake’s turn to work his magic. He was given clearance to land by Alpha Two control and he set up the landing parameters on his visor display. He needed to compensate by bringing the aft thrusters on line twenty-three seconds later than if both the main and aft thrusters worked. He took his time and waited for the jump pad’s emergency tractor beam to grab the jump ship before applying pressure on the thrusters’ manual controls. Split-second timing was required to ensure he didn’t overrun the jump pad. He eased off on the thruster controls expertly
and the jump ship landed with a thud. Jake allowed the sensor controlled grabbers to lock the ship in place and disconnect the tractor beam. He heaved a huge sigh of relief.

“Great landing,” said Maguire.

“Great mechanics,” said Jake.

They both laughed as they climbed down from the cockpit and watched the CAG team set about securing the ship and commencing repairs to the damaged thruster.

“No point us sticking around here,” said Jake. “Let’s grab a drink and come back in half an hour or so.”

“The thrusters and nose cone are going to take about two hours to repair, so there is little point you going up again. The shift will be over before you are able to rejoin your group.” Harry Wong located the two Academy rookies’ in the mess hall.

“You did well today—both of you. Your group leader reports you took out a ‘Wasp’ single-handed, Enson Carter. You have made your first ‘kill’. You are among a select few to have achieved this before graduation. One thing, though; it might have been better if you had waited for a wing-man. You are much safer in pairs and the format usually allows you to work as part of a team.

“Enson Maguire. Your repair to the power unit and innovation with the power coupling was fantastic. All in all, you guys proved yourselves well, and I would be more than happy to take you both in here, should we have a vacancy when you graduate.”

Jake and Siobhan thanked the Commander and watched him as he left the Mess Hall.

“I guess you could say that was a double hit.”

“Yes. I think I owe you a drink,” said Jake.

“Don’t you be coming on to me, Enson Carter. I know your reputation.”

“Don’t worry. My love life is complicated enough without you adding to it.”

The two pilots chatted for a while before Jake stood up. “I think I am going to take a stroll, care to join me?”

The Squadron had a relatively quiet time once the ‘Wasps’ were rounded up. The captives were taken by the Patrol vessels directly to Venus command, where they would be processed and tried. The evidence would be compiled quickly, allowing for a quick trial, conviction and immediate transfer to a penal colony.

Steve was impressed. The Green Squadron was not made of front-line pilots. They were more than capable and they dealt with the pirate threat consistently without fuss. It was good today and he spent the day with Lydia Lyons. He was tired and ready to return to Alpha Two, debrief and get back to Earth as quickly as possible.

The debriefing was straightforward enough. The operation was effective and, collectively, eighteen space pirates and their ‘Wasp’ ships were taken into custody. Commander Wong had thanked the Academy trainees for their ‘active’ participation and had praised the group as a whole without singling out any particular jump ship crew. Wong finished by saying he welcomed approaches from new jump ship graduates six months from now. He exploded the myth that the front line was the only place to find notice and move up the ladder.

The trainee pilots made their way to the mess hall following the debriefing. Steve and Lydia met up with Jake and Siobhan for a drink. Jake’s ship was ready and the four pilots agreed to swap so that Jake and Steve could fly home in the AA5, with the two girls taking the other ship.

Steve relished the opportunity to take the swing wing variant into orbit and took control as they launched. They sat in silence for the first few minutes, before Steve broke the silence.

“So, your first kill?”

“I didn’t kill anyone. I simply took out their weapons and their drive systems.”

“It’s still a kill and you did it on your own.”

“I was told off by Wong for not waiting for a wing-man. I am grateful I didn’t kill anyone.”

“They’re pirates, for God’s sake! Vermin, and they deserve to die for what they inflict on their prey. I felt a sense of satisfaction when our target ‘Wasp’ was destroyed.”

“They are probably humans, you know that don’t you. Maybe with a family and children?”

“Jake. This is what I joined up for. No worries. Look, you’re okay because you disabled a ship single-handed and
I am okay too. Anyway, I understand Siobhan helped.”

“Yes, the repair job she did on the thrusters was amazing.”

“Cute girl. What say we link up with them this weekend? Lydia is a stunner.”

“Oh come on, Steve. You are with Carla; on a break, yes, but you are still with her and you will work your way through this. Don’t throw it away on a one night stand. I am still with Maria.”

“Cut the crap, Jake…you and Maria are history. Let’s be honest, you’re bored. As for me, I am a free agent, until Carla sorts herself out. I can do what I want.”

Jake paused before replying. “I’m going to pass on this one.”

Steve smiled. “Okay, but if you change your mind, I have arranged to meet up with Lydia tomorrow night.”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Ionian Front

Admiral Koenig was pleased. In a little over six weeks, Alpha mobilized sixty percent of its capability across light years of space to confront the enemy en masse. This was the first time in Alpha’s history that a large battle force was deployed in deep space. It was an achievement to comprehend.

The Fleet amassed in open space along the Ionian corridor. The main fleet numbered some five hundred forty ships of the line with over eighteen hundred support craft. The total crew complement, including infantry, troopers, marines, jump ship crew and support was nearly five hundred thousand. This truly was a formidable force. Coupled with the capable support of over the Sabres, Rapiers and Hunters, they were a force to be reckoned with.

The Sentinel fleet was vast. It consisted of over eight thousand ships, most with fighting capability. There was no question Alpha would be considerably outnumbered. However, like for like, his ships had superior speed, maneuverability and weaponry, coupled with significantly better tactical awareness and support capability.

Losses, he reasoned, would be considerable. The bottom line was, his ships of the line must destroy, on average, fifteen ships each just to win the battle. Fifty percent losses were the least Alpha could expect.

This was a political minefield. Opinions on Earth varied as to the necessity of the war. Those against, reasoned the Sentinels simply protected their interests in their own backyard, and there was relatively little confrontation between the two parties in the last few months. Those for, pointed to the deliberate build up of Sentinel forces on the edge of Earth’s territory, which was confrontational and the potential for invasion.

There was also the issue of the Tri-Star region itself.

The APF tried to play mediator, as had ECG diplomats. There was some success in terms of diplomatic channels and that the Sentinel power lords held back launching an attack, when intelligence reported them in a state of readiness. There was an inevitability to this. General Yoshi flexed his muscles and, ultimately, he was his own man. Eventually, his patience would wear thin and he would launch his offensive, irrespective of the power lords’ approval.

This suited Koenig. He wanted the battle to commence for purely personal reasons. He wanted to cement his position as the power horse of Alpha, by presiding over a successful campaign. The defeat of the Sentinels would galvanize his support on the Admiralty bench and strengthen his position with Earth.

Ambassador White was Earth’s envoy within Alpha and he had an important role to play. White was an older man, but this was his strength. He had seen this all before, and brokered many a deal between Alpha, Earth and other parties when all else seemed lost. He was a respected man and the obvious one for the job. President Roslyn appointed him to this new post to do just that. He wanted Alpha back within ECG influence, and he felt White would deliver just the right amount of persuasion, tact and diplomacy to achieve this. In essence, White was his secret weapon.

The scheduled comm link opened and Ambassador White appeared on Koenig’s 3D wide screen.

“Conal, how are you? Are you well? It’s been a while.”

“I am well, Admiral. Despite my age, I still have the energy of a teenager. Especially when it comes to my wife and children.”

They chatted for a few minutes about family and old acquaintances, before White cleverly moved the conversation to Alpha and Earth’s commitment to her.

“You realize support for your forthcoming campaign is still good on Earth.”

“Yes, although it is clear there are divisions.”

“ECG is working to remove them but we must do our part. The problem is that Alpha appears removed from the political aspects of this. I presume you would relish the prospect of enhancing your support on Earth.”

“Why not cut straight to the chase Ambassador?” Koenig was bored of White’s circling of the issue and wanted to find out what ECG was putting to the table.

“Well, my friend, ECG asked me to broker a new relationship between Alpha and themselves, one which serves both parties in the current climate. They don’t want a controlling influence again, but to develop relations, perhaps establish a reporting line, without having a direct say. They want to be in a position to influence Alpha’s decision-
making process. In return, they will offer a new and considerable funding line. I am sure this would be of extreme benefit to you.”

“We have adequate funding from the APF and other parties.”

“I am sure you do Admiral, but space battles cost money and frequently squeeze the war chest. There will be losses, new ships need to be built and manpower and resources replaced. Additional funding from these outside sources won’t be immediately forthcoming because the ‘war’ is seen as an Earth issue.”

“What did ECG have in mind?”

“Not much. A direct reporting link between ECG and Alpha. Ideally between you and the President personally, but on an informal basis and a change to your articles that makes you once again representative of Earth, i.e., that your ‘main’ reason for existence is the protection of Earth.”

“All seems a bit familiar. ECG won’t fund unless they have an influence on the actual decision making process. They need to define ‘reporting’ further.”

“They don’t seek to be your masters. Funding would be specific and paid yearly in advance. ‘Reporting’ suggests advising ECG on Alpha issues, presumably with some cross-discussion about ways in which ECG can help and ways that they feel Alpha should go. There would be no formal command structure in place.”

“So what does ECG get out of this?”

“At the moment they feel completely divorced from the whole thing. There is a war in which many of its citizens are going to die and they don’t currently sit at the table, let alone have an influence. They accept Alpha would want more relaxed reporting lines. They accept a command structure is inappropriate, but they do want to be involved.”

“There are issues with Alpha’s current funding providers and our reporting lines to them.”

“There are, and ECG doesn’t wish to prejudice these. Discussions need to be more in depth, but need not be complex. I propose you appoint a member of your bench to act on your behalf and that I sit as chair in order to broker a deal. This whole issue need not stand in the way of your main issues today, Admiral. A battle is imminent and that is your main concern. Do you wish me to set something up?”

Koenig was not overly convinced, but discussions didn’t commit and he needed to see which way Roslyn really headed on this. “Yes, discussions would appear to be in everybody’s interest. I will appoint a senior Admiral from the bench to represent Alpha.”

“Excellent, my friend. We will speak in the next few days and let’s see if we can get this moving.”

They exchanged pleasantries and the comm line went dead.

Koenig’s reticence was misplaced. He knew Alpha without ECG was not as easy as they anticipated and that this was moving things in the right direction. Now was not the time to discuss funding or Alpha’s constitution. He sat down at his desk and returned to the small matter of the Sentinels. Battle would shortly commence.
Chapter Thirty
Relationships

The day dragged. It was Friday afternoon and Carla looked forward to a quiet weekend. She had nothing specific planned other than Tennis with Jake. Maria asked her whether she wanted to join her and two other friends on a trip to Rome for a spot of shopping; normally something at which she would have jumped, now she needed time to herself this weekend.

Her day began with a communication link from her parents in Australia. Joely made contact and finally agreed to meet her parents in Singapore this weekend. This was great news. Carla spoke to Joely and confirmed her visit to Titan in three weeks. Next she finalized the arrangements for their trip with Jake. Initially, he sounded unenthusiastic, but he yielded and in the end seemed happy to go, even if Maria didn’t feel the same way.

As for Steve, it was two weeks since she enforced their ‘temporary’ split. He was persistent. She stood her ground, but she did miss him. You couldn’t spend three years with someone without feelings lingering after the event. Did that mean she regarded the split as permanent? On the other hand, Steve was suffering. Given his other issues, was it fair to do this to him right now? She had needs too. While she needed space at the moment, she needed someone to cuddle and support her in the next few months.

It wasn’t Steve she wanted. She wanted and needed Jake, but she could not have him…or could she? Maria was away and she was not with Steve anymore. Carla smiled…maybe she would not have to wait until their ‘Trip’.

Jake met Maria after class, late on Friday afternoon at the Refectory. In the two months they dated, Jake looked forward to their afternoon rendezvous, but today was different. There was an uneasy silence as they sat drinking their coffee and their initial greeting was brief and formal.

It was cooler today, certainly less than twenty degrees and comfortable. The ‘monsoon’ rain season finished. Between now and the end of the year, the climate would be pleasant. When the sun shone in a cloudless sky, the radiation threat from UV rays remained high. Protective clothing and sun shades were absolutely necessary, but the liquid tubes could be dispensed with until Spring.

Maria broke the silence. “So when are you going to Titan and for how long exactly?”

“Three weeks tomorrow. We will be gone for five days, returning on Thursday in time for jump ship training and the Top Gun competition that weekend. Look, Maria, you are not still hung up on me going with Carla are you?”

“Yes, I am. Okay, Jake, cards on the table.” She looked down at the floor briefly before looking back at Jake with her opaque blue eyes. “I need you to tell me something. If I ask you not to go will you consider it?”

Jake looked at Maria and found himself hypnotized by the sheer beauty and depth of her eyes, the color of the sea in a tropical bay. He could not let Carla down. She needed him right now.

“You know I can’t. It’s the same as you being away in Rome this weekend. You have to let this drop. Seriously, this is not good for either of us.”

Maria paused before replying and a tear ran down her face. “Jake, I think we are going to have to finish. I cannot be your girlfriend, if you won’t even discuss this. I told you we needed to talk about how we feel about each other. Well, you have made it clear how you feel about me.”

Jake was a little stunned. “I guess I am not ready to commit to anything more serious at the moment. Look, I am sorry things have not worked out between us. Let’s stay friends and see what pans out.”

“I am not going to wait around, you bastard. We had something special here and you ruined it because you won’t commit.” Maria stormed off.

Jake sat there, slightly bemused, but with the growing feeling this was a lucky escape.

Steve Costello went straight from class directly to Occupational Health. He suffered from headaches all week and, despite medication, he found it more difficult than ever to concentrate in class. Concerned this could be something which would impact on his jump ship training, he asked for a body scan to ensure all was okay.
The scan was conducted immediately and Steve was relieved that all was okay. The Medic suggested the headaches were stress-related and he should take a short break, perhaps a week’s detox. Steve laughed. No matter how tempting this was, he was still playing catch up on his work. He needed to work hard and be seen on campus. As he left the screening facility, he noticed Maria coming towards him. She walked briskly, clearly in distress.

“Everything okay?”
“Do I look as if everything is okay?”
“No, you do not. What happened? Is this something to do with Jake?”
“Yes. It’s over. Jake and Carla can go off and fuck like rabbits for all I care.”

Steve let her go past him. She was not taking this well. Maybe he should stop her. He called out but she ignored him and continued on her journey, presumably to the next Disciplinary Panel. I feel sorry for whomever stands accused before her today, he thought.

He grabbed his mobile comm device from his pocket and opened a comm link.

“Hi Jake. Do you fancy going out tonight and getting drunk.”
“You better believe it. Maria just dumped me.”
“I know. I just spoke to her. She didn’t seem happy.”

The two friends agreed to meet later. Steve still had a headache, but a few drinks would rid him of that.

* * * * *

Jake awoke with a start. It was light but still early. Another freighter left en route, to a distant star system. Jake had a sore head and the noise from the space port didn’t help.

Jake and Steve spent much of Friday night drinking themselves to oblivion. Somehow he found his way home and presumed Steve must have also. It didn’t look as if he crashed on the floor. The evening was amusing. They both let rip and enjoyed life a little. Steve grew a little confrontational half-way through the evening, when he again accused Jake of infidelity with his ‘girlfriend’. Jake told Steve to wake up, nothing went on. Steve shacked up with Lydia last week. Steve backed off and the two of them went on to enjoy the rest of the night, drinking well into the early hours.

Jake got up and took a shower before donning his towel robe and sitting down at his workstation. He needed to finish his presentation on Quadroponics and, having showered and taken an anti-sickness tab, he felt much better and ready to start work.

Two hours later, Carla arrived and made coffee while Jake finished off his presentation notes. Satisfied he completed his task, he dressed quickly and took a seat next to Carla and proceeded to tell her what happened last night. He missed the bit about Steve and Lydia. Carla was sympathetic, but knew Jake was not that concerned.

What did concern Jake was what Carla said next.

“So we can go to Titan as two single people. That should make life interesting.”

Carla definitely came on to him again and Jake found it difficult to resist. She was an alluring woman at the best of times, but this morning she looked particularly good in her tennis whites.

“Yes, we should have an interesting time. Does your sister know we are coming?”

“Absolutely. She will be putting us up in the AUSWAS accommodation block, which is very pleasant.”

“Okay sounds good.” Jake looked to change the subject quickly. “Are you up for Tennis?”

“Yes. The question is, are you?”

“I am fine. The tab I took has cleared it all up and my head is clear.”

Maybe on the outside, he thought, but most definitely not on the inside.

The two ‘friends’ left Jake’s apartment and headed for the sports complex. They played three sets of competitive tennis, with Jake eventually winning the close match two sets to one. They then took breakfast in the café opposite the courts and headed back towards the accommodation block.

Carla was keen to raise the subject of Titan once again, but Jake soon changed the subject to his parents and his scheduled visit next weekend and to the next Top Gun event. They talked as they walked and, ten minutes later, arrived at Carla’s apartment. She took the hint and didn’t bring the subject of Titan up again. She kissed Jake on the...
cheek before they parted company, having agreed to meet up later with Steve on campus for a drink. Jake returned to his apartment and sat at his work station once again. Studying is getting harder, he thought. The work load, the stress and my personal life…
Chapter Thirty-One

Halo 7

The fleet remained at high alert despite the diminishing threat from the Partacians. There were no further skirmishes since the gas cloud, although the Partacians kept watch out of range. The Halo 7 remained at alert status and the crew stood down. The real battle was yet to come, and they needed down time prior to battle.

*We are within 12 hours of the Partacian border and within 48 hours of the Sentinel Fleet. We have not yet detected any Sentinel activity, but this is as anticipated with the Sentinel fleet gathered in front of the main Alpha Fleet.*

Hoskins was in the process of drafting his Ship’s Log. This was a daily chore, but one he enjoyed as it helped him to get any issues off his chest and into perspective.

*Halo 7 received new orders from Fleet command. We have been temporarily re-classified as a Class B ship of the line and will partner the Defiant as the two lead ships supporting the Flagship when we assume attack posture. This places the ship under greater risk, and the crew will have to be at their best if we are to come out with credit. We will be under close scrutiny. The new orders are currently classified with just Commander Jacques and myself aware, at present.*

Hoskins was interrupted as his first officer entered the ready room. He suspended the log entry on his palmcorder.

“Morning Commander. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to discuss the new orders sir. Off the record. I am a little concerned.”

“Why?”

“Are we combat ready to take on the Sentinel Fleet as a main assault vessel? This is the front line.”

Hoskins interrupted. “We have been upgraded to a B class ship, Jean-Luc. Admiral Shenke has shown a great deal of faith in us, especially with the debacle surrounding our CAG errors. We have to grab this opportunity by the horns. We have the element of surprise and forty-eight other ships to back us up, not to mention the main fleet.”

“Jonathan…”

The two officers reverted to first-name terms in the privacy of the ready room because it made both of them more comfortable.

“There are still some unknowns with the ship’s capability. I am not saying we should not be heavily involved. Perhaps it would be more prudent to select a different ship to front the attack.”

“I understand your concerns and, given that we are close to battle, they are inevitable. We need to remind ourselves why we are here and what we have. This ship is battle-ready and has a formidable arsenal and an excellent crew.”

“Jonathan, I take issue with us being battle-ready, but my main concern is that this element of surprise factor is almost irrelevant. We will be in open space and detectable from before we reach weapons range. They will have time to create a significant response before we can attack. If they concentrate their efforts on us then, we are dead in the water.”

“This was always the case Jean-Luc. We knew the odds would be stacked against us and this task force would need a kill rate. That’s accepted with a high number of anticipated losses. This is war and it is not nice. It is repugnant. Shenke is a good commander and has the balance right. We are in the firing line and shall remain so as long as we have the capability.”

“Are you prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice?”

“Don’t question my commitment Jean-Luc. I am committed to this ship and my crew first and foremost. The fleet is secondary. If I believe fleet command orders are not in the best interests of this ship, then I will act accordingly. If the crew are safe and the ship is near loss, I will use the ship as a weapon. I will ram it straight into the Sentinel Fleet.”

“Look, Number One…” Hoskins took on a more formal tone, “I assume you still have faith in me as the ship’s commander and need reassurance. We have covered the main points of ambiguity. I note your concerns. We will advise the crew of our new role in the fleet tomorrow evening. In the mean time, I suggest you get some rest. I need
you at the top of your game.”

Commander Jacques realized the conversation had drawn to a close. He agreed and assured his CO he had the utmost faith in him. With that he left the ready room.

Hoskins wasn’t surprised. His first officer had every right to challenge his decisions in their one-to-one discussions, as he too was an executive officer. It was also healthy to have a constructive discussion on such things. He was concerned. This would not be an easy battle and losses were inevitable. He hoped he would not have to make a decision to act against the fleet. The consequences could be catastrophic from a career perspective.

He was concerned, too, about his new CAG. Obeya would be in one of the most dangerous areas of the ship. Perhaps he could find an excuse to bring her up to the bridge, he thought. Then he dismissed the thought and Obeya from his mind. He reminded himself he was finished with her and that his wife was pregnant.

Suddenly, he no longer wanted to be here. He wanted to be with his wife, to make up for lost time, to curl up in front of a warm open fire. He was interrupted this time by Fleet Command. It was Shenke, who wanted to know if all were okay and if the proposed changes to the Halo 7’s status were acceptable to the crew.

“I have only just told my first officer, so far. I will be telling the crew tomorrow. Yes, Admiral the changes are fine. It will be good to be in the thick of the action.”

“I will look for you and the Defiant to keep the fleet moving forward. If we push into the Sentinels, we will win in close-proximity combat. It will be dangerous, but exciting and I feel good about it. Anyway, I just wanted to check all was okay. Call me if you need to discuss anything.”

The link went dead and Hoskins smiled. The Admiral’s call was remarkably timed. He must finish his log and then get some rest.

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Obeya Temsouri was in the CAG operations room. She sat with her back to the Main Hangar and studied her reflection in the clear plastic window looking out over the fleet.

She knew a Sentinel battle was imminent and her involvement would be considerable, but she yearned to be involved directly. She was a jump ship pilot and not a CAG. She didn’t know why she accepted Jonathan’s promotion and she disliked his major influence over something so important to her.

Jonathan Hoskins made it clear he didn’t want her to continue with combat operations and that the CAG post would help him out and give her the step up she needed to progress to Squadron Leader Command. At the time she accepted the promotion, anything Jonathan said would be taken as gospel. He cast a spell over her because she loved him. At the time she had not realized he made her decisions for her.

She still loved him. She resented that he could flick his fingers and she would run. Not any more, she told herself. She was her own woman. Only she would decide her destiny. She already decided she would set about the CAG operation for the forthcoming battle initially as an active leader. She would prove herself in the first few days of battle and then, in the thick of it, she would hand it over to her deputy CAG and pilot a Sabre as Group command. She wouldn’t tell Jonathan. He didn’t need to know. She needed to be out there and he was not going to stop her.

She, like everyone on board, felt anxious about what the next few hours would bring. She was part Dactorian—a brave and warrior species who thrived on confrontation. She was a jump ship pilot, and the best in the fleet. She could make a Sabre turn on a flat spin in the blink of an eye, and she could outrun any Sentinel Pilot without breaking sweat. Right now, the other main string to her DNA, the Barcudian part lay dormant. This was her cognitive capacity, her ability to reason, recognize, and rationalize a situation clearly and without contradiction. Today this was a contradiction. The two contrasting elements of her cross species personality clashed and the warrior won.

Hoskins was on the Bridge. He sat in his command chair, with his first officer and his bridge officer sitting either side of him. He opened a ship-wide comm channel and started his announcement, choosing his words carefully.

“This is Commander Hoskins. The Halo 7 will form part of the front line offensive, together with the Flagship and the Defiant. I am pleased to advise that we have been given a Field Operational Upgrade to a B Class ship of the line and we are considered central to the success of this Task Force.”

“We have just crossed into the Ionian System and we are maneuvering to our new position at the front of the fleet. We are still under battle operation conditions and we will maintain our operational status until we detect Sentinel activity on our short range scanners. There will be no access to external comm links for the immediate future. You
will have taken the opportunity already, I am sure, to speak to your families. Now is the time for quiet contemplation, rest and anticipation for battle. We have prepared for this battle for a long time. The ship is ready, the crew and the fleet is ready and soon the waiting will be over. “

Hoskins closed the channel and turned towards Commander Jacques.

“Well that’s done. Now we wait.”

He didn’t like motivating, cliché-filled speeches, but there was little else you could do when you must broadcast to the ship, when the whole crew were in a state of contemplation in the natural but uneasy calm before battle.

Jonathan Hoskins had already contemplated what lay ahead. He was apprehensive, but he didn’t show it. He was a leader by example and he was ready. Ready to come to the fore, when conflict commenced.
Part Two
Chapter Thirty-Two

The Battle Commences

Admiral Thomas Rose watched on as the initial skirmishes of the battle commenced. From the Central Command room on his Flagship, the Pacific. Now he could see the entire fleet and the vast and swelling numbers of the Sentinel Fleet.

Certainly General Yoshi’s Fleet outnumbered Alpha’s considerably. This was a constant, a known factor, and his battle strategy had assumed that Alpha would be outnumbered by fifteen to one. There was, though, a significant unknown factor. Rose had commanded two previous assaults against the Sentinel’s Northern Fleet and on both occasions he was successful. There was something about this Southern Fleet.

The ships were the same, the formations the same, but something was different. Something Rose could not put his finger on. Yes, some of the newer and larger ships had their new advanced Dark Shielding, which was certainly going to make their detection much more difficult and yes, the Sentinel Commanders responded to Alpha’s advances in a more accurate and calculated way. This didn’t explain the overall feeling they fought a different enemy.

Admiral Rose was fifty-five years old and was nearing the end of his ‘active’ military career. He was the most senior and most highly-decorated Admiral in active service, and certainly the most respected and the most tactically astute. There was no question, either from the Senior Bench or from the ranks, that Rose was the best man for the job.

Today, Rose knew he would have to utilize his tactical skills to gain the initiative. He was supported by a three-strong team of senior commanders, who between them had a vast array of experience, and it was this team that he turned to.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. There seems to be a coherence to the Sentinel Fleet that has been absent in previous encounters. If we are to have any success today, we must break this down. Let’s have some thoughts…”

This was Rose’s tried-and-tested method of opening a forum, and his team, all of whom was with him throughout his previous Sentinel campaigns, duly indulged.

“We need to bring their command ships into the open,” said Commander Troy.

Troy was a forty-six year old fellow American who was known for her quick thinking but methodical approach to battle tactics.

“We should concentrate our jump ship sorties in these general areas.” She pointed towards the interactive holographic battle map and dragged three Rapier and one Sabre battle group to three different areas on the map. These were identified as being Sentinel Command Centers.

“We can back these up with teutonic infiltration. This will have the effect of breaking the main Sentinel fleet into four sections, for which we can deploy separate initiatives to break them down.”

“I agree,” said Commander Schneider, a tall, thin Titan of Germanic extraction, who was Rose’s eyes and ears to the fleet. If you wanted to know who was where and what they were doing, Schneider was the person you turned to.

“We need maximum infiltration on the outer flanks of each section. Would it not be better to deploy the jump ships from below?” He stood and made references to his tactical suggestion on the holographic display.

“We have seen weaknesses in Sentinel Shield capability from below.”

“Yes, but we need to deploy a much greater number of Jump Ships. Perhaps as many as a thousand, if we are to gain an early initiative,” interjected Admiral Haines.

Haines was Rose’s Number Two. He was a burly man of Caribbean descent. His accent was strong, but he spoke slowly and purposefully having grown used to people’s lack of understanding of his accent. He neared the end of his active Alpha life and looked forward to his place on The Senior Bench.

Haines proceeded to demonstrate how best the jump ship battle groups could be deployed, assisted by Schneider and Troy who illustrated the impact of teutonic fire power on each area.

Rose stood and approached the Map.

“Okay. I agree that we should attempt to split the enemy into four main sections. We must not forget Admiral Shenke’s task force, who can be deployed from the rear to perform a similar function. When we have broken the
fleet into sections, we can then break up our Fleet into constituent parts and launch offensives in line with the
Centurion B initiative.

We should deploy ten Rapier Battle Groups and one Sabre Battle Group. That will give us a concentration of
seven hundred fifty Rapiers and seventy-five Sabres. We don’t want to cause an overflow of jump ship activity. This
could lead to many jump ship losses in the short term, and we can scarce afford to lose the biggest advantage we
have.”

He paused briefly, before speaking directly to Haines.

“Courtney. Can you and your team make the necessary arrangements? Also, can you make contact with Admiral
Shenke and confirm our discussions?”

Rose left the command team to calculate the logistical and operational changes required to implement the new
battle strategy. He headed for his state room. It was time to update Admiral Koenig.

Despite the revised tactical deployment, Rose still felt uneasy. The Sentinels were not acting as they had done
before. They seemed much more assured, stronger and capable. He needed to know why and soon.
Chapter Thirty-Three

The Sentinel Response

In the end, the decision to attack was taken out of General Yoshi’s hands. Alpha advanced to within one thousand kilometers of the Sentinel Fleet and had launched their offensive immediately. The initial onslaught was significant and effective. Yoshi coordinated his forces, and they were winning a number of individual skirmishes.

Alpha launched their jump ship. The Southern Fleet had no single answer to the overall adaptability and maneuverability of their jump ship. They were everywhere and there must have been hundreds. Each individual ship carried substantial weaponry, and they certainly made a significant impact in the early exchanges, together with the constant barrage of teutonic missiles. However, the Sentinel Fleet’s plasma weapons were proving to be effective against the smaller Alpha vessels and gradually the jump ship numbers were dwindling, although Alpha had launched a new group of jump ships to swell their numbers.

Yoshi realized early on, that Alpha intended to split the Sentinel Fleet. He bolstered the defenses surrounding his command ships to try to stop this tactic from working. Yoshi knew Alpha looked to prey on the Sentinels’ perceived weaknesses and, in particular, battle strategy. Yoshi smiled. They may have been successful against General Timona and his Northern Fleet, but they won’t out-tactic me, he thought. Then sat back and sent out a sequence of reactions to Alpha battle strategies. Yoshi would take the battle to Alpha.

At the outermost flanks at both ends of the Sentinel front line, ten Dark Ships stood silently. Right now they were undetectable, and they were ready to launch their deadly offensive. General Yoshi had positioned the Dark Ships, so that they would be invisible and yet they could strike the enemy fleet within moments of Yoshi issuing the command.

He briefed them before now, Each Commander would want to carry out their own preparation before commencing their offensive, and, what with the large Betanica Sect presence in his fleet, he didn’t wish to antagonize the Sect, with the inevitable backlash that would follow. The Sect controlled the power lords, and ultimately they controlled General Yoshi. Protocol must be observed.

He was ready and his fleet would soon gain the upper hand.

He gave the attack signal to the Dark Ships’ Commanders via remote sub-space relay transmission, with the signal bouncing off strategically placed remote comm boosters which surrounded the Sentinel Fleet. The signals would not be detected, nor would the Dark Ships as they carried out their silent attack.

The Dark Ships eased forward and set a course for the Alpha Fleet. Undetected, they slowly gathered pace and brought themselves into position inside their tactical atomic weaponry range. They were too close for Alpha to destroy the missiles before they hit their targets.

The brutal destructive force of eighty low-yield atomic missiles hit the center of the Alpha Fleet. The impact was immediate, with a huge fireball rising up from the epicenter of the mass explosion, instantly obliterating everything in its range. A huge gas cloud engulfed the whole fleet and suddenly there was silence.

The Dark Ships had done their jobs for now and they returned to their posts, primed and awaiting the call from Yoshi to attack once again.

Yoshi smiled. He knew he had the upper hand, but there was not much he could do to press that advantage home. Visibility was zero, with the gas cloud having engulfed the entire battle scene and both fleets. He would be ready to strike again with equally devastating force when the time was right.
Chapter Thirty-Four

Devastation

The attack was unexpected. They were aware of the potential for a nuclear attack and that some vessels within the Sentinel Fleet possessed dark shield characteristics, which rendered them nearly invisible. What Alpha had not expected was that Yoshi would use this tactic so early on and to such ruthless effect.

Admiral Rose stood in front of his team of commanders and listened to the damage assessment. Commander Schneider was tasked with summarizing the damage and was now drawing his speech to a close.

“In summary, we have lost fifty two vessels, including twenty-eight ships of the line, with a likely death toll of ten thousand plus. In addition, thirty-five vessels have reported significant damage, with eleven likely to have to retire from the main fleet to conduct extensive repairs. Two ships are adrift and await salvage.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Rose scratched his forehead, sighed and sat down.

“Oh…We are probably fortunate that the gas cloud has prevented the Sentinels from forcing home their advantage. We have lost a near-double-digit percentage of our overall capability in a blink of an eye, and a good start has turned into devastation on a major scale. You can imagine the response at home…”

He shifted in his seat and then sat forward, placing both his arms on the table, as if to encourage his team to huddle forward to hear what he must say next.

“We have no choice but to react swiftly and decisively and we can only really respond with sub-space weaponry.

A hushed silence fell over the group as realization that they were about to use a weapon which filled even the most ardent supporter of Mass Destruction weaponry with dread. Their history was the raison d’être for Alpha to seek funding from outside of ECG for the first time.

Sub Space Weaponry had first been tested some fifty years previously by a joint Alpha/ECG initiative. The Sub Space charge was composed of a small alloy sealed tube which was filled with a composite mix of negative and positive ions in a specially pressurized environment with plasma and antimatter being introduced to the mix in minute quantities—the larger the balance of antimatter, the larger the ionic yield. The tubes were then sealed, graded and then encased in ballistic missile shells.

Twenty-five years ago, Alpha was testing low yield sub-space charges in the Kuiper Belt, by examining the impact made on the belt by the detonation of the charges. The tests were fully funded and supported by ECG and were in their final assessment stages, prior to being introduced as a new addition to Alpha’s arsenal.

On that day, The SS Mauritius, a vacation cruise liner, was returning from Alpha Centauri and took a detour to the Kuiper Belt. They were ahead of schedule and had granted their fifteen hundred holiday-makers the opportunity to see the often unseen spectacle of the Belt. Unscheduled detours by Cruise Liners frequently caused Alpha problems, but not like this day. The Mauritius was destroyed by the Sub Space Charge, which had remotely detonated. All fifteen hundred passengers and some two hundred fifty crew were killed instantly, with the entire vessel vaporized. In its place a small vortex was created. The vortex then amortized, and the fabric of space in this area of the Kuiper belt became permanently distorted.

Then all hell broke loose. ECG were horrified and instantly withdrew their support for the project. This was followed by months of bad publicity with the media constantly calling for the ‘Weapon from Satan’ to be banned. Eventually ECG yielded and told Alpha that they could not develop sub-space weaponry of any kind.

Alpha accepted this in public, but not privately. This new form of weaponry could give them a huge advantage in future conflicts. The development of the weapon must continue and now, for the first time and without ECG’s knowledge, Alpha sought additional funding and began to develop the sub-space weapons secretively.

Prior to this event, all funding was provided by ECG, Now the Alpha Senior Bench had got the bug. They determined that their Articles provided that they didn’t have to keep ECG abreast of all their current endeavors, and they began to source more and more funding for more and more projects from outside of ECG’s knowledge and control.

The Sub Space Weapons remained banned by ECG, and Alpha continued to develop them in secret. Ten years ago, Alpha had released a limited batch of Sub Space Warheads to be used under strict and controlled guidelines,
only as authorized by senior Alpha Commanders. In practice, this meant a limited number of charges were stored on Class A star ships under the watchful control of the ship’s commander. There was no official log of their existence in the ships inventory and they didn’t exist.

Over the years, several high ranking commanders had come close to using the weapon, but had pulled back at the last minute. Today, there could be no pulling back.

Rose continued. “We need to work quickly to select the charges and make them ready. We will need to look at the logistics, how best they are deployed, and the media, in terms of assuring them of our integrity and the need for these weapons to be used and the crew. There may well be some backlash from the more ecologically-minded individuals.

“By my reckoning, we have perhaps twelve hours to cover all these issues comprehensively. Admiral Haines and Commander Troy will handle the logistics and Commander Schneider, the media and crew. Let’s thrash out how best we can use these weapons.”

Again, Commander Troy was the first to speak.

“We can’t use teutonic delivery. There is too great a risk of the missiles being destroyed prior to hitting their intended target and putting us within the charges range… I suggest we use a jump ship and short range Tigers.”

“If we go down that route, it will need to be delivered by a Sabre. The question is, how many do we deliver and what is the target?” said Haines.

“The target is the same as before.” said Rose. “We need to use three charges and target the command centers within the Sentinel Fleet. We also need to quickly determine the whereabouts of these Dark Ships and destroy them, before they attack us again.”

“Is there any call for us to use atomic weapons other than sub-space?” said Schneider. “This would be a more appropriate response and, if deployed properly, could still be effective.”

“No we need to gain the initiative here. Atomic weapons need to be delivered with pin-point accuracy for a task of this type. We would need too many warheads to make use of them here effective. If we run with the sub-space weapons, we need only use three to five charges at the most. However, we could use atomic weapons on the Dark Ships. Courtney?” Rose gestured towards his Number Two “I need you to find a way of locating the Dark Ships and removing their threat.”

“Well. If it’s okay with you I will leave Commander Troy to look at the sub-space charge logistics and I will concentrate on the Dark Ships and their destruction. One thing though, it would seem logical to utilize Admiral Shenke’s fleet. They are now well positioned but outside detection range. The Sentinels won’t be expecting an attack from behind.”

“An excellent idea Courtney.” Rose continued to refer to his confidant and friend personally than by rank, while he used normal protocol when speaking to Troy and Schneider. “We will deploy sub-space charges from both fleets. Let’s double up and fire all targets from both sides. A total of six charges. Okay, everyone let’s get to it.”
Chapter Thirty-Five

Home for the Weekend

Jake Carter was on his way home. He had not seen his parents for three months and looked forward to some ‘down’ time, some good food and to seeing his parents and, in particular, Barrat, the family collie. He was slightly apprehensive, though, about seeing his father. He had not spoken to him since Joanne’s memorial service, and he knew that he would persist with his assertion that progression to Starship command didn’t come through starting his career as a jump ship pilot, especially with the news coming from the Ionian front of major jump ship losses being reported.

The short trip in Jake’s PTV from the Academy to his parent’s home in Surrey only took ten minutes. Jake brought the craft down expertly onto the circular launch pad which his parents had installed last year to accommodate their new hyper space yacht.

His father had seen him arrive, dropped his gardening tools and walked towards the house to let his wife know Jake had arrived.

The house was situated in a leafy wooded lane on the outskirts of the town of Farnham, the hustle and bustle of modern life taking a back seat in this peaceful and remote environment. Barrat, who was in the corner of the garden, recognized Jake instantly and charged across the garden to greet his long lost friend. Barrat was very excited, with his tail wagging in circular motions. a sure sign that he was pleased to see his ‘brother’ as Barrat’s ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ referred to Jake.

Jake was happy to respond in kind and bent down and gave Barrat a big hug. Then his mother and father arrived and he hugged both of them too before returning briefly to Barrat, who demanded further affection.

The reunited family took tea on the terrace, the weather still good even for December, and Jake’s mother and father both talked at some length about what they had been doing for the last three months. Jake managed to avoid discussing what he was doing, while he listened intently to his parent’s news. He knew it wouldn’t be long though before the inevitable cross examination started.

A news update from the Ionian Front on the holoscreen, in Jake’s parents’ drawing room, brought the subject of jump ships close to home. The news was bad. The Sentinels had somehow managed to use atomic missiles at close range and destroy a chunk of the Alpha Fleet. The headlines were dramatic, the by-lines reported the total losses to date of some five hundred jump ship. Equally dramatic, but more specifically, this allowed Jake’s father to jump straight to his pet subject.

“I wonder how many of the pilots were new Alpha Graduates? Probably some of them from South Downs.”

Jake agreed and said the news was horrendous but would improve as the Fleet made headway into the Sentinel ranks. His father would not let it drop.

“I’m going to take Barrat in the garden and take a Spa. If it’s okay with you?”

“Now, Jake,” said his mother. She knew this was a blatant attempt by Jake to move the subject on, but she let it go. There was plenty of time to discuss these matters and Jake did come here to relax.

* * * *

The Spa room was adjacent to the pool and tennis complex, which his parents had built ten years ago. They were frugal with their money over the years, with Ros’s earnings more than sufficient to cover monthly expenditures, meaning Simon’s salary was used almost exclusively for investment. They were able to pay for the entire complex and the Space yacht outright without the need for credit. Jake had developed his love for tennis here, but it was the Spa which evoked the most vivid memories. Mostly of times he spent with various girlfriends in the sauna and the steam bath.

The complex included an interactive modular game console and a pressurized anti-gravity chamber, the use of both of which made Jake a popular friend to have when he was a teenager.

Jake headed for a sauna first, before a brief steam bath and a quick swim. His father then joined him in the game room, where they used the gaming console briefly before his father suggested that they use the gravity chamber.

Simon Carter was a youthful fifty-five and, like his son, was fit. He had opted for early retirement from active duty five years previously to take a staff post at Alpha One’s EMEA Operational HQ in London. His job was to
facilitate and co-ordinate the development of the new class of high-velocity stellar drive mechanisms’ that would see velocities exceed SD10 in the medium-to-long term. The project was successful, and Commander Carter’s team of engineers had just released the first prototype Type R Hyper Stellar Drive mechanism. It was hoped that star ships would be powered by this new drive system within five years.

As such, the project was more than successful, and Simon Carter anticipated that his long awaited 4th Star was just around the corner. He would retire in five years in the knowledge that he had achieved; he became an elite commander and he had served both Alpha and his planet well. He was content. Content because his life was good, and he no longer placed his life and the lives of others under constant threat every time he issued an order in anger. Now, though, his concerns lay elsewhere, with his son’s career and his son’s life. He knew how much danger this chosen career path would place on his son, and he would do everything possible to minimize that danger.

Father and son entered the anti-grav chamber through a pressurized vault. Weightlessness was instant and as enjoyable this time as it was the first time. They both took five minutes of anti-grav exercise before the pressure automatically equalized and the chamber’s gravity returned to normal.

Dinner was taken at 6 p.m., and after coffee and biscuits, Barrat brought his lead and Simon Carter asked whether Jake would be joining him for Barrat’s evening walk. Jake agreed, thinking full well that his father would now take the opportunity to force his point home about jump ship command.

“So, what happened to Maria then?”

“She just got too close. I am not looking for commitment right now.. I need to concentrate on graduation.”

“Yes, I agree. How are things going now?”

“Okay, I have completed my Quadroponics dissertation and my Weaponry and Quantum Mechanics theory is coming on nicely.”

“No mention of your jump ship training and the Top Gun competition?”

“I didn’t think you would want to talk about them.”

“Why not? They are an integral part of your final year studies. We have no problem with you developing your jump ship skills and even your participation in the Top Gun event. They can only add value to your resume.”

They entered a clearing and Simon took a ball from his pocket and began to throw the ball for Barrat.

“You’ve got to remember that I feel that the best career path for you following graduation is not the jump ship path. The knowledge is good, but so are your weaponry and your stellar navigation and your quantum mechanics. They will all lead to a good posting, perhaps even Earth Defense. We are not trying to force the issue. We know you are conditioned to feel that the quick fire route to star ship command is via the jump ship route, but times have changed.”

“Dad, I know how you feel. You tell me every time I see you. I can assure you that I am not being conditioned. I am able to make up my own mind and at the moment, however, with two whole terms left before I graduate, the jump ship route is my preference…that may change but it is unlikely.”

“I know. I am not trying to rock the boat. We just see the sheer number of jump ship pilots losing their lives. There is no future in it. Admiral Black agrees with me.”

“Ah, I knew you talked to him about me at the Wake. You never miss a trick do you?”

“Now, he approached me and it was a few days after the wake. He said they thought of you as the son-in-law they never had. You were, and I guess always will be, the nearest thing they had to a son-in-law.”

“I am still close to them. They were so devastated. I guess it is inevitable that they would want to urge me to move away from the jump ship path.”

“Yes, Black said he was more than happy to use his influence to facilitate a good posting for you. These are the kind of contacts that make things happen. You could be in a command post within two years.”

“Maybe, but I want to make it on my own. Can we just agree to disagree for the time being? I don’t doubt that Mum will want to talk about this too before I leave tomorrow. Let’s leave it for a bit.”

“Okay. Do you want to take over the ball-throwing for a while?”

Jake continued to throw Barrat’s ball, and within a few minutes they had reached the turning point in their walk and a had a view looking out over the Surrey Hills. The leaves had turned and begun to fall. The scenery was every bit as beautiful as Jake remembered it.
Jake’s father started to talk about the battle. “It will be over quickly,” he said.

“What makes you say that? Maybe in their favor.”

“No, Alpha definitely has a few tricks up their sleeves. There is no way they would have gone into this battle underprepared and without a killer tactic. I think they will use tactical nukes or maybe even a sub-space derivative.”

“Something you know?”

“Yes and no, mostly rumors. Guess we will have to wait and see what Alpha’s response is.”

They continued in silence for a few minutes before his father piped up again.

“So tell me about Carla and Steve. You said that they had split up and that you and she are going to Titan?”

“Yes, although it’s only a temporary split. Carla and I remain close. You know we still play tennis every weekend?”

Jake went on to explain why Carla wanted to visit Titan and why she had asked him and not Steve. As he finished his explanation, they neared the gates of his parent’s house. They walked the remainder of the walk in silence.

Jake awoke much later than usual for a Sunday morning. There was little space traffic noise here and, despite a day of little exertion yesterday, he had felt comfortable sleeping in. He took breakfast on his own, then joined his mother in the garden. Simon Carter had gone to have a drink with his friend. A habitual custom, every Sunday for many years.

Ros Carter was forty-nine, but looked more like thirty-nine. She had a good life and practiced healthy living with a positive mental attitude. As head of the Battle Injury unit at the Farnham Medical Center, she witnessed some of the most atrocious injuries man could ever inflict on themselves. She strived to make as many of them better, or to make the patients as comfortable as possible, and that was how she got through the day. Right now. she was on call, 24/7, with breaks at the weekend critical to her own self-preservation. They anticipated the worst. The recent losses at the Ionian front would soon result in a huge number of referrals to her facility; it was a flagship center and served a large community because of their overall capability.

She was glad to have the opportunity to spend some one-to-one time with Jake. She, too, wanted to talk about jump ships, but she would be more subtle than her husband.

“So Jake, why has Carla invited you to Titan? Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No Mum. We are close, but purely platonic. This is an emotional time for Carla and she needs someone she can rely on. Steve is unreliable, especially at the moment.”

“Steve has always been unreliable. Typical jump pilot really. I always thought they were a good match, i.e., opposites attract.”

“Yes they make a good team, but Carla needs some space. I am going along for the ride, plus I have never been to Titan. It will be interesting for my studies, if nothing else.”

“If she tries it on what will you say?”

Jake decided to ignore the question.

Ros Carter smiled. It was a vested interest. She liked Carla, and Carla represented the more pleasant side of Alpha’s activities. She was a good communicator and would make a fine diplomat some day. She liked the idea that Carla and Jake could get together and she might well persuade Jake not to go down the ‘fly boy’ route. She turned towards Jake again and sighed.

“Joanna’s service was nice. She was a wonderful girl. You miss her, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. She and I had some good times together. It is such a tragic waste of life. Mum, I know you are going to link this with my jump ship training. Jo was unlucky. She was too good a pilot for her loss to be anything other than bad luck.”

“Is it luck then, a lottery if you decide to become a jump ship pilot?”

“No, it’s about skill. The luck is when and where you get called into duty, just as it is with a star ship. The ten thousand personnel lost in the battle with the Sentinels were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and most of those were in ships of the line. You need to understand that I enjoy piloting jump ships, and that it is still the fastest route to command. I could be looking at squadron leader within eighteen months.”

“Jake. We know; you will make the right decision, but you must understand our concerns. Dying in combat is not
romantic or cool and neither is injury. There is nothing cool about being paralyzed from the neck down or losing half your face in combat. Is there?”

Just then, Simon Carter appeared, having downed his two pints. He seemed pleased enough. “Just seen Sarah Whitaker in the village, Jake, she was asking after you.”

“Sarah Whitaker is after a husband, and preferably a jump ship pilot. Stay clear, Jake,” teased his Mum.

“She’s cute but a bit too small-town provincial for me. Anyway, I have only just finished with Maria. I have not got time for relationships.”

“I have invited her and her family to our Christmas drinks party on the 17th. I presume you are still coming?”

“Yes. I should be, academic work pending. Please don’t try and set me up with Sarah again. She’s nice, but not my type and I am only twenty-two.”

Jake knew that this was yet another subtle way of trying to move him away from jump ship. Jump ship Pilots were considered pretty lowly in the Alpha community, but way up there as a catch for the jet set super rich debutantes. Sarah was the daughter of a wealthy landowner in the local village, and Jake was definitely still on her target list. Trouble was that Jake was there before, and he did have fond memories of their brief time together in the Spa…

The subject turned to Christmas and his parents’ local and community issues, and continued through lunch. After lunch they sat and had coffee in the drawing room and chatted briefly about world affairs, Alpha and ECG. Jake was getting itchy feet. He still had plenty of studying to do before class tomorrow. His parents made their case for not following a jump ship career path emphatically, and further discussions would simply labor the point. He decided to finish his coffee and prepare to leave.

Just as Jake stood and prepared to say his goodbyes, a further news update appeared on the holoscreen. a new and significant development occurred on the Ionian Front. News was just coming in of Alpha’s response to the Sentinels Atomic attack.

So the rumors were true, Alpha was stockpiling illegal sub-space weapons and they used them in combat.
Chapter Thirty-Six  
The Sub-space Attack  

There was never any doubt. It was clear in Rose’s mind that the charges would be deadly and so they proved. Six charges were fired via short-range Tiger missiles. Each missile was launched from an individual Sabre, with the first three being launched by Admiral Shenke’s mini-fleet and the second three launching thirty seconds later from the main fleet.

The gas cloud barely cleared when the Sabres were launched and they delivered their cargo accurately to within five hundred meters of their target. The Tigers accelerated briskly and impacted the Sentinels shield system. That was sufficient. The charges exploded on impact, and the sub-space reaction occurred instantaneously, with the Sabres barely clearing their target before the explosion reached them. The explosion spread like a bush fire, engulfing half the Sentinel Fleet within seconds of impact. There was no gas cloud and, thirty seconds later, the initial explosion abated and the net result of the attack was clear to all. Three large holes had appeared along the length of the Sentinel Fleet.

The destruction was enormous, with some five hundred Sentinel vessels vaporized in an instant. Nearby vessels were ripped apart, some partially intact, others spread over a large area. Then there was the void. Small at first but gradually growing, an area of dark space within which nothing existed. As it got larger, it engulfed more and more Sentinel ships.

The Sentinel fleet was in disarray, but their commanders had the good sense to quickly move the vessels most at risk out of the immediate range of the expanding void. The Sentinel Fleet was divided into four sections just as the Alpha plan had envisaged. The fleets shield system was malfunctioning and Alpha acted swiftly to carry home their advantage.

The Centurion B initiative was Alpha’s planned winning battle strategy. The strategy mimicked that of the Centurion B, an Alpha Battle-cruiser from the last Galactic War that had found itself on its own, facing thirty enemy vessels. The Centurion commander decided that running was not an option and that they must shoot their way out. They achieved this by splitting the thirty vessels into small groups, by running jump ships in close range diagonal passes, gradually spreading the enemy fleet while the main ship blasted the enemy vessels out of existence. In summary, the strategy was to deploy high numbers of jump ships to weaken the resolve of the enemy fleet, while the main fleet concentrated all of its fire power on the weakened points of the enemy fleet. This was a simple but effective battle tactic, in this case especially effective because both the jump ships and the fire power was coming both from the main fleet and the mini-fleet.

* * * *

The Sentinel Fleet was decimated. Alpha’s advantage pressed home but it could not last. General Yoshi acted to ensure this battle was far from over.

Battles in space are more than three-dimensional. A commander has the flexibility to move his vessels both up and down as well as back and forth and left and right. In this environment it was clear General Yoshi needed to act quickly to prevent Alpha from running away with victory. He didn’t have the initiative, but he did have the numbers and he still had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Yoshi moved the main body of the fleet forward and upward sufficient to maintain a viable distance between the two fleets. In doing so he removed the threat from the sub-space void, which was in ‘no man’s land’ between the main Alpha Fleet and their sub fleet. Ironically this would act as a defensive buffer and would prevent the mini-fleet commander from attacking from the rear. He then gradually bolstered the defenses around the right and left flanks of each of the newly created sections of his fleet, and gradually built up a new front line. Once again, his fleet was whole and he could engage Alpha, albeit with currently-limited operational shield capability.

Throughout this process he continued to deploy a mass defensive strategy against Alpha’s probing attack. He was losing ships fast, and he needed to create greater cohesion to prevent losses from accumulating too quickly. He still had Dark ships and atomic weapons and they represented the best chance of stemming the tide and creating equilibrium long enough for the shield imbalances to be resolved.

He gave the order for a further deployment of Dark ships and their deadly cargo, almost exactly twenty-four hours after the original atomic attack. Ten more Dark ships deployed and made their way toward the Alpha Fleet. This
time they were sighted before they could get close enough for accurate penetration, but they were still able to deploy their atomic yield before they were outgunned by the Alpha vessels that surrounded them. The dark ships and the pursuing Alpha vessels were caught in the mass of the nuclear explosion and were destroyed instantly. A gas cloud began to permeate the battle scene and, once again, an enforced ceasefire existed.

Commander Schneider was handed, in his opinion, by far the most difficult task of the three fleet command subordinates. His brief was to deal with the media and the crew in the aftermath of the sub-space detonations. He had just sent out a fleet-wide crew briefing which explained, in summary, that sub-space weapons were deployed and that they were effective. In this communication he had made no attempt to explain why these weapons were deployed. He merely reported the facts. Now he must face a more difficult task.

He previously spoke to the Fleet’s Media Co-coordinator and requested the scheduled daily briefing for the media who accompanied the fleet be brought forward. The meeting was now to be held aboard the flagship in one of the observation lounges in the lower decks. From here, the press could witness the battle, what little they could now see of it, as the newly formed atomic gas cloud began to take shape.

Schneider arrived five minutes before the scheduled start of the briefing, and was pleased to see that the media representatives were asked to wait outside while presentational aids were set up. This was standard protocol aboard Alpha fleet vessels, but unless controlled was frequently ignored by the media.

He was now ready and he gave the order for the media team to be allowed in.

Lieutenant Commander Mike Penance was the Media Co-coordinator for the Fleet, and was responsible for the welfare and overall management of the fifty-strong Media team. It was his responsibility to provide daily update briefings on the state of the battle as it unfolded. Today, just twenty-four hours into the conflict was due to have been his first briefing. He was not surprised when Schneider had contacted him and requested a special briefing. To coordinate the movement of the various Media personnel to the flagship was a logistical nightmare, but Penance took it all in his stride, and ultimately all the journalists were delivered to the flagship without fuss or danger.

Penance opened the briefing with a short explanation of the reasons for the ‘special briefing’ and went on to confirm that normal daily briefings would commence the next day. He then introduced Commander Schneider.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have called this special briefing today to outline the progress made in the first twenty-four hours of this offensive. I shall now provide details of the number of sorties, the number of casualties and the weapons used, and I will summarize progress made as a conclusion. I shall take ten minutes of questions following my briefing. I am taking onboard the normal daily briefing issues within my communication. This will revert to Lieutenant Commander Pence tomorrow and thereafter.”

Schneider shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He knew that this was going to be a rough half hour. He began by detailing a summary of the day’s events, but expertly and deliberately stayed clear of any reference to the sub-space weapons. That was to come.

“As you know the Sentinels launched a successful atomic attack on the Alpha Fleet less than twelve hours into the conflict and I have already detailed losses from this attack. In the enforced ceasefire period following the Sentinel nuclear attack, the fleet commanders met and decided on an appropriate response. Alpha needed to regain the initiative in order to quickly put into place the fleet’s primary battle plans. This meant we needed to consider all of our potential weaponry capabilities.”

He paused briefly again and then began his explanation of the existence and usage of sub-space weapons.

“Alpha made a collective decision, twenty-five years ago, that the development of the sub-space warhead should continue, following the loss of the S.S. Mauritius. This was done legitimately and within Alpha’s constitutional memorandum, but was achieved outside of specific ECG funding.” Schneider omitted the fact that funding for the development was sourced elsewhere as this would open up a whole new discussion. No doubt someone would bring that subject up today…

“Ten years ago, Alpha released a limited number of sub-space charges into the command of high ranking officers serving on A Class ships of the line. The brief was that the missiles should only ever be used in an absolute emergency. Restrictive controls were put in place to ensure that their usage must be verified by both executive officers aboard a specific ship, or in the case of fleet command by all members of the executive fleet command team. These weapons have not been used until now…”

The pause allowed several members of the press gang to shout out their questions, but Schneider ignored them. He was a long way from being finished.
“Taking into consideration the vast potential power and the environmental questions that arose from the Kuiper Belt testing twenty-five years ago, Alpha’s stance on the use of these weapons is that they should never be used in an environment which would impact on the local biosphere.”

Again he paused and again the quiet of the room was disturbed by a flurry of angry questions. The atmosphere was becoming heated, but Schneider was here before and he calmly asserted himself on the gathering.

“The Fleet Command, under Admiral Rose’s request, began to discuss an appropriate response to the Sentinel Atomic attack. We ruled out our own battlefield nuclear weapons because we would not have been able to accurately deliver them to the target without them being destroyed. Remember that we do not have the remarkable dark ship technology that the Sentinels have, and our jump ships would not have been able to get close enough to make this form of attack count. We looked at the local environment and elected to use six low-yield sub-space charges, encased within short range ballistic Tiger missiles. The missiles were delivered at the first opportunity, on the clearing of the gas cloud, via three Sabre jump ships from Admiral Shenke’s fleet, followed by three missiles from the main fleet via the same delivery method. The effect was instantaneous, and over five hundred Sentinel vessels were destroyed on immediate impact. The resulting spatial voids have all expanded to a maximum of three thousand meters in diameter, and have now stopped expanding. The void sizes fall within our anticipated parameters. The explosions brought about the anticipated effect, splitting the Sentinel fleet into four, allowing us to commence our primary battle strategy. The Sentinels have no equivalent weapon and, despite their second unsuccessful atomic attack, we believe that we have destroyed the majority of their dark ship capability. Thus it is likely that little or no further atomic retaliation is possible.”

Schneider paused again and then delivered his summary. He concluded that the legitimate use of sub-space weapons had achieved the desired effect, and that Alpha had the initiative to progress the battle to a satisfactory conclusion. He paused again and then opened the meeting to questions.

Then all hell broke loose, with one journalist shouting out a plethora of questions all at once. Commander Penance intervened and stated categorically that one question should be asked at a time, with only one question per journalist, with hands raised to prompt the speaker to select a questioner. “Everybody should get a chance to ask a question. Please keep your questions brief and to the point.”

Penance then selected a journalist from the front row.

“Commander Schneider. Billy Thompson. Earth Today. What makes you think that the development and use of sub-space weapons is legal?”

Schneider smiled and paused before answering. “Alpha’s legal team looked at our articles of association and our memorandum documents and determined that the factor behind what and how we conduct our R & D is based on who funds it. Since ECG had banned the development of the weapon, we sought funding elsewhere. It is not appropriate at this time to divulge who, but Alpha’s incorporation documents are there for all to see.”
Each journalist was then selected from a show of hands. In common with all media briefings they announced their name and who they represented, prior to asking their question.

“What about the use of these weapons?”

“The same thing applies. Alpha has taken our environmental responsibilities seriously and has stringent controls for the use of these weapons. Hence the reason why they have only been used once in ten years.”

“Are there other yields available? How much stronger are the maximum yield weapons?”

“Yes there are other yields. It is not appropriate for Alpha to release information about weapons which have not yet been used because of the security implications.”

“Why did Alpha not advise ECH or the media that the weapons were developed and made ready for deployment?”

This was by far the most contentious issue. Schneider knew that what he was about to say would cause political uproar on Earth.

“Alpha has kept ECG updated on both the development and deployment of these weapons over the last twenty-five years. The information was deemed to be defensively sensitive and, because of the potential security threat, was not released to the public.”

Sure enough, the room erupted and Penance took over and spent a good few minutes calming the room down. He then selected one questioner and stated that this would be the last question.

“So ECG knew about these weapons right from the start. Could you not say they were funded by stealth?”

Again Schneider smiled. “Yes, they were aware, and no, they had no part in the funding.”

He sat down and gathered his papers together while Penance closed the meeting. The meeting had gone as anticipated, and the media representatives would draft their articles and communicate them back to Earth via secure comm links. *President Roslyn will be delighted*, he thought.
“Commander Schneider did well.”

“Yes he did. He has cleverly deflected the pressure from Alpha onto President Roslyn, which means that we can concentrate on our priority, winning this battle. There is still the issue of the prospective funding from ECG and, to be honest, I don’t know which way Roslyn will go on this. Before the sub-space attack, opinion was divided. Now I think that they would want Roslyn to act and try to obtain control over what we are doing again. That says nothing for the government’s overall opinion rating, which will plummet even further.”

“We will have to watch this space.”

“So we will. For now, let’s wait and see what the fallout is like with ECG, and then we can pick up the dialogue again with Ambassador White. Thank you Gentlemen…”

Admiral Koenig was speaking to his fellow Alpha Cabinet members, Admirals Kohn and Clarke. They both knew him well enough to know that their unofficial meeting was over and they hastily departed Admiral Koenig’s substantial office suite.

Personally, Koenig was not happy with Admiral Rose’s decision to use the sub-space weapons, or with the ridiculous debacle surrounding Admiral Shenke’s efforts to pass through the Partacian system. The whole battle strategy was looking weak, and even the Sentinels’ capability was underestimated. Koenig had spoken to Rose earlier this morning and Rose seemed happy with the situation, arguing that the strategy was on target. Koenig expressed concern about the number of fatalities. It was difficult to brush over the loss of nearly thirteen thousand lives in just four days. The media were having a field day. The battle was not going well, too many lives were lost for too limited a return, and the ‘gutless’ Admiral Rose had resorted to deploying a mass destruction weapon, which was not only banned by ECG but by the APF and other regional power assemblies. Koenig had left Rose with a simple message. “You are replaceable. Make sure the campaign gets back on track.”

Koenig had little time to mull over the issues, and was just about to review a draft of the latest press release when a direct comm link opened. President Roslyn’s distinctive features appeared on the holoscreen in front of him.

“Ah President Roslyn, what can I do for you?”

“Your Commander Schneider has made a mockery of the government. I want to know what you are going to do about it.”

Nothing like going in with both feet, thought Koenig. “I believe that Commander Schneider handled the situation well, rather than crucify you like he could have done. He was asked a specific question: to deny would have meant lying and I won’t ask my commanders to do that for anyone.” Koenig was equally forceful.

“So what are you going to do to help to pacify the media?”

“I am looking at the latest draft briefing. Basically we will be stating that ECG was under the same obligation of non-disclosure as we are. Governments sometimes have to keep secrets too.”

“When will this be released?”

“This afternoon, before 4 p.m. I would think.”

Roslyn changed tack. “The media are gunning for ECG to have greater involvement again with Alpha. Ambassador White is looking to make a statement advising that progress is being made with regard to our increased collaboration. Given the events of the last week, I think he should go further. Do you agree?”

“No really. It will merely serve to further tarnish further Alphas reputation, and ECG’s for that matter. I don’t think that White should even be speaking to the press. I think we should put the consultation process on hold for while.”

“Why? You need funds more than ever.”

“Because allowing ECG greater involvement in our actions at this time will be like admitting defeat; that we cannot cope without you. The reality is different. We have and continue to apply funds obtained from external sources…”

Koenig was getting angry. Roslyn tried to force his way back in by default. He continued, “We will make no
apology for the actions we have taken. They were the correct ones. They are legitimate and they will see us through to victory.”

Roslyn could sense Koenig’s anger, a weak point in the Admiral’s normally steadfast resolve. He would not seek to exploit the weakness, not today.

“Very well, Admiral, but I see no reason to ask Ambassador White to hold off. I shall ask him to be discreet.”

Koenig was exasperated, but knew that to force this issue would be futile. “Fine. I will ask Admiral Clarke to brief White on our stance. Before we close this discussion, Mr. President, I wanted to talk to you about the Odysseus Project. Are you familiar with it?”

“Yes, I think so. That’s the Tri-Star wormhole project, which is I believe being partially funded by government. I don’t know much detail I am afraid.”

“The project is being sourced by Nexus Thru Space, Inc. They have submitted a proposal to send a ship with Alpha support into each wormhole, which was approved with the caveat that Alpha would attempt to open both wormholes together to either prove or disprove the blue wormhole theory. Are you familiar with the theory?”

“I am. The main reason for the war, we are led to believe.”

“The problem being that, while Nexus has agreed to provide us with an additional line of funding, which we welcome, it transpires that the original proposal was a public/private funding initiative, with the project being partially funded by ECG. This means ECG was provided funding to Alpha through a third party, that is, by stealth.”

Roslyn frowned. “Is that really the main problem here, Admiral? Should we not be more concerned with their being able to get to the Tri-Star region and whether the Sentinels and the Betanica sect’s beliefs are correct?”

“Yes, We need to formulate an agreement between Alpha and ECG so that the funding line is not jeopardized and that the media see the funding as not being made via the back door.”

“Okay, I agree. I will ask our representative to draft an appropriate addendum. Do you not have an opinion on the wormholes, Admiral?”

“Yes, I do. Currently accessing the Tri-Star system is not a problem. The Sentinels have poured all their resources into the Ionian system, leaving the area relatively clear. I believe the mission element of the project is due to commence early in the New Year. As for the blue wormhole theory…it is more than possible that if a further corridor opens up, then we could be granting access to species from other galaxies. If any of the wormholes are two way then we are inviting both the good and the bad to enter our region of space. It’s not really a new thing. The interest for Alpha is in whether the blue wormhole will form and how.”

“The Betanica Sect have, they say, evidence proving that a tyrannical race will come through. Perhaps we should be seen to be sensitive to their beliefs, maybe just as a precaution?”

Koenig laughed. “Admiral Shenke’s task force is on stand-by to attend the Tri-Star region if required. I am not completely against the possibility that there may be something in this. Alpha has learned from mistakes made in the past. I understand the Sect infiltrated ECG, but at a much higher level than we thought.”

Koenig’s attempt at humor had taken the edge of what was a challenging conversation. Roslyn acknowledged the humor and continued it. “They have infiltrated Alpha, too. Where will it all end?”

“We will soon find out, Mr. President.”

With that, the two leaders said their goodbyes and the comm link closed. The conversation was heated, but had ended on a better note. Koenig then reopened the briefing document and began to read. Once again he was interrupted by a comm link. This time it was Admiral Clarke.

“Just wanted to advise you that the Odysseus Project time lines have been agreed. The two Nexus vessels are en route to Alpha six. Have you spoken to President Roslyn about the third party funding?”

“Yes, I have just spoken to him, although he was pre-occupied as you might expect. I will emphasize to Mr. Rose when I next speak to him that it is important that we ram home the advantage and get this battle finished. I want Admiral Shenke’s mini-fleet available to potentially support the Nexus ships… Just adopting a belts-and-braces approach.”
Obtaining clearance for a personal exit from Earth was always complicated, particularly in war time. Carla had confirmed a clearance for their trip to Titan three days earlier, scheduled for 16.30 hours. It was 17.15 and, as yet, no confirmation had come through.

“Vector 373D, your active clearance is denied. Alpha traffic has priority.”

“So how long before we can get clearance?”

“You are moving up the list, could be four or five hours, maybe longer.”

Carla turned to Jake. “This is ridiculous. I know they’re busy, but space way 6 is not exactly a key Alpha run. They could let us through surely.”

“Yes, but they will be re-routing non-priority traffic off the main Alpha trunk routes. There is nothing we can do about it. This is not exactly the first time we have had trouble getting off-world.”

“Don’t you still have priority clearance from Admiral Black?”

“I doubt it…maybe. I don’t suppose Joanne cancelled it with her father. The route is confirmed in your name. We could request a change of pilot. Do you want to try?”

Carla nodded and reopened the paused comm link. “Alpha control, this is Vector 373-D. If we were to change pilot to a priority level pilot, would that make a difference to our departure?”

“Yes, in theory, but you can’t just change your pilot. You will have to cancel the old one and request a new priority clearance in the pilot’s name. Do you wish to proceed?”

“We need to confirm whether the priority clearance is applicable first. Can you check an id for me?”

“Negative. We need to take the application first.”

Carla turned to Jake who was listening in. “Is it worth the risk? If we lose our slot and have to reapply for an exit, it could be tomorrow before we get underway.”

“I say we gamble,” said Jake.

“Okay, Alpha Control, this is Vector 373D. Yes we wish to cancel our exit and apply for a new one.”

“You need to contact Alpha one exit clearance and they will arrange cancellation. Then back to the Service desk, zone three, to apply for priority clearance.”

What a fool, thought Carla. She thanked the operator and immediately opened a new comm link to cancel the exit. Jake took over and contacted the service desk. He requested priority clearance and was put on hold for thirty seconds, before he received confirmation that priority clearance was granted. Vector 373D had immediate clearance for takeoff and exit.

* * * *

The Academic term ended, and one-third of Jake’s final year in the academy passed. The Christmas holiday arrived and it was time to take a break from the rigors of studying, until the next Top Gun event.

The space yacht launched at 17.40. Jake expertly lifted the yacht into the stratosphere and onto the space link. It was exceptionally busy with all manner of personal, commercial and off-world craft, but the priority lane allowed Jake to clear the logjam and move onto the space way within fifteen minutes of take-off.

The space yacht was a Challenger 600. The loaned ship belonged to Carla’s parents. When her father realized they planned to travel to Titan via passenger ‘ferry’, he delivered the yacht personally to her this morning, fuelled, serviced and ready to go. He added the caveat that this was his ‘baby’ and he expected it back in the same condition as he left it. It was not a particularly modern ship, but in mint condition. Over the years, Carla’s father had added to the standard specification in many ways. She had armor-plated shields, a state-of-the-art NAVCOM, and upgraded phase cannons. She was recently refurbished and, in the process, upgraded with a Red Dragon Stellar drive converter. This meant she had theoretical SD3 capability.

Jake enjoyed himself. The ship was a space way cruiser designed for maximum comfort for long space voyages. She was surprisingly agile, despite her sixty ton bulk. The trip to Titan would take five hours.
Jake and Carla agreed to share the piloting. He didn’t want to let go yet; he was having fun.

He felt guilty about exploiting his position with Admiral Black to gain a priority exit clearance. The Admiral gave Joanne and her boyfriend the ‘perk’ because she frequently visited her parents off-world. Neither Joanne nor the Admiral terminated Jake’s special clearance. It could not have been an oversight, as the facility must be actively renewed on an annual basis. It felt wrong to use the facility in another girl’s parents’ craft. He reminded himself that Joanne and Carla were good friends. Jake spent a few minutes more reflecting on the loss of Joanne and how he felt about it. He was still upset but time was healing the grief. Carla interrupted his thoughts, keen to take control of her parents’ yacht. Jake handed over control and left the cockpit in search of a quiet corner for a rest and a period of further reflection.

Jake awoke with a start. It was 8.30 p.m. and Carla piloted the craft for over two hours. He stood and left the accommodation bay, pausing briefly to stare at himself in a mirror. As he entered the cockpit, Carla had just taken the stellar drive offline and booted up the auxiliary drive.

“What’s up?”

“Clearance issues at Titan. Our new flight and landing schedules aren’t processed yet. They asked us to stand down while they process. We are ahead of schedule though, so we should still get in around 22.00 hours.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You were sleeping like a baby. You can take over in a few minutes and I’ll get some supper.”

“How domesticated.”

Jake brought the yacht in low at half stall speed, using the thrusters to seek out the landing strip. It was dark. The yellow lights of the space port and the pale green phased landing strips of the yacht contrasted, giving the planetoid surface a luminescent glow as he brought the ship into land. They landed at 9.55 p.m. and Jake taxied the craft into the rented port docking facility. They cleared security and customs before heading straight for the modular transport system.

They reached the AUSWAS facility at 12.45 a.m. and were pleased to find Joely had arranged accommodation as promised. They were in their rented studio apartment ten minutes later.

The apartment had two bedrooms, a kitchen diner and a bathroom, with south-facing windows looking out over the mountainous landscape and several of the brightest moons of Saturn. From here, even at twilight, you could pick out the Saturn Rings with some clarity. The view really was something to behold.

Carla poured two glasses of chilled wine and they sat down on the couch to stare out at the fantastic spectacle. This was surely one of the most romantic viewpoints in the galaxy.

The two friends exchanged a brief conversation about the flight, about Saturn and about Joely, before Carla lent forward and removed the glass from Jake’s hand.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that we have known each other for so long and yet we have never shared an intimate experience like this?”

Jake was intoxicated. Carla was a friend. He knew the dangers of putting their relationship on a higher pedestal and yet he could not resist. Slowly they embraced. Jake could no longer resist and Carla was his.

Carla was already awake, when Jake opened his eyes. The two lay intertwined on the bed following a night of near endless passion.

“Hi, how are you today?” Carla’s Australian drawl was exaggerated all the more as they lay together on the substantial bed.

“Pretty good. Not sure what we should do.”

“We can make love again, if you want.”

* * * *

Carla and Jake were due to meet Joely at in the reading room. They rose, showered, dressed and took breakfast two hours before. Carla wore a skin-hugging Lycra® body suit, which was perfect for the atmospheric conditions. She looks fantastic as usual, Jake thought. Oh God, how things changed. Their feelings for each other had finally come out and what would happen?

Jake didn’t have time to reflect further, as Carla’s older sister entered the reading room. A little older than Carla,
she was attractive and also wore a Lycra® suit. There was no mistaking the family resemblance.

The two sisters embraced and Carla introduced her sister to Jake. Joely led them through the reading room French doors and out into a courtyard. They climbed steps and entered a large wooden clad room. Professor Winterburn stood by the window looking out. He wore the same Betanica Sect robes as when Carla first saw him.

Jake felt suddenly uneasy. Clearly this man had a hold over Joely and entranced Carla.

“As you can see, we have moved from our temporary warehouse to the AUSWAS facility. I trust your accommodation is comfortable?”

Winterburn stared directly at Carla, when he spoke, ignoring Jake. Carla introduced Jake. Winterburn brushed him aside as he moved from the window to a desktop holographic display on the other side of the room.

“Alpha is in the process of delivering their star ships to the Tri-Star system with a view to penetrating the wormholes simultaneously.” Winterburn illustrated the movement of the Alpha vessels on the hologram.

“This will result in a blue wormhole, which will create a gateway for the Kryl. They will come through the gate, bringing with them a destructive force never seen before in this galaxy. They will systematically take apart civilization in this galaxy and the next. Their powers are beyond comprehension and their sole intent is mass destruction. The demons of Kryl are coming. Unless we stop Alpha from opening the wormholes they will soon be upon us.”

Jake decided he had enough of this. “What evidence do you have that the Kryl even exist or that a blue wormhole will form a gateway?”

Winterburn again ignored him and moved on. “The Collective tried reasoning with Alpha, Earth’s Central Government and the APF, but to no avail. The Sentinels, the guardians of the Tri-Star Region, are forced under the guidance of the Sect to destroy Alpha’s military capability. I am fearful Alpha is too strong for the Sentinels and the Collective will have no choice but to act.”

Jake was not be ignored. “What can the Collective do? You are a political body.”

Again, Winterburn ignored Jake. He addressed Carla and stared directly into her eyes. Carla was completely absorbed. Jake decided enough was enough.

“I have had enough of this. Come on Carla we are going.” Jake looked to storm out, but Carla just stood there staring into Winterburn’s eyes, transfixed.

Finally Winterburn spoke to Jake. “Mr. Carter, your presence is a distraction to this discussion. You are welcome to leave, but I can assure you Carla is highly unlikely to follow. She has an understanding of the issues and wants to help.”

“I am not going anywhere without Carla.”

“Very well, then you will listen quietly and say nothing.”

This time Jake found Winterburn’s eyes staring at him. The eyes were opaque and yet they carried such depth. He realized the eyes were not human. He found himself spellbound briefly, but resisted and pulled his eyes away to concentrate on Carla.

Winterburn preached to a seemingly converted audience. He had complete silence and his rhetoric was concise, almost fanatical in its delivery. He continued for a few minutes, expounding the power of the Kryl and the inevitability of destruction unless opening of the blue wormhole was prevented.

Then suddenly it was over. The spell ended. Jake found himself released and of his own free will and yet he still found himself unable to speak.

“I must leave, but I will leave you in the capable hands of Joely and the other members of the Collective. They will continue your instruction, Carla. I feel sure you are ready to join us. Joely, escort Mr. Carter from the AUSWAS premises.”

“Mr. Carter, you are free to leave. You are not a believer and your place is with your own family.”

“No. I am not leaving without Carla.” Jake suddenly found his voice.

Carla looked at Jake and said, “Really, Jake. It’s okay. I need to spend a little more time here. Go get some fresh air, perhaps visit New Portsmouth. I will call you when I am ready to leave.”

“Don’t be taken in by him, Carla. This is not real. The Kryl don’t exist and this is all religious claptrap.”
Winterburn smiled. “I can assure you they are very real. It is time for you to leave…Joely.”

Three pairs of hands grabbed him from behind. Jake had not realized others were in the room. He turned around and saw twenty or more people stood there, believers, and all staring at him. Was it too late for Carla?

* * * *

Jake woke up. He was asleep on the bed within the studio apartment in the AUSWAS facility. They decided he could stay within the complex, but how did he get here? Perhaps his usefulness was not yet over. It was dark, and there was no sign of Carla. Jake opened a comm link to her, but there was no answer. What could he do? Should he try to find her or wait?

Jake pondered his next move for a few minutes, then suddenly felt hungry and he got up and headed for the kitchen. He found the kitchen supplied with plenty of food. He prepared himself an omelet and a glass of milk. The ingredients were unusual, not of Earth origin, but the meal looked appetizing enough so he filled up.

Carla arrived at the studio apartment thirty minutes later. She looked tired but back to her normal self. “Thank you for coming with me, Jake. We are done here and can return to Earth tomorrow.”

“What the hell does that mean? What have you been doing? The last thing I remember before I woke up on the bed was being grabbed by some of Winterburn’s cronies.”

“You passed out and they took you to the apartment. You were not harmed. Winterburn has that effect on some people.”

“Doesn’t that ring alarm bells in your head?”

“No, I know he is not human, if that’s what you mean. I don’t know what his origins are, only that Earth is his adopted planet and that he is aware that he has certain powers.”

“So what did you discuss in my absence?”

“We talked about the wormholes, the Kryl and Alpha. I spent some time with Joely.”

“So how did Winterburn leave it with you? He said you were ready to join them.”

“I am…well, I am interested to see what this is all about. Not now, I have my graduation to complete.”

“Then a posting.”

“Maybe, we will see.”

“So we spend just one day with them. I thought we were planning to stay two or three?”

“We were, but Joely and Winterburn are flying out to the Tri-Star region. There is no point in staying any longer unless you want to do some sights.”

Jake said ‘no’ to sightseeing. Titan was interesting to the extent that it was an environmental miracle, but there was little to offer in terms of history, ancient architecture or even its physical wonders. He was keen to get back to Earth. He didn’t know where he stood with Carla, and the Academy suggested a shorter absence from study would be best.

“Okay, so we go home tomorrow. What shall we do?”

“I am tired. How about you join me for a shower and then we start again where we left off this morning?”

Jake was surprised but happy to accept. The conversation about what would happen between them when they got back could wait until tomorrow.

* * * *

Jake woke first. He yawned, stretched and moved Carla’s arm from his chest, carefully to not wake her and got up. He needed time to clear his head. He spent another wonderful night with Carla. She was fantastic but it felt wrong.

He was unhappy about what happened to him yesterday. The fainting theory didn’t ring true. He also worried about Carla. She was hiding something. To what extent has she been taken in by the Collective?

Jake sat out on the balcony and tried to address his questions. He rationalized he had nothing to hide, and that the likelihood was that he had fainted. Surely not because of Winterburn and, if so, why had Carla not also fainted? He tried to analyze the position further but gave up. He was none the wiser. He found himself, not for the first time,
staring at the moons and rings of Titans ‘mother’ planet.
Carla joined him on the balcony. She was wearing a white towel robe and looked amazing as ever.

“Hi Jakey. How are you feeling today?”
“I am feeling good. What about you?”
“I am ready to go home…but not yet. Do you want to come back to bed?”

* * * *

Three hours later, the space yacht lifted off from Titan’s surface. Jake once again requested priority clearance and the vessel was swiftly underway. He took command for takeoff and the first hour, while Carla busied herself in the kitchen area. She made a salad from ingredients she picked up at a Titan market on route to the modular transport connection. The produce was Titan in origin, but closely resembled the Earth equivalent and was tasty.

The yacht joined the space way, within twenty-five minutes of take off. Jake placed the vessel on autopilot and joined Carla in the kitchen area. They sat down and enjoyed the lunch Carla prepared. Jake was hungry. More importantly, he wanted to know what would happen next with their relationship.

“Carla, we need to talk.”

“About us, you mean. Yes, we do. Let’s finish lunch and then we can have a proper chat.”

* * * *

As Jake and Carla enjoyed their lunch, the AUSWAS research vessel exited Titan control space and powered up its stellar drive. On board, Professor Nigel Winterburn and five of his fellow Collective members, including Joely, waited patiently for the commander to complete his pre-stellar speed checks. Satisfied, the commander set course and engaged the stellar drive. The AUSWAS vessel was en route to the Tri-Star System.

No one—Carla, Jake, nor the five collective subordinates—knew the true reason why Winterburn took this flight. If they had, they would certainly have tried to stop him.

* * * *

Jake asked Carla if they could sit in the cockpit to have their chat. He felt uncomfortable with self-shift auto pilot and, in a busy shipping lane with a non-Alpha maintained ship, he couldn’t risk leaving the ships NAVCOM to deal with the whole spectrum of problems that could manifest in this environment. Jake liked to fly himself and, if he was not flying, he wanted to see what went on.

“So how do you feel about us?” Carla asked.

Jake exhaled. “I don’t know…it feels so right. It’s like it has always been this way. We are friends Carla. Are we spoiling our friendship? Then there’s Steve.”

“Yes, but I am not with Steve. I know we are on a ‘temporary split’. “ Carla emphasized the words mockingly. “That is only to pacify Steve. To be honest, I have felt like this about you for a long time,” Carla breathed a sigh of relief. “There, it’s out.”

Jake was slightly taken aback and paused before replying. “I guess I knew something was going on, even before Maria. I tried to read the signs, but, hey, I am only a man, what do I know?”

“This the age of common emotional awareness,” she said as she put her head on his shoulder.

They embraced and Jake said. “Yes, you are right and I feel the same way. The question is: what are we going to do about it?”

“Well, I don’t want it to stop. We will just have to be careful.”

“Are you suggesting we don’t tell Steve?” Jake asked.

“Yes, we can’t tell him. It would break him thinking his best friend and his ‘girlfriend’ are seeing each other behind his back. We need to keep it to ourselves until after graduation.”

“That is nearly six months away, Carla. We can’t creep around like this for half a year…can we?”

“Yes and no. We can, but it will be difficult. Steve thinks we are not together, and I will have to break it to him that the split is permanent, which I must do before too long. That will hurt him, I guess, but it’s unfair to keep him
“Hanging on.”

“How do you feel about him? You have been together for three years. Are you sure the relationship is over?”

“Yes, I am. I have known for some time. I love him, but not like that; not anymore. I care about him more as a friend. The passion ended in our relationship a long time ago. I just wish he would wake up and grow up a little. This is a serious game he is playing. Flying jump ships is a grown up and dangerous profession. I don’t need to tell you that.”

“To be fair to Steve, he has bucked his ideas up lately. He really knuckled down with his Geometrics and caught up with most of his other classes.”

“I know, but you still get the impression he could let rip suddenly…at the wrong time and endanger himself or others.”

Jake paused before commenting further. “Do you think your feelings for him are on hold because he is too much of a risk taker?”

“No, it’s not just the risks. It’s his overall attitude. He needs to grow up. The ‘Steve’ I know will never come back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. He is immature sometimes and takes too many risks. He is stubborn, obstinate. It doesn’t matter anyway. I love someone else.” Carla looked at Jake and laughed as he looked slightly confused. “It’s you, dammit!” she cried.

They embraced again and then Carla sat on Jake’s lap. Time for the autopilot, thought Jake. “Shall we come off the space way? We are in no hurry to get home.”

“Yes”, said Carla. “I am definitely in no hurry to get home.”

The Challenger space yacht was not designed as a passenger ferry. It was at its best when taken off the space way, when its occupants’ wish was to observe planetary systems, galactic phenomena, etc. Jake switched off the NAVCOM and transferred all navigational, communication and drive to manual systems. The yacht drifted, aided occasionally by the thrusters which automatically kicked in whenever the craft deviated fractionally from its current course. This was what the vessel was designed for.

They made love passionately and fell asleep together in the yacht’s master bedroom. Six hours later, Carla got up to take a shower.

Jake lay in bed, wondering what the future would hold. He was still concerned about Carla and had doubts about her explanation on what happened to him after he blacked out. It was not that he didn’t believe her. Someone fed her false information. His concern was, whether she had fallen in with the Collective far more than she realized—and all Winterburn must do was click his fingers for her to come running. His overall state of mind, though, was a happy one. He and Carla were together. He had not felt this way since Joanna, and he felt a really strong bond was already developing between them. He also felt guilty because he exploited Admiral Black’s generosity.

A proximity alarm suddenly sounded in the cockpit and Jake jumped off the bed and charged along the main living accommodation corridor to the command center of the yacht and the cockpit. The yacht had moved to within the thousand kilometers of the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars. Because only thrusters were in operation, there was no immediate danger.

Jake was furious with himself for missing something so fundamental. He learned the solar system in his first grade and plotted his first safe navigation through the asteroid belt, via space way six when he was fifteen. This should have been second nature. He was losing his touch.

He plotted a new course to take the yacht back towards the space way using the auxiliary power drive, without intersecting the asteroid belt. After checking all critical systems he re-engaged the NAVCOM and returned to the accommodation block to see if Carla were okay.

Carla had dressed and stood on the observation platform, gazing out into space. She stared right through the spectacle of the asteroid belt and beyond. Clearly she is troubled but now is not the time, Jake thought.

“So are you ready to go home yet?”

She smiled “Yes, I am. We are going to have to be really careful you know. We will need to take our chances when we get them…lots of quickies” she said cheekily.

If she is still thinking about Joely and Winterburn she’s covering it well, Jake thought. “Yes, and Christmas will
get in the way.”

“Don’t you like Christmas?”

“Yes, I do, but...it’s been a tough year and there is a lot going on. Christmas is just a distraction. Do you know what Steve is doing over the festive period?”

Carla frowned. “He and I had planned to stay in a rented cottage in Scotland and then take in some skiing and, Hogmanay. Has he said anything to you?”

“No. We don’t want him to spend it on his own. Are you retuning to Oz for Christmas?”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to three weeks with my folks and plenty of relaxation, although it is oppressively hot down there. Are you spending Christmas with your parents?”

“I’ve got to, really. I have missed out for the last few years. Maybe I should invite Steve to spend it with me? It’s only one night and the rest of the time I will be on campus.”

“That’s if he’s talking to you after the Top Gun showdown.”

“He is going to be really fired up, but I am equal to the challenge.”

Carla avoided eye contact and any conversation about their relationship. Collectively, they assumed their parts in the deception. They only needed to be cautious in public. In private they could relax and be as intimate as they liked, so why had Carla suddenly switched off?

“Carla is everything okay? You went a little cold on me.”

Carla smiled and apologized. “I am sorry Jake. I have a lot on my mind. I don’t want to lose Joely again, and now I am here and she is probably already en route to the Tri-Star region. Maybe I should be with her?”

She sought approval and Jake knew better than to put her off. It was best to humor her, but ignore her and hope that she didn’t try anything stupid like turn the ship around.

“Okay, let’s get this ship back on the space way and get ourselves home.” The strategy worked. Carla joined Jake in the cockpit and helped him to set up the NAVCOM.

The remainder of the journey was straightforward enough. Jake’s priority clearance allowed a swift re-entry and landing. Carla agreed with her father that she would keep the yacht and use it to return home at Christmas. She already rented temporary hangar space and maintenance services at the space port.

They spent a brief period of intimacy before departing the yacht and then took the sub rail together to the main campus and made their way to the academies main entrance. Even though the academic term had finished, the Academy remained open, with many students continuing their studies over the holiday period. Jake walked Carla to her apartment and they said their goodbyes, in public and without affection.

Jake walked on towards his own apartment. He missed her already.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Halo 7 In Battle

Commander Jonathan Hoskins was exhausted and so were his crew. The battle continued for over two weeks, but there were no further nuclear blasts and the dark ship capability was removed. Conventional weaponry gave Alpha battle supremacy. Shenke’s mini-fleet were engaged in one to one fighting with the rear section of the Sentinel fleet, twenty-four/seven. The fighting was fierce but the superior quality of Alpha vessels and the overall ability of their pilots was apparent. The mini-fleet took losses, while Alpha’s supply line to the rear of the Sentinel fleet became restricted. The Halo 7 took significant blast damage. Hoskins damage repair teams were constantly in demand.

The jump ships played a significant part and Obeya did a fantastic job as CAG. It’s about time someone told her, Hoskins thought. He left the bridge for only the second time in twenty-four hours and headed to the main hangar bay. Reinforcements were promised to the severely depleted Halo’s jump ship Fleet. It remained uncertain when they would arrive and likely he would have to suspend the Halo’s jump ship capability unless new ships and crew arrived soon.

Hoskins entered the hangar bay just as two damaged Sabres returned from their latest sortie. They were both hit by Sentinel blast cannons, but salvageable and would be back out within two hours. Hoskins watched as the two pilots dismounted and headed towards the CAG.

“Get those two into the repair bay, patch them up and make ready for launch in two hours.” Obeya was in control of her domain. She addressed the pilots. “Good work, you guys. Take four hours rest and then report for active duty.”

The two pilots looked disconsolate. Hoskins realized the morale was draining from his jump ship crews.

“Lieutenant Temsouri, what is the current flight status?” Hoskins walked forward and addressed Obeya directly and formally.

“We have six Rapiers on Sorties, two to come back in within the next thirty minutes, but no replacements until either the five Rapiers or the three Sabres in the repair bays are fixed. I can only send out what I can.”

A huge explosion rocked the hangar bay as flames engulfed one of the jump ship exit tunnels. The blast shields prevented the full force of the explosion entering the hangar, but not fumes and heat. Hoskins felt the skin burning on his face.

“Shut down exit five and shield up,” Obeya ordered. “Commander, sir, we have to shut down our exit tunnels, and we have maximum four ship capability for the next two to three hours. My pilots and repair teams have had limited sleep for the last seventy-two hours. If we aren’t careful we may have a major incident, slap bang in the middle of this ship. We are barely coping.”

Hoskins realized the position was hopeless. His jump ship staff needed rest and they needed to get back up to capacity before they could exercise an effective battle strategy.

“CAG, shut down the jump ship operation for twelve hours. Bring in the six ships on sorties. Get all the ships repaired and let me know when your capability has reached a sustainable level. Make sure all crew and engineers, including you, have adequate rest before you reopen the hangar…and get those exit tunnels sealed up A.S.A.P.”

“You are doing a great job Obeya,” He added informally. “Please get some rest. I need you at your best.”

He spent so little time with her over the last few weeks. He had not shared a bed with her for over ten days and he ached to feel the warmth of her body against his. “Join me for dinner in my quarters at seven, Lieutenant Temsouri. We need to discuss our strategy going forward.” Good, he thought, a rare opportunity and one he didn’t want to miss.

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The Betanica Sect high priestess commanded the legion of Sect vessels accompanying the Sentinel Fleet. They had not participated in the fighting, avoiding the majority of Alpha’s continuous sorties and the sub-space attack by embedding themselves within the main body of the vessels which protected General Yoshi’s flagship. They remained passive throughout the battle. The High Priestess listened to an Earth secure communications the Sentinels intercepted from Alpha.

Alpha fleet refused the comm link as they maintained radio silence. The message originated from outside the
Ionian system and was sent to all transmission sub-stations within its reach. It was easy to break the source code and intercept Earth communications. Sometimes in battle this was a better source of strategic information than even that of an enemy fleet. On this occasion, this was definitely the case.

The broadcast took the form of an information update, advising the status of the battle and other Earth issues. The message was clear, Alpha and an organization called Nexus planned to open the two wormholes in the Tri-Star system.

The High Priestess knew this time would come. She knew there were factions on Earth with vested interest in opening the wormholes and thus the Void Hole which would ultimately give the Kryl access to this galaxy. These factions were varied; they were not just political or economic in their justification. There were some who wanted the Void opened because they wanted the Kryl to come through. These factions now created the right environment, both politically and economically to facilitate their aim. The Sentinel Fleet must be successful. She would demand General Yoshi assume a more dominant position. The Sentinel Fleet must win the battle.

That wouldn’t prevent the humans from opening the wormholes. Although there were Sentinel patrol forces in the region, if Alpha elected to assist Nexus with additional military support, it would be difficult for Sentinel Patrols to prevent the holes from being opened. She had no choice. She must prevent the opening of the wormholes, and this was the main justification for the presence of the Sect Legion in the first place.

She had no choice but to send the Legion into the Tri-Star System to destroy the threat from Alpha and Nexus. Having determined the facts and made up her mind, she stood up and walked to her chair. She summoned her inner circle of senior Sect ministers and gave her orders. The legion would depart the Sentinel Fleet and head directly to the Tri-Star Region.

* * * *

Admiral Koenig briefed Shenke to watch the Sect vessels in particular. It was clear their presence was more to do with the Tri-Star region than combat operations in the middle of the Ionian system. Their sudden departure, with a clear heading taking them directly to the Tri-Star region, confirmed Alpha’s suspicions. Shenke opened a secure channel to Admiral Koenig forty minutes earlier, and received verification to proceed. He opened a further secure link to Admiral Rose and advised him their departure from the Alpha fleet was imminent.

The suspension of jump ship flights was destined to last a lot longer. The order came from Admiral Shenke’s fleet command just four hours after Commander Hoskins ordered the Halo 7’s jump ship status to be suspended. They were ordered to regroup and leave the battle, setting a course for the departing Betanica Sect vessels. Hoskins hadn’t realized at the time, but they headed for the Tri-Star region.

From the chaos of battle to the calm of deep space, Shenke’s task force pursued their prey at high velocity. They were joined by twelve reserve ships of the line, together with new supplies, munitions, new jump ships and personnel. The mini-fleet was whole again. They acted alone once more.

The Halo 7 was in a weary state. The repair teams continued to work their way through the damaged sections of the ship, but their relentless task had an ending. The ship was fully operational with a full complement of personnel, together with a full ammunition dock. It was time to take stock and to allow the crew to come to terms with their losses. Sixteen crew members died in the battle, twelve of them jump ship pilots, three CAG support crew and one member of the repair team. Their losses were felt throughout the ship, but the commander shouldered the brunt of the responsibility.

He had orders to send his ship into battle and issued the individual commands. It was he who put a face to those ordered to their deaths. He would do the same again in the name of protecting Earth.

Is it Earth? Hoskins began questioning the rationale behind his command in recent weeks. It was Alpha that was antagonizing the situation, and ECG and the people of Earth were removed from it. They were simply the cattle fodder, Alpha was the executioner and he was Alpha, or part of it.

Hoskins tried to put the losses behind him by doing what he did best. He walked the ship. His job was to restore morale and to bring the ship back to full combat readiness. He visited the mess halls, the repair teams, the medical center, the jump ship hangars and the crew recreational facilities. Each time he stopped and took time with his crew, he shared their conversations and their grief and he began the process of bringing his crew back to life. Shenke wasn’t attacking the Sect vessels so he had time.

The mini-fleet followed at a safe distance. The likely destination of the Sect fleet, the Tri-Star system, was six days away at current speed. What would happen when they got there was unknown, but it was likely there would be
more bloodshed.

Hoskins returned to his quarters to find Obeya lying in his bed. He needed the comfort of a woman and Obeya was there for him. He went back on his word to his wife, but here he lived a separate life. He had needs and his wife could not help him. Jonathan Hoskins returned to his bed and to his mistress. He needed comforting again.
Chapter Forty

Christmas Homecoming

There were twenty remaining competitors in the South Downs Academy Top Gun tournament. By the end of this weekend’s event, the finalists would be known, with the final itself taking place in the early New Year.

Jake and Steve were neck and neck, with Steve edging in front at the end of the last event. They would next compete in Rapier 6’s, which definitely gave the advantage to jump ship students over the remaining candidates, as the jump ship pilots completed more than 300 hours flight time in the Rapier 6 variant. The elite pilots were already ahead of their non-jump ship student counterparts. The final twelve were expected to be composed of jump ship elite pilots only.

Now all the remaining candidates would be given their chance. With fewer competitors, six different events were scheduled to take place this weekend. These varied from speed trials to obstacle courses to wing-man flying. There was even space for a freestyle section, which allowed the candidates to demonstrate their full repertoire of capabilities.

The Top Gun supreme was in his element. They were at the business end of the tournament and he already looked closely at the remaining competitors, two of which represented the Academy in the Alpha-wide Top Gun tournament. Today’s events would start with a time trial from Earth to Jupiter and back. The distances involved, given the increase in power of the Rapier over the Hunter meant the intermix calculations would have to be precise to ensure the optimum balance between the two drive systems involved. The stellar drive must be engaged at exactly the right point and only the most technically-astute candidates would ensure both the timing and the mix was correct. The candidates would fly in two batches, with those placed in thirteenth to twenty-fourth place going first.

Jake and Steve watched as the first batch of Rapiers lifted off from the space port and accelerated briskly to clear Earth’s defense shields. Steve was in his element. This is what he lived to do and he had the lead again. He didn’t intend to let Jake have it back. He knew his friend wanted it too, but his career was mapped out in a different direction. Steve always wanted to be a jump pilot, to emulate and surpass his father’s tragically short jump ship career and to be the best. He had no real ambition beyond this. He didn’t particularly aspire to make squadron leader or group commander. Those things would come as a bonus in time, but were not what motivated him to succeed.

To win the outright Top Gun competition would be the icing on the cake, a recognition of his ability, and nothing would stop him from achieving this. That he and Carla no longer dated supported this assertion. He came to terms with their split and wasn’t surprised when Carla told him a few days earlier that their split was permanent.

She wanted to concentrate on her studies and her career, and that it was better for both of them. She was right and he could concentrate on his career.

Steve tried to put Carla to the back of his mind and the Top Gun tournament was currently the best excuse he had. The reality was different. He was devastated to think he might have lost Carla for good.

The two friends joined the other candidates in the café adjoining the Academy hangar and waited patiently for the jump ships to return, to be made ready for their turn.

Jake’s usual enthusiasm for the Top Gun event was muted. He desperately wanted to see Carla before she went to Australia for Christmas and the Top Gun got in the way. He was assured of a place in the final twelve and the event, despite the more varied agenda on this occasion, didn’t exactly inspire him.

The twelve jump ships were ready, following a fast turnaround, after returning from their original sorties. Jake was allocated a vessel at the back of the hangar, meaning he would have to wait to launch. The first Rapiers cleared the hangar. He watched as Steve Costello maneuvered his jump ship out onto the nearest jump ship bay, launching immediately. Momentarily, Jake taxied forward. Within a matter of minutes he was in flight and en route to the scheduled event start point. Jake’s competitive nature took over again as he pulled onto the starting grid. All the Rapiers were level and awaited the start of the race.

The Rapiers surged forward on what, in relative terms, was a sprint. The ships fastest off the line accelerated to pre-stellar velocity, but the early leaders were not likely winners of the race. Their high velocity at launch meant it was likely they miscalculated their intermix calculations and the acceleration to light speed would be compromised. As the jump ships made ready for their first turn, Steve, who engaged his Stellar drive last, was leading. Jake was third, behind their greatest rival, Enson Hilliard, a hybrid Human-Vanarian, which made for a slightly unusual look, with his angular facial features with small green, almost feline eyes. This didn’t affect either his athletic prowess or
his piloting brain. Like Steve, he was in this for the glory and wanted simply to graduate as the best jump ship Pilot. He was kept largely at bay in the competition to date, but he argued he felt uncomfortable in the Hunter and preferred the Rapier.

Jake found it difficult to keep up with him, and even Steve must stretch himself to keep the hybrid at bay. Jake decided he needed to look at this intelligently. Right, now he was almost 1000 meters behind Hilliard. He needed to calculate his mix to ensure he came out of light speed at the last minute and gain perhaps a vital fraction of a second advantage that would take him past him. He knew Hilliard and Steve would concentrate on keeping each other at bay, giving him a potential advantage.

*Hey, I might even get in front of Steve, Jake thought.*

The race drew to its conclusion. Jake was on his own in third and drifted to almost two thousand meters behind the leaders, but he was ready. They would make their intermix calculations.

Jake waited patiently. The jump ships could now see Earth, and the leaders had less than thirty seconds to take their ships sub-light and engage their auxiliary drives. Five seconds after Ensons Hilliard and Costello, Jake disengaged his stellar drive and his auxiliary drive kicked in. His ship instantly decelerated, causing massive negative G and forcing Jake back tightly in his seat. This was a perfect drive switch and it worked. Steve remained in front, but the hybrid was behind Jake, too far behind to make any impact. The two friends crossed the line almost together. Steve won and consolidated his position as leader. Jake was second with a healthy lead over Hilliard.

"Where the hell did you come from?"

"I was sitting behind you guys waiting for one of you to screw up. I nearly got you as well."

"Saw it coming, my friend, just in time. It looks like Hilly didn’t. He ended up well back."

"Yes, but he is getting better. We are going to really have to watch him this weekend."

"I agree. Perhaps we should negate his threat."

"What do you mean, negate?"

"He doesn’t like being squeezed. If we work together we can put him under pressure."

"That’s not exactly in the rules."

"No one will find out," said Steve.

By good fortune or not, Jake and Steve were paired together in the next race, each taking turns to be the others wing-man. The objective: to hold as close as possible to each other over the course in the fastest time possible. Penalties were deducted each time the wing-man left the leads’ domain by even a fraction. This was child’s play for Jake and Steve, with Steve assuming the wing-man position first. Jake took the lead and held it. When it came to the changeover, Steve took a wide birth and allowed three other Rapier pairs to overtake. He wants to increase the odds, thought Jake. Talk about confident.

Steve’s intention became clear moments later when he realized Hilliard was Steve’s intended target man. Hilliard was wing-man in his pair and held close, as his lead tried to catch the two pairs in front. Steve began to drawer in on Hilliard and Jake had no choice but to follow. Jake was furious but held on for fear of losing points.

Steve took his Rapier to within five meters of Hilliard’s ship before moving in closer, to within the slipstream of the wingman. This was a perfectly legitimate, if not slightly unorthodox move, given the vast expanse of space surrounding them, but Steve wanted to get his wingman in closer still.

Jake held on. He knew Steve relied on his consistency and ability. There were few happy to fly in formation, passing another vessel where there were centimeters between the four ships. Inevitably, Jake took his ship even closer to his lead, to ensure he had room to pass Hilliard. Steve made this difficult, squeezing Jake’s air space to the narrowest of paths. Then he used the slipstream to pull past Hilliard and his lead.

Jake and Steve shot past and moved in for their next target. Jimenez, the lead ship from Hilliard’s pair, held the line and continued. Steve’s slipstream pulled the Spaniard’s Rapier off line and the Rapier, briefly out of control, fell away quickly before Hilliard was able to pick up and rejoin his lead ship. He lost nearly five hundred meters, and the pair lost two places in the race, as a result of his deviation. Hilliard’s recovery was good, but dramatic. He lost further ground in the overall standings.

The Race Marshall followed the events closely. He could not fault Jake, who stuck to his lead despite some clever but extremely dangerous flying from Enson Costello. He would have to watch Costello and Hilliard. This could turn
into something bad.

Steve and Jake came within range of their next target. Steve was going to try the same thing again, but Jake would have none of it.

“Back off Steve. You made your point and Hilliard lost ground. That was extremely reckless and could have turned out bad for both of us.”

“Relax Jake. I won’t get you in as close this time. We need their slipstream if we are going to get ahead of this pair and get close to the lead pair before the end of the race. Hilliard has lost confidence now.. You should be clear to take second place into the final round as long as you don’t fuck up.”

Typical Steve arrogance, thought Jake. “Just keep it legal and don’t fuck up yourself, you bastard. Remember, I am more than capable of taking first place into the last round,” he added for good measure.

Steve and Jake were able to retake the lead before the Rapiers jumped out of hyperspace and crossed the finishing line in perfect formation. With few errors, they took maximum points from this race, and their overall lead in the competition grew. Steve used the slipstream to maximum effect in both overtaking maneuvers, but this time he allowed Jake room to pass the opposition ships. His flying was fantastic but arrogant, and he did little to diminish his growing reputation for being selfish and dangerous. He was not a team player.

The third and final event of the day was a close-quarter ground-hugging exercise on Mars. The Rapiers would hug the ground closely, flying at no less than one hundred fifty meters and no more than seven hundred fifty meters above the planet surface at high velocity, all the while avoiding anti-aircraft fire from below and above. This was a typical jump ship training exercise pilots must perfect before graduating and, as such, was open to exploitation by the pilots who frequently tried dangerous tactics to get the better of their opponents. However, Steve was on his best behavior, and on completion of his run became the man to beat. Jake was in the second batch of twelve vessels. He was slightly ahead of Hilliard, who was strangely quiet since the last race. Jake was on a good run and set himself up for the final run in, when he was wing tipped by Hilliard from behind. Jake had barely enough time to react to ensure his ship didn’t plunge into the hills ahead. He recovered and realized he was overtaken.

Hilliard has set out his stall, thought Jake, so here’s mine.

Jake accelerated forward and entered Hilliard’s slipstream. Hilliard tried to shake him loose, but Jake once again showed his close-quarter flying was a match for anyone. Amongst the flack and anti-aircraft fire from below he shot passed Hilliard legitimately.

Hilliard must react quickly, thinking the race would shortly be over. He could not use slipstream; he must nudge Carter’s ship off line to pass him. Jake would have none of it and held his line. Hilliard’s Rapier nudged the rear of Jake’s ship twice before making a bad error of judgment. He got caught in Jake’s afterburners and was thrown off course. He had little reaction time as the rocks below got closer. He tried to pull up, but gravity took over and the Rapier spun. The Rapier never recovered and smashed into the rocks below. It exploded on impact, instantly killing Hilliard.

“What the hell happened out there Enson Carter?”

“Hilliard went crazy. He wing tipped me first and then, after I got beyond his slipstream, he nudged me. On the third occasion, he got caught in my afterburners. He must have spun. He would have been only three hundred meters from the ground. He had no chance in a spin and no time to use his ejector mechanism.”

The Race Marshall watched Hilliard closely and witnessed the events leading up to the crash. His observations echoed those of Jake Carter. “I agree. A tragic accident, down to pilot error. There will be an inquiry, but you will be free from blame. Try not to think about it and get some rest. Tomorrow we have three more races and you are still in a great position.”

Jake woke early on Sunday morning after a restless night, with long periods lying awake with his head pounding out the events of the previous day. Hilliard was dead and he felt partially responsible. How is Steve feeling? He started the whole bandwagon rolling. His actions brought about the chain of events, which lead to Hilliard’s death. A human being who, less than twenty four hours before, drank coffee and joked with his fellow candidates as they waited for the first batch of candidates to arrive from their opening race. Hilliard was a close rival, in many respects their only close rival, but did he deserve to die?

The Top Gun supreme gathered the remaining twenty-three candidates to make some carefully chosen words about the events of yesterday.

“Enson Hilliard ultimately paid the price for breaking the rules and for taking his piloting skills beyond the limit.
He didn’t deserve to die, but it is important to put the events leading up to his death into perspective. He was being competitive, but to seek advantage he tried to remove a colleague from the race. This lead to his untimely death. We will send our collective sympathies to his family.

He paused and then moved on. “Today we must complete the Top Gun event. We cannot postpone or delay, given our proximity to Christmas and commitments in the new term, but I do feel it is appropriate that we act with a sense of decorum. We will fly just one extended and simplified race today commencing at Alpha Two, and taking in the Kuiper Belt, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and Venus before returning to the Moon.”

He demonstrated the course on the holographic display in front of him. “There will be five laps, with the winning race time expected to be about five hours. In essence, this is an endurance race. There should be little room for illegal overtaking maneuvers and over-indulgent acrobatics. This is about doing as well as possible in the race to achieve your place in the final twelve. Good luck candidates.”

Steve was barely talking. He was subdued and took the loss of Hilliard badly, thought Jake. Steve, however quickly dispelled that myth when he approached Jake in the café, as they awaited the preparation of all twenty three Rapiers. “We have this wrapped up. No one else is close enough to us and as long as we both finish in, say, the top ten, we should both qualify easily. I am still going to win it though.”

“How are you feeling today about Hilliard?”

“He is dead and it was his fault, simple really, I feel sorry for his family but it was his fault. He tried to play games with us, but ended up in a ditch. No one else’s fault but his.”

Jake was surprised but knew that Steve was in the zone. He also knew the organizers called Steve to one side this morning and issued him a stern warning—that further dangerous antics could lead to disqualification.

The order came to board the Rapiers at mid-day. The Rapiers were moved to a larger hangar to accommodate their increased number. It was not long before the Rapiers were off-world and on the grid, awaiting the start of the race. This time, the intermix calculations were constantly variable and an optimum mix could not be pre-programmed into each Rapiers NAVCOM, because of the sheer complexity of the various flight changes the race demanded. The NAVCOMs made their calculations as each obstacle arose.

When the race started, the front runners quickly established a lead, and the field spread out as they continued their first circuit. Steve and Jake were in second and third place respectively as they completed the first circuit. Jake kept a close eye on Steve. He knew this was a good opportunity to beat him. He had consistency and skill on his side, whereas Steve was the greater overall pilot, but lacked the steely determination and consistency required for an endurance event of this kind. Jake knew that he needed to get ahead, but waited for a lapse of concentration by Steve.

Thirty minutes later, the position remained the same. Jake glanced up at his ceiling display which monitored key systems, the NAVCOM, and the drive systems to ensure optimum performance. It was bit more than a cursory glance as the ship suddenly felt heavier. All systems worked within normal parameters. Just being paranoid, he told himself and he took his attention back to the race.

She was certainly being sluggish. Something was definitely wrong.

Sure enough, he was losing ground to Steve, plus the fourth and fifth placed candidates caught up with him. He tried not to panic and ran a series of ship wide diagnostic and health checks to see if he could determine the problem. The main drive ran at eighty-five percent and he was caught by everyone. His race was over unless he diagnosed and corrected the problem quickly.

The diagnostic revealed a faulty circuit in his stellar drive. The ease involved to resolve the problem depended on where the circuit was. He set a further diagnostic enquiry in more specific detail and found it at the business end of the stellar drive, out of maintenance range. The circuit controlled a valve which allowed plasma to vent from the drive mechanism periodically. The valve sealed shut and a huge level of plasma built up within the drive mechanism. Jake took the ships stellar drive offline and sighed. His race was over.

There was never any question Jake would make it to the Top Gun final. He amassed more than enough points to ensure he would be one of the final twelve. As it turned out, he finished in third place overall, but the final places were largely irrelevant for the final candidates as they would all start with zero points in the first race of the final. Jake felt disappointed. He knew he could have won the race today and this would have gone some way to alleviate the guilt he felt about Hilliard’s untimely demise. He had the disappointment of not completing the race, as well as, the guilt.
Jake suffered the further humiliation of his Rapier being towed to Mars by an Eagle. The Rapier was a write-off. The buildup of plasma caused huge damage to the stellar drive, the auxiliary drive as well as the main infrastructure. Alpha engineers would get to the bottom of why it happened.

So he qualified for the final. He could concentrate on the one thing which really mattered. He must see Carla, before she left.

There was passion. Both of them were aware of their strong feelings for each other. It would be some weeks before they would see each other again. Carla showered, dressed and was ready to leave by nine o’clock the next morning but Jake lay there almost in disbelief—that they were together, and that it took them four long years to realize their feelings for each other. After holding each other close for what seemed an eternity, they said their goodbyes and Carla took her bag and left Jake’s apartment. He lay there not certain exactly what he was feeling.

* * * *

He must have drifted off to sleep again. An hour passed since he last looked at his watch. It was Christmas Eve and he had his own journey to make. He needed to get a move on.

Before the Top Gun event, Jake asked Steve to join him and his family for Christmas Day. His friend declined citing that Christmas was an Earth celebration and that, as a Titan, it meant little to him, especially that he was no longer with Carla.

Christmas was not the festival it once was. The religious festival, over time, largely reverted to its origins: a mid-winter festival celebrating the end of the year and the start of the next. The giving of presents still continued, but in a less materialistic way. It was usual for someone to buy their loved one a token present and children still awaited their presents from Santa Claus on Christmas Day, but the ‘old’ meaning of Christmas eroded over time. Jake’s family was unusual, in that they still decorated their house at Christmas time and Jake’s mother still cooked a Christmas lunch using traditional Christmas fare.

Jake took the opportunity to relax and enjoy the company of his parents and Barrat. He stayed two nights and was pleased to see his parents called a truce in terms of attacking his chosen route of graduation. The Academy and his studies were mostly off the agenda for the duration of Jake’s stay, although the subject of both Maria and Carla did come up. Jake decided not to mention his new relationship with Carla. He was certain they would disapprove if he told them his best friend and Carla were no more because she was with him. On Boxing Day morning, following a cooked breakfast, Jake left his parents and headed back to the Academy. He arrived at his apartment, just as Steve arrived at the door. *Here we go,* Jake thought. *It’s back to reality.*
Chapter Forty-One

The Sect Arrival

The Sect Legion arrived in the Tri-Star system about two hours before Admiral Shenke’s mini-task force. They immediately joined forces with the Sentinels’ small patrol force and set out their stall, pending the arrival of the Alpha/Nexus ships and the more considerable threat pursuing them from the Ionian System.

The majority of Sect vessels were interceptors, all of the same design, with patent black livery and a blacked-out cockpit. They were essentially ghost ships, barely visible and unbecoming, bearing in mind they were piloted by members of the Betanic Order. They were fast, capable, adaptable and powerful. They would be a real handful for any similar-sized adversary. Their pilots were superbly trained—handpicked at birth and taken under the wing of the Sect Military. Here they were raised, educated and trained as killers, still versed in the teachings of the Sect, but qualified as guardians and protectors of the Tri-Star region itself. They were the gatekeepers, and their job was as clear today as it ever was.

Amongst the mass of Black single-seater ‘interceptors’ flew Sect Command ships. These were the nerve system of the Legion and housed the Sect Commanders, the Betanica Priests themselves. Also taken from birth, they were trained to command and lead the offensive against the Kryl should they be allowed through the Void Hole. There was one larger vessel, where the High Priestess herself resided. This ship, with the majority of the interceptors, formed the main defensive force should the Kryl attack.

The Nexus Alpha research vessels neared the system; the convoy of ships was considerable. They were led by two Eagles, followed by the two Nexus Survey vessels. Behind this, Alpha brought with them eight support craft and the Alpha research vessel, Botanic. The Botanic was really the hub. The senior Nexus scientists and their watchful executives were based here, together with the Alpha scientific and military contingent. The Botanic became a military vessel, with fifteen jump ships and a considerable arsenal of teutonic and ballistic missiles, as well as her conventional defense systems. Her shields were up to Battle standard and she housed a contingent of two hundred fifty troopers, ready and waiting to be deployed in whatever scenario came to pass.

The Odysseus project leader was Dr. James Cameron. Cameron was a consultant with no direct connection to either Alpha or Nexus, and was brought in after a disagreement as to who should run things. He was a leading specialist in his field and a natural leader, known for his no-nonsense approach to problems.

They would arrive in the Tri-Star System in less than twenty-four hours, and his team thought they were ready. Cameron was clear he wanted further diagnostic tests run before they reached their destination; he was concerned about reports from Alpha commanders that a Sect Legion was in the system. We may only get one chance, he thought, and failure is not an option.

The AUSWAS survey ship neared the Tri-Star system. The Collective came before as guests of the Sentinels. Winterburn knew where he was going; he formed the Collective for this reason. He knew Earth couldn’t resist the temptation to enter the wormholes, and that the Sentinels would try to stop them. He must apply political pressure to prevent Alpha from accessing the wormholes in the name of exploration or profit.

The Collective responsibility was clear. They would attach themselves to the Alpha-Nexus vessels and persuade them not to enter. They would assert themselves in the best tradition of political activists by placing themselves between the opposition and the wormholes.

Winterburn was busy. He made contact with thousands of dormant members of the Collective; he told them they were needed in the Tri-Star system. He knew they were listening. Slowly but surely, the Collective’s numbers would swell and the System would be awash with his flock. Only then could they commence their task in earnest, and only then could he reveal the Collective’s true objective.
Chapter Forty-Two

The Nexus Arrives

The Alpha/Nexus Fleet cleared the giant gas cloud which had for so long protected the Tri-Star system and its secrets, and the three stars were visible in the main viewer, directly in front of the convoy.

Cameron felt confident his team was ready. He took his group of ships to high alert. He thought it likely the first obstacle would be the Sentinel Patrol ships, and asked his Alpha commanders to make ready their jump ships in the event the Patrols became an issue. He waited for news from Admiral Shenke that they were within range, so that he could seek Alpha’s protection as they began to work.

The job was simple; to open the wormholes was not. The wormholes lay dormant for millions of years, and the simple act of passing across them was not sufficient to wake them from their slumber; the two survey vessels needed to make some noise. They needed to create a high-frequency oscillating pitch, to be achieved by a sonic pulse resonator which would bounce sonic waves off the sides of the dormant wormholes. The wormholes would respond to the high pitch and should start to unwrap and turn.

Admiral Shenke’s mini-fleet entered the Tri-Star system. Shenke ordered an immediate scan of the system to establish the whereabouts of both the Sentinel patrol ships and the Sect Legion. He knew while the Patrol vessels posed only a limited threat; the Sect vessels were different. Diametric scanning revealed extremely sophisticated and advanced weaponry. These were the mainstay of the Sect vessels.

Shenke opened a comm link to the Odysseus Project lead vessel, the Botanic. Dr. Cameron answered immediately. Shenke was wary of the scientist. They had crossed each other before.

“Ah, Admiral Shenke. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has Dr. Cameron. This time we appear to be on the same side.”

“Yes. So sorry to have dragged you away from your war games, Admiral. We have a large Sect contingent we need your assistance with. I presume you will be able to keep them at bay?”

“They are much more than a contingent Doctor. They represent a real threat.”

“Oh, come on, Admiral. This is a walk in the park, with your weapons of mass destruction. Please try and keep the more sinister ones in your trousers this time,”

Shenke was angry. Cameron walked a deliberate tightrope to see how far he could be pushed. This was, Shenke reasoned, posturing—Cameron trying to ensure that Shenke realized who was in charge.

“Just be aware, Doctor, my fleet acts independently of any standing instructions you may have. Orders to deploy come only from me.”

“Ah, very well, Admiral. I understand your anxieties. Can I ask, though, that you immediately deploy a sizeable ship to watch over the AUSWAS vessel? They are, I believe, a threat to this mission.”

“A threat why? Are they not simply observers?”

“Yes, but there is more to it than that. Alpha and ECG intelligence both report the potential threat from the Collective, who are in effect holding the AUSWAS banner. They are in the guise of using AUSWAS’s ship. Our concern is with Professor Winterburn. He is likely to try to stop the opening of the wormholes.”

“I will deploy a battle cruiser to ensure that the AUSWAS ship is kept out of harm’s way. You won’t see any trouble from him.”

“Thank you Admiral. That will make our lives easier. We will stand down until your report confirms that the threat from the sect has been alleviated.”

Shenke thanked Cameron and closed the comm link. He paused briefly before opening a new comm link.

“Commander Hoskins, I have a special job for you. I need you to locate the AUSWAS ship and prevent it from impacting on the mission. Use any force necessary.”

Hoskins was in his ready room. He was glad to take the opportunity to remove the Halo from the fleet. Fleet cohesion was stifling and you never felt in command of your own destiny. Even in battle, he felt controlled; he was briefly on his own and in command of his ship and its destiny once again. The AUSWAS ship didn’t present too much of an obstacle. Scanning revealed their weapons potential, but he thought it unlikely they would be used. They
were political in their stance, and were here to use persuasion to prevent an action, not be active participants. He doubted whether any exchange of weaponry would even be required, but he remained cautious to the possibility of conflict.

His first officer entered the ready room, with a smile on his face. “The AUSWAS ship appears to be under the command of a Professor Winterburn, who is the founder of the Collective. The Collective are an antagonistic pressure group, whose sympathies lie deeply with the Betanica Sect. They want only to stop us from opening the wormhole; this should be a walk in the park. I would imagine that morale is good aboard the ship now that we have left the fleet.”

“It’s probably only temporary. You say, you would imagine; aren’t your ears close to the ground at present, Commander? Do you sources affirm your instinct?”

“No, not yet, but I am sure they will. I guess we are hoping that, by the time we rejoin the fleet, the Sect threat will be destroyed and, hopefully, Rose will have secured victory against the Sentinels.”

“Don’t be so sure, and don’t rule out any potential difficulties with the AUSWAS ship. These types of people can be just as awkward to deal with as our enemies.”

Shenke identified the whereabouts of all one hundred fifty Sect Ships and began to split his fleet tactically. He dispersed the Halo 7 to shadow the AUSWAS ship. He looked to spread his fleet as widely as possible, while still leaving a core element to assist the Odysseus project. He only had fifty ships, making this awkward. He decided he needed a core of ten vessels to help protect the project and about twenty-five to spread out and ensure complete coverage of the system. The others would remain on standby, pending further orders, to ensure the Sentinels didn’t try to attack from outside the system. He knew the Nexus ship could not commence its operation until he had secured the system, and it was with this thought that he opened another channel to Doctor Cameron.

“Dr. Cameron, I presume that you are in place, pending our advancements?”

“Yes, we need you active and neutralizing the Sect threat. What level of deterrent are you preparing to use?”

“We won’t be nuking them, if that’s what you mean. They will be more than a pushover, but we will use fairly conventional weaponry. I will advise you myself when I am certain that we have achieved our aim.” With that, he hung up and commenced his personal log.

* * * *

The AUSWAS ship knew it was being followed and Winterburn approved of the ship that Alpha had recruited to do the job. They are taking us seriously, he thought. He did, though, have no intention of allowing Alpha or anyone else to interrupt his personal position on this. The Collective would ensure they were placed in the right position to influence proceedings, and he would be the center of all that occurred. Winterburn ordered a direct course for the wormhole, and the AUSWAS vessel moved slowly forward. He knew Alpha would first clear a safe route to allow the Nexus scientists to do their job.
Chapter Forty-Three
The Battle Continues

Admiral Rose enjoyed dinner with two of his senior commanders in his state room. They finished dessert and awaited coffee, when Rose’s comm link sounded.

“Admiral, the Sentinel flagship is in trouble, sir. Her shields are down. She is dormant and listing. She is under protection, but this is an opportunity to take the flagship and General Yoshi.”

“I am sure Yoshi won’t stick around to be taken. Yes, we need to take the ship. Launch jump ships and troopers. I will join you in about five minutes. Keep me informed of progress.”

Rose hung up before his orders were affirmed. He knew this battle neared its conclusion. Victory was in sight, and yet he was anxious. This was the critical time in a battle; both sides were weakened and loss of life had been considerable. He knew victory would be soured by the loss of too many Alpha personnel, and in recent days, losses had been significant. He knew every decision was critical, and that the only way the battle would end would be upon the demise or capture of General Yoshi.

He had a lot of respect for his opposite number. He disliked Yoshi. He disliked all his enemies, but that didn’t stop him from feeling for the near-defeated General in terms of professional respect. Yoshi would soon be compelled to withdraw or surrender. Words couldn’t describe the way a defeated commander felt when he finally reached a decision such as this. The battle was not yet over; it was in its death throes, drawing to its inevitable conclusion, but the bloodbath continued. Rose knew Yoshi wouldn’t allow his command team to be taken. He could have already moved them to a secondary command ship, within the protected mass of the main Sentinel Fleet. Despite its dwindling numbers, the fleet still afforded a great deal of protection.

Yoshi had made several mistakes in the last few days and was compelled to bring his flagship into battle. It was the sole remaining dark ship in the Sentinel Fleet. The dark metal shielding no longer afforded the Sentinels with the protection which had plagued Alpha in the opening salvos of the battle. The flagship became easy to detect. Alpha command concentrated its heavy artillery on the Sentinel flagship. Its demise was inevitable.

Rose turned to his two guests. “Gentlemen, the pleasure of your company this evening has been delightful. Please take your time to digest dinner and enjoy your coffees. I am returning to the bridge.”

Rose headed off towards the bridge, and the two commanders exchanged glances and quickly finished their coffee. They knew Rose had signaled that he was back on duty. Despite his polite suggestion that they could take their time, they both knew Rose wanted them back in command of their respective ships.

* * * *

Yoshi was downbeat. His flagship was being boarded and his fleet numbers rapidly diminished. He had run out of options to turn the outcome around; he needed to pool his remaining resources for further attacks against the main body of the Alpha fleet. He still had atomic weapons at his disposal. He planned to inflict the highest number of casualties possible by driving his forces into the heart of the enemy. He was going to target the Alpha command vessel.

The hastily assembled command center aboard Yoshi’s new ship was not as it should be. The command sections related to weaponry and defense were too far away from his chair, and he found it difficult to get his orders understood. The new flagship was smaller but more agile than its predecessor, and Yoshi again wanted the vessel to play a key part in the next Alpha attack. Yoshi moved to his holographic battle map and studied the positions and numbers of both the enemy ships and his own carefully. He was used to challenging positions, but found it difficult to accept that much of their numerical advantage had gone. There were three times more Sentinel vessels than Alpha but his forces continued to lose out to their superior weaponry. It was time to act and be done quickly.

Yoshi is predictable, thought Rose. He tried to push the main body of the Sentinel Fleet forward so that they could launch a final offensive. This tactic would not work, because the Sentinel ships lacked the agility and cohesion to cause Alpha further major losses. Rose ordered the fleet to close in on the Sentinels. This was a mistake.

Yoshi anticipated such a move, and launched his nuclear attack more accurately because of the close proximity of the respective forces. The mass nuclear attack was unexpected and devastating. Rose’s ship took the full force of the aftershock which followed. Suddenly Rose’s world went black.
He knew he was hurt. He could not get up, but remained conscious. The command bridge was reduced to a mass of smoldering workstations. Even with auxiliary power, the backup lighting was poor and with dust yet to settle and with several workstations still ablaze, there was still a great deal of confusion.

A medic lifted Rose into his chair and advised him that his leg was badly broken, but he was lucky. Rose only half-heard the medic as he strained to hear a conversation in the background. The ship powered back up and the secondary command bridge was already in operation.

The medic administered painkillers to Rose. Two orderlies lifted the Admiral to a hover stretcher and moved towards the exit to take him to the medical center.

“Stop,” said Rose. “Take me to the secondary command bridge.” The orderlies redirected the stretcher so that it headed, under their guidance, to the new command center two stories below. Rose didn’t have time to feel the pain, and the painkillers and shock helped to keep the pain at bay for now. He arrived at the command center two minutes later and immediately requested a status update.

Rose knew the new bridge crew, but they were not his number one team. The lead commander took a seat next to him and updated the Admiral on the Sentinels’ latest nuclear attack.

“The Sentinels destroyed about twenty of our ships and knocked out about fifteen others. They fared little better though, and their main fleet has broken up. We have commenced a one-to-one attack strategy, and we are trying to locate their new command ship. It is possible that Yoshi’s adopted vessel was destroyed in the blast. We will know more shortly.”

“What about the old flagship?”

“Destroyed in the last attack, sir, along with twenty-five jump ships and over one thousand troopers. This was a deadly attack, sir.”

“Who is in command of the fleet?”

“I am, sir. The senior commanders were all killed or badly injured. You are lucky to be alive.”

“Thank you Commander. I may be lucky, but I don’t feel lucky. I am assuming command. Get a medic up here to fix my leg, and launch ten squadrons of jump ships. We need to find Yoshi and put this battle to bed once and for all.”

The Commander started to protest but realized Rose was in no mood to compromise. “Aye, sir. Jump ships launching. Don’t worry, we will find Yoshi. This latest attack has backfired on them, sir.”
Chapter Forty-Four

The New Year

Winter finally hit Britain. A cold front swept across from Siberia, and the United Kingdom was in the midst of the worst snowfall and the lowest temperatures for ten years. Not that cold weather was unusual at this time of the year; in stark contrast to the other ten months of the year, January and February were usually cold with frequent frosts and snowfall. Temperatures frequently dropped below minus ten degrees Celsius, and each year the cold snap served as a reminder of the United Kingdom’s formerly cold climate. Today it was cold. Snow fell overnight laying a fresh blanket over the hardened layer of snow from last week.

The snowy white landscape surrounding the Academy looked different as Jake walked to the Academy. There was no sign of either Steve or Carla. Steve's absence didn’t surprise him; he probably lay in bed, awaiting an alarm call—which would never come, as he had forgotten to set the alarm.

Carla’s absence was a cause for concern. She called Jake on Saturday evening from Australia to advise she would return home in the morning, and that she would catch up with him before college. She called again on Sunday morning to delay her return. He half-expected a call early this morning, but there was nothing. Jake was not the type to chase. People needed their own space. Carla hadn’t called for a reason.

She seemed distant when she called yesterday and the affection had gone from her voice. There was none of the usual sarcasm and humor. If Jake were paranoid, he’d think Carla avoided him. He missed her and needed to talk to her. Steve had been talking about reconciliation since the New Year. He asserted he cleaned up his act, and that Carla would inevitably want him back. This annoyed Jake, because he could not be one hundred percent certain Steve was wrong. Maybe Carla would go back to Steve. Was he being paranoid? Jake decided that if he hadn’t heard from her by close of play today, he would call her. He was not chasing her. He was expressing concern about her non-arrival, especially as today was the first day of the new term.

Jake entered the tutor’s class on his own. All the other students were already there, with Steve and Carla being the notable absentees. Jake heard the whispers. He distinctly heard one of the girls at the front of the tutor class assert that Steve and Carla were back together again. Jake sighed. Perhaps he should accept the inevitable Carla and Steve were together for three years. He and Carla for only a matter of weeks. Small wonder she might return to her former lover.

His thoughts were interrupted by the tutor, who entered the room carrying a bundle of hard copy files. Steve Costello followed into the room.

Steve sat down next to Jake and smiled. “Sorry I’m a bit late today. The alarm was not set again.”

Jake smiled and turned his attention to the tutor, who was speaking.

Where the hell is she? Still no contact and he kept his comm link open all day. Carla would normally have called by now. Jake brought the subject up with Steve as they walked home later that evening.

Steve laughed. “Perhaps she’s gone to find her sister again.”

Jake added that he thought it unlikely, but he would contact her later this evening when he returned to his apartment. He was alone and had time to reflect on Steve’s comments. Could she really have gone looking for her sister?

Jake decided enough was enough. He opened a comm link to Carla. There was no reply. Determined, he then spoke to Carla’s parents in the vain hope she left them with an idea about where she was going. Jake tried to remember the words Carla had used, when she explained her feelings about her sister and Winterburn, but her final comments were a little vague. She could have followed them, but where? Were they heading for the Tri-Star system?

Carla’s parents were alarmed to hear she may have gone missing. Jake tried not to alarm them, but it was clear they had no idea where their daughter might be. She left on Sunday morning and called two hours later to say that she was at her apartment.

This was bizarre. Jake checked his comm link again and, for good measure, checked his portal messages. He rebooted his comm link and servers to ensure that was no malfunction. There were no messages.

Jake awoke in the morning with still no messages. He contacted his tutor directly at home, apologizing for his early intrusion and explained that he had tried to establish Carla’s whereabouts. His tutor was not immediately
forthcoming, but Jake pushed, explaining that it was critical that his tutor divulge anything he knew. Eventually, the tutor revealed he received a portal message on Sunday evening. It came from Carla’s home server, which suggested she had been to her apartment. The message was a little unclear. She took leave of absence to deal with a family matter. She apologized and advised she would be in contact within a few days.

Jake thanked the tutor and told him he would not be in for lessons today, as he needed to concentrate on finding Carla. His tutor was a little taken aback, but accepted the excuse because Jake’s attendance record to date hadn’t been an issue. Jake hung up and then opened a comm link to Steve.

“Steve, we have a problem. Carla has definitely gone A.W.O.L.” Jake went onto explain his findings in detail and awaited Steve’s response.

“Well, we have to let her get on with it. I am sure she will be back in a few days.”

“For God’s sake, Steve. She disappeared without telling her parents or either of us here she was going. She is probably half way to the Tri-Star system by now, and if that’s the case she could be in real danger.”

“I don’t see what we can do. We have the Top Gun final in four days. I am sure she will be in contact before then. Let’s see where things lie in a week.”

“I don’t get it Steve. I thought you were committed to get her back. Aren’t you even worried?”

“Yes, I am, but I have long since learned that Carla sometimes needs to be left to her own devices. We have to let this go and concentrate on the Top Gun for this week.

Jake spent the rest of the day trying, but failing, to heed Steve’s words. He felt the wrath of Winterburn and he didn’t like it. He didn’t trust the man, could not begin to contemplate what Winterburn’s ultimate intentions were. He tried to study but could not concentrate, and was beginning to regret the decision to stay at home. Ultimately he knew if she didn’t make contact soon, he would have to do something, even if it meant missing the Top Gun final. He was just about to reboot his server for the umpteenth time today when he finally received a message from Carla.

The message came in the form of a delayed portal message. Carla left it on Sunday morning, with a delay meaning it would not be delivered to Jake’s comm server until Tuesday evening. The message was curt and lacked feeling, apart from the final sentence, where Carla said she missed him. This was not the Carla Jake knew.

“Hi Jake. By now you will have spoken to my parents and persuaded our tutor to divulge the contents of my message to him. I have to go to Joely. She needs me. I have delayed this message to you because I don’t want you to follow me. I will be fine. I will contact you again in a few days. Please don’t follow. I miss you and I will be home soon.”

This left as many questions as he had answers. So she had followed Joely. Jake reflected further for a few moments, and decided he would heed her request for the time being. He would leave it until Friday, and if she hadn’t made contact again by then, then he would review the situation and decide whether to take further action.

He opened a comm link to Carla’s parents, who were grateful for Jake’s update. Initially they urged Jake to go after her, but backed off when he insisted he must heed her request not to. Carla’s father was all for following himself, but was dissuaded by his wife and Jake. He offered Jake the use of his yacht, which with its SD3 capability would minimize any journey time should they decide Jake should follow after all.

Jake felt better about things. Carla made contact and he knew he had the use of a fast ship should he need it. He decided to turn in early. Tomorrow was another day and he needed to get back to his academic life. This was still important after all.

He returned to the Academy on Wednesday and immersed himself in his study. Geometric Math, jump ship training, Parade and Quantum Mechanics left Jake feeling jaded at the end of the day, so he declined Steve’s offer of a trip to the bar and opted again for an early night.

On Thursday, most of the day was taken up with Sabre jump ship training, close quarter attack strategies and low terrain hugging across the African plains. Again Jake was tired, but the day was enjoyable, not least because he was able to pit his wits against Steve and some of his other close adversaries. The Sabres were Jake’s favorite, and for most of the day he allowed his thoughts to drift away from Carla. He opted for an evening out with Steve, because he knew Steve would not drop after being in such a high. They both consumed too much alcohol, but stopped short of total inebriation. Steve spent much of the evening flirting with some fresher’s but backed off when Jake prompted a return to their apartments. As they walked back to their respective homes, Jake again broached the subject of Carla.
“You were trying to get lucky tonight Steve. I thought you were holding out for Carla?”

“Not much chance of that, is there? She buggered off and left me. It’s been a while and I think I stand a chance with one or two of them. I said we would see them again tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow is Friday night and we have the Top Gun final on Saturday morning. You need to make up your mind how you feel about Carla. She is in a potentially dangerous situation and all you are concerned with is your bloody loins.”

“If you’re so bloody worried about her, why don’t you go after her? I think you are after Carla again.”

Jake resisted the temptation to respond to Steve’s confrontational and drunken challenge. This was going nowhere and he decided to change the subject.

“Don’t be daft. We need to concentrate on our studies and the Top Gun. There’ll be plenty of time for ladies later.”

On Friday morning, Jake awoke later than usual, with a hangover. He drank far too much last night. He was cross with himself for letting Steve influence him so near to the Top Gun and, more specifically, to his deadline for a decision as to what to do about Carla.

He checked his comm link and server for messages and then took a long shower. He felt apprehension again. It was three days since Carla’s original message and her sixth day gone. How far has she got and how did she get there? She didn’t have access to a fast ship, which meant she either hitched or hired a cruiser.

This didn’t fill him with confidence. He also had a conflict to deal with. Did he participate in the Top Gun or not? If he went after Carla, should he follow now or on Sunday after the Top Gun? What would he say to the Academy if he did go, and how long would he be away? He didn’t have to wait long for the answers to his questions. Carla sent Jake a further delayed portal message which sat on his server as he accessed his comm station for the second time today. The message this time was longer and more self-assured. She seemed more confident in her actions but expressed anxiety as to why she was doing what she was doing.

“Hi Jake. I am really sorry to keep sending you delayed messages, but it is really important that you don’t follow me. I left my parents last Sunday and charted a light cruiser from Melbourne Space Port. Cost me a fortune, but I felt I must go. I felt compelled to follow Joely about two days after Christmas. I put it off at first, but the feeling became stronger. I can’t really explain it, but all I know is I must go. I am on route to the Tri-Star system to rendezvous with Winterburn’s research vessel. The cruiser has SD capability so it should only take a few weeks. I sent a message to my parents and another message to the Academy, so all should be okay. I miss you but you must not follow me. I will contact you again soon. Love, Carla xx”

Jake’s worst fears were coming to light. There was something strange about Winterburn. Jake witnessed it first hand before Christmas, but he could not put his finger in it. Winterburn compelled Carla and others to follow him. Why? That was too big a question, but Winterburn certainly influenced her in some way. Jake must follow her, and yet she twice asked him specifically not too. Why was she doing this? He was grateful she had contacted him again, but what was she getting herself into? Jake let out a deep sigh and opened a comm link to Carla’s parents. It was time to decide what action he should take and when. He could not just let her go to Winterburn. This was not jealousy; he was concerned about her safety.

Carla’s parents received a message from Carla a few hours before, and had spent much time discussing it. They quickly asserted their wish for Jake to go after Carla. Her father prepared his yacht; he insisted Jake use the ship. He would bring the ship to Jake’s apartment tomorrow, and Jake should leave on Sunday. They both knew this was important for Jake personally and insisted that he defer his chase until after the event’s completion. Jake agreed and hung up. He knew what he must do. He must tell his tutor and Steve. He didn’t want Steve to come with him and Jake realized that it suited him that Steve was looking for love elsewhere. He was wary of Steve’s apparently relaxed attitude. Possibly Steve hid his true feelings.

He dressed, took breakfast and made ready for his morning at the Academy. He had classes today up to one p.m. with his afternoon free for private study, giving him the opportunity to prepare for his trip before concentrating on the Top Gun Final tomorrow.
Chapter Forty-Five

The Final Top Gun Event

Steve was in a determined mood. This is what he waited for; the opportunity to prove once and for all he was the best pilot in the Academy and no one else even came close. He woke early and took a short run, before carrying out some warm down exercises, showering and partaking in an energy max breakfast. He prepared as he always did for the Top Gun event, thoroughly. No one would have an advantage over him because they were more fit or had greater stamina.

The main threat was Jake, but he knew Jake’s weakness: conformity and the avoidance of risk. This would be his downfall today as each candidate went that extra mile to achieve their competitive best. That meant Jake would stop short of over-exerting his ship and crossing the ship’s maximum boundaries. Steve knew how to go beyond the theoretical limits, and today he would show everyone just what that meant.

If he was driven today, it was not just the Top Gun which drove him. Steve was worried, very worried. Carla had involved herself in something far too big to comprehend. She was so entrenched that she broke off their relationship because, somehow, this Winterburn got to her.

He knew Jake would follow her, and Jake’s potential intervention presented Carla with her best chance to break free from whatever power Winterburn had over her. Steve knew Jake wouldn’t stop until Carla was free.

He knew he must be there, because ultimately Carla needed him and not Jake. He would go with Jake and bring Carla home. It was as simple as that. He didn’t consider the consequences of his plan or what impact it could have on his graduation. At this moment, he cared only for two things: Carla and winning the Top Gun tournament. Jake pushed him all week for an expression of emotion. He knew if he let on how he really felt that Jake would try to dissuade him from coming. It was best if he pretended he didn’t care, even if he still yearned for her.

The twelve Rapiers stood side by side on the wide take-off strip on the far side of the space port, some two kilometers from their usual take off pads. It was important today that no-one had an advantage over any one of the finalists. They would all start together, at exactly the same time. The agenda for the final was simple. One event with a projected duration of over seven hours, a race over twelve laps covering the landscapes of Mars, the asteroid belt and some of the toughest and most dangerous terrain on Earth. The course was a one-off, designed for this race only. The Top Gun supreme and his team created a unique course for the final each year, and this year was no exception. It was fast, dangerous and testing to the extreme.

The finalists awaited their signal. It finally came, and all twelve lifted off simultaneously. They achieved minimum cruising height and immediately changed course heading for North America. Their first challenge was to clear the salt plains of Oklahoma. They were required to keep low to avoid radar detection and to fend off any bogey assault, individually and as part of a team. Steve was ready, and assumed a ground-hugging altitude of less than twenty meters and commenced his first run in earnest. Jake slotted in behind Steve; he began to set out his stall for a chasing strategy. Right, Steve was too fast. Jake pushed on in the knowledge that there would be other opportunities.

The jump ships left the desert and accelerated briskly into the stratosphere. The twelve Rapiers cleared Earth’s defense systems immediately and headed towards the main space ways, lead expertly by Steve, with Jake hanging back, followed closely by six of the remaining competitors. A gap opened between the lead ships and the back markers, as they each carefully maneuvered across the crowded space lanes.

* * * *

The Wessex Bulk Material Freighter had just cleared the Earth’s shield systems. The vast spaceship was at the start of a two year journey to the Southern Delta Cluster, a region of space rich in mineral ore and precious metals. The pilot was in a cautious mood. He knew how dangerous the space lanes could be, and in a ship of over one kilometers in length, he didn’t take chances and he didn’t like surprises. Unfortunately, he was about to have one.

Steve didn’t see the freighter until it was too late. He ploughed into the huge vessel’s aft thrusters just as she ignited them for a short power boost to bring her into the main shipping lane. The impact caused a cascade of sparks, but no damage to the freighter. The Rapier was pulled first towards the freighter, and then thrust outward into the space lane directly into the path of a variety of earthbound vessels. Steve took evasive action only to be confronted by the huge freighter once again. This time the freighter pilot fired up his ship’s powerful shields, which flicked the jump ship away like a mosquito being swatted away from a person’s face. Steve tried to pull the Rapier out of a spin
only to find himself facing the wrong way once again, on the shipping lane towards Earth. He finally regained control of his ship and pulled the ship across the lanes in pursuit of the other Top Gun competitors. He had been first, he was now definitely last.

Steve was not going to let a moment of stupidity spoil his day. He was behind, but there was a long way to go. He must fend off the obligatory questions from the Top Gun supremo, then Jake, and finally the captain of the freighter, all of which was agitating and acutely embarrassing. Jake was enjoying his moment and Steve acknowledged that Jake was in a good position but this was a long way from over. First he must catch the back markers. He was about twenty seconds behind the ship closest to him, with the other three back markers between twenty-five and thirty-five seconds in front. There was then a thirty-second gap, for positions seven to three.

Jake and Bellamy were in positions one and two, with Bellamy twenty seconds ahead of the leading pack and Jake some forty seconds ahead of Bellamy. In all Steve was about two and half minutes behind Jake. He would make up half that distance in the next two laps. He would have to make up the remaining distance quickly to allow himself a real go at Jake in the last half of the final lap. The odds were stacked against him, but as Steve liked to tell everybody, he was no ordinary pilot.

Two and half laps later, Steve was in second place and chasing down a lead of just over a minute. Jake felt anxious. How had Steve managed to cut the difference between them in half?

Jake had just entered the Earth desert section for the penultimate time, and the artillery fire bugged him. It kept him on his toes, but the bastards changed their positions each lap. He had no way of preparing for each new onslaught. He took damage to his aft thrusters, from artillery fire, SAM missiles, and small impact asteroids buffeting his Rapier as he passed first over and then under the asteroid belt. Jake also suffered from fatigue. He had slept badly in the past week, and it now was taking its toll.

Steve was catching Jake. They cleared Mars and charged back towards Earth at high velocity. The gap was just three hundred meters and Steve could see his target. He needed to close to within less than fifty meters to take advantage of the desert terrain, where Steve knew he had Jake beat.

Jake really pushed. Steve needed to find some extra thrust from somewhere. He looked around for inspiration, but found nothing. His intermix was maxed out. Jake held Steve off. They were nearing Earth and quick clearance was crucial. Fortunately the shields proved no obstacle, and the two leading Rapiers headed towards the Oklahoma desert at mach 2.5. They both left their deceleration to the absolute last minute.

Jake straightened out fifty meters above the rocky surface. Steve followed just seventy-five meters behind. He is close enough to smell me, thought Steve. He must catch Jake and pass him. Both ships took artillery fire, but this was no longer about avoidance; they both took direct hits, causing damage to their fuselage.

They could see the finish: the rocky hills ten kilometers ahead. They both pushed to their maximum. Steve was catching up, sixty meters, fifty-nine meters, but still Jake held off. Then, as if pre-ordained, Jake took a direct hit to his main engine manifold. Power loss was instantaneous, and Steve swept past him.

Jake knew he had lost, but his battle was not over yet. He fought to keep control of the Rapier as he was peppered by still more artillery fire from below. Bellamy came in sight, behind him. Jake took a deep breath and opened the throttle to maximum, this was do or die. If he lost second place to Bellamy, he would be devastated.

He need not have worried, Bellamy was in trouble himself and Jake’s sudden burst of power was enough to bring him close to the finish. He stuttered across the line with Bellamy at a standstill. Bellamy did finish, but there was no disputing the winner. Steve had won the South Downs Alpha Academy Top Gun tournament and Jake must settle for second best.
Chapter Forty-Six
To Seek Out Carla

Steve was in an ebullient mood. He somehow, against all the odds, came from last place to win the Top Gun final, albeit by the slimmest of margins. He didn’t view his win as ‘lucky’; piloting a jump ship was about more than flying. It was about tactics. It was about exceeding your limitations and about avoiding enemy fire. Jake was caught out by enemy fire, pure and simple. He fell and Steve came through to win legitimately.

Jake’s view was somewhat different. He wanted Steve to get back into second place, but behind him. He didn’t want to finish second, after having come so far. He earned the victory. He had lead for the best part of five laps, and was unlucky to have been caught in the last few kilometers. Jake allowed Steve to take the glory. He knew finishing in second still qualified him with Steve as the two representatives from the Academy who would compete in the main Alpha Top Gun competition. He could put this matter to bed and concentrated on more pressing issues.

The Top Gun reception commenced as soon as the finalists touched down, and most of the twelve felt a little jaded. Jake made his apologies and crept away before 9 p.m. This was Steve’s party and Jake needed to rest. He would need to muster all of his strength over the following days if he were to make fast progress to the Tri-Star system.

He spoke to his tutor, via comm link during the reception. His explanation was brief but truthful. He needed to take leave of absence to seek Carla and bring her home. She was in big trouble and he needed to be with her. The tutor was reticent at first, but then realized Jake would go with or without his permission. He reluctantly granted leave for a maximum of one month. Jake knew that his career was on a knife’s edge. If he didn’t return within the month, he needed a damn good excuse to persuade the Academy to keep him in the course. That was not important right now.

* * * *

True to his word, Carla’s father delivered his yacht to Jake. His biological scan reading was held on the vessel’s hard drive. Recognition and approval granted him access to the yacht. Carla’s father had once again been busy. He installed various software upgrades, a new exhaust manifold and a geoscope.

The geoscope was the most fascinating piece of equipment. On the one hand, it helped to pull a ship into a standard orbit; on the other, it was a sophisticated stabilizer which allowed the vessel to be hit, knocked off course and still maintain equilibrium.

He also equipped the yacht with a vast arsenal, including high yield cluster bombs and miniature teutonic torpedoes, which although only a tenth the size of the full-sized variant, packed a charge equivalent to over a third of that of the standard size. The storage units were fully equipped with provisions, and the ship was well-stocked with components and drive system consumables. The ship was ready for anything.

The meticulous attention to detail reminded Jake of Carla. So often in the past, he or Steve ventured into something ill prepared and Carla stepped in to save the day. This was typical of Carla. What forced her to do something so out of character?

Winterburn had a lot to answer for. Jake secured the space yacht and headed to his apartment for some rest. He was ready to go, but needed sleep. It was a long day.

* * * *

Jake awoke at 8 a.m., took a shower, and ate a light breakfast of cereal and orange juice. He dressed and spent a few minutes transferring his server and comm link connections to his portable comm link. He then headed for the space yacht. He entered and set about the pre-flight checks so critical to any journey, but none more so than this one. Jake was about to make a log entry in the ships records, when an instantly recognizable voice came from behind him.

“You didn’t expect me to miss the party, did you?”

Steve Costello sat bold as brass at the navigation console. He wore blue standard Alpha pilot fatigues and appeared in a state of readiness for a mission.

“What the hell are you doing here?”
“Same thing as you. I couldn’t let on that I was just as worried about Carla as you were. The Top Gun was at stake. I needed us to hang on until that was over.”

“What if I decided to leave earlier?”

“I would have stopped you.”

“Steve, I have Academy clearance for one month’s leave of absence. Have you spoken to our tutor?”

“I have just left him a long message. The bottom line is the Carla thing is unavoidable and I will return.”

“They won’t be happy with the way you have done this. If we don’t come back with a good result, you are going to be in big trouble.”

“I know, but what choice do I have. Anyway why is my way so different to yours?”

Jake ignored Steve. He knew he had no choice. He didn’t want Steve to come along, but it was clear, save from physically evicting him, that Steve was coming.

“So, we go together then,” said Jake.

“Yes, together. Though God only knows what we are letting ourselves in for.”

Three days later, the space yacht cleared the Kuiper Belt and headed out beyond the Oort Cloud. The ship was about to cross the boundaries of the solar system into deep space. Traditionally, this was seen as the point where a rookie became a full-fledged pilot, in much the same way as crossing the equator for the first time by a sailor was seen.

Neither Jake nor Steve had ever ventured beyond the solar systems limits and today, albeit without the pomp and ceremony of a larger ship with experienced space farers to make the most of the moment, they were determined to mark the ‘special’ moment. Steve took the stellar drive offline and Jake got ready to plot the official mark by making a log entry as the ship’s master.

The journey to date was insignificant. Both men began to experience real space travel, long-distance travel where nothing happened for days on end, and where the view remained the same endlessly with only the most observant noting the variation in the star constellations. They talked, but Jake managed to keep the subject of his ‘new’ relationship with Carla off the agenda.

The Oort Cloud and the Kuiper Belt gave variation to their journey. Jake and Steve took the opportunity to assume manual control through the cloud. This was a difficult navigational challenge, with the fabric of the cloud ever-changing, with pockets of plasma and space debris scattered throughout its sprawling mass.

Then there was nothing again. Nothing visible to mark their own personal landmark. This was a distraction. An important one, because even after two hundred fifty years of space travel, a very few experienced life beyond the Solar system. It was an ironic privilege, given their current circumstances. They celebrated the passing of a landmark, which paled into insignificance compared with the challenge ahead. The landmark passed, and they opened a bottle of champagne from a supply Carla’s father kept onboard to help capture the moment. They enjoyed a brief moment of complete insignificance. They were surrounded by trillions of kilometers of open space in a vessel no bigger than a small house. This was real space travel.

When the moment had passed and the champagne was consumed, they booted up the stellar drive, set course and engaged the NAVCOM. The two lightly-intoxicated space journeymen then both fell asleep in their chairs.
Chapter Forty-Seven

The Tri-Star Battle

The Nexus ship was ready. The convoy closed to within ten thousand kilometers of the nearest of the two wormholes and The Odysseus project leader, Dr. James Cameron, ran through a final check list to ensure the first section of the three part ‘exercise’ was one hundred percent ready. He sat at his desk in the makeshift operations center aboard the Botanic.

This was what all the planning was about. For six months, the team scrutinized and again scrutinized millions of pages of data, compiled by Nexus and associate laboratory resources. This was the result. They were in a war zone, light years from home, facing two wormholes and the possibility of the creation of one of the most complex structures in the universe. The creation of this structure was, in astronomic terms, as big as the stellar drive theory. The potential for the structure was enormous, not only as a transport source to potentially another universe, but also because of the immense power it would bring. If man could harness the power, the possibilities were endless. His team only just began to realize the possibilities of the discovery of a blue wormhole.

Yet opposition to the task at hand was rife. He could not rationalize the potential threat arising from the blue wormhole. He viewed Alpha’s presence here as a hindrance, and he just wanted to get on with things.

His own involvement in the project was a relatively new thing. He was aware of the research and the plans to open the wormholes. He hadn’t realized how far the project had come and how vast it became. He could not begin to fathom how the funding for such a project was put together. He tried to find out as Project Leader; he felt he had the right to know. This time, he had pushed too far and had come up against a metaphorical brick wall. He came close to giving up and pulling out of his new venture, but turned around in the last minute by the persuasive arguments of his peers. He accepted he didn’t need to know how the project was financed; he told himself it was better this way. He was a scientist and about to do his work. This was the moment of truth.

“Dr. Cameron, we are nearing proximity point A. Shall I charge up the vector components?”

“Yes, please do.”

He addressed the Alpha Commander, “What is the status of the Sentinel and the Sect vessels? Do we have a clear path to the wormhole?”

“Yes, Dr. Cameron. The presence of the Alpha Fleet is preventing the Sect and the Sentinels from engaging us. The Sect has taken a step back.”

* * * *

The High Priestess resigned herself to the inevitable. The number of Alpha vessels expanded rapidly, and to engage in a full-scale battle with Alpha could be counterproductive. Her quest was to prevent the Kryl from entering the galaxy. She would do everything in her power to prevent it and this is what she needed to concentrate on.

The opening of the first wormhole was not, in any case, the issue. She knew the first wormhole would be opened. Humans needed to fuel their insatiable desire for growth and she could do little to stop this. She could not allow the second one to open. She prepared to pay the ultimate price to stop this from happening.

* * * *

Jonathan Hoskins watched the events unfold. The Alpha/Nexus vessels slowly closed toward the wormholes. They were surrounded by Shenke’s mini-fleet, of which the Halo 7 was a key component. The Sect Fleet stopped attacking and stood at a standstill, less than a kilometer behind the Nexus vessels, but curiously with a clear path through. The Sentinel Patrol vessels also stopped and monitored the situation. Finally there were the onlookers: these included the AUSWAS ship and incredibly large numbers of individual craft of all manner and shape. These were the hangers-on. There were hundreds of them, and more arrived by the hour. They were mostly of Earth origin. He had never seen such a large number of non-military crafts so far out in deep space. This was absolutely fascinating.

Lieutenant Obeya Temsouri entered the room for a scheduled CAG debriefing.

“Good morning Lieutenant. What is our jump ship status?”

Hoskins still maintained a formal relationship with Obeya while in public. He knew the crew were aware of their
relationship’, and to display open signs of affection or favoritism could lead to negative feelings against both him and Obeya. They had a very different relationship in private.

“Good morning, sir. All Rapiers and Sabres returned with no losses. We had minor damage to two Rapier 3’s, and one of their pilots has been taken to the medical center with suspected head trauma.”

“Were you able to make any additional observations on the AUSWAS ship?”

“Yes. Curiously, the majority of the non-military craft seem to be heading to the AUSWAS ship. Not sure why.”

“Yes, it is a bit weird. The number of onlookers is incredible. Why are there so many? We are a long way from home.”

“I am not sure, sir. We are monitoring all movements and I will continue to observe.”

“Excellent, Lieutenant. Thank you. You are dismissed.”

Obeya left the ready room and Hoskins returned to his observations. There was certainly something strange about the AUSWAS ship, which made Hoskins all the more curious because he was entrusted with the ‘protection’ of the AUSWAS vessel. There was no communication whatsoever with the vessel, which annoyed Hoskins. It wouldn’t take much to acknowledge the assistance his crew provided.

Ironically, Professor Nigel Winterburn was just thinking the same thing. It was high time that he introduced himself to the crew of the Halo 7.

“Commander Hoskins. My name is Professor Nigel Winterburn and I am leading the AUSWAS protest into Nexus’ and Alpha’s attempt to open the two wormholes and thus trigger a cataclysmic disaster.”

“Thank you for the introduction Professor, although there was really no need. I am already well versed in AUSWAS the Collective and its goals. Thank you also for making contact. We will be able to better serve each other’s needs since we have established a relationship.”

Hoskins annoyed Winterburn, but this exchange of views served its purpose. “What are your needs, Commander? My understanding is you were tasked with protecting us. Is that not correct?”

“To an extent, yes. More specifically we are here to keep an eye on you and to make sure your actions don’t create a dangerous situation. Moreover, as participants in this project, Alpha looks to protect its own interests.”

“What could we possibly do to put your project in jeopardy? We are one small unarmed ship.”

“Professor, our scans reveal your vessel is more than adequately armed and protected. Furthermore, you have collected a large number of hangers-on. Presumably these are members of your ‘Collective’. Is this to be a human shield?”

Winterburn laughed. “Commander, our ship is well protected and armed because we are in a dangerous region of space. The ‘hangers-on’, as you put it, are, I presume, supporters of our cause, which has been widely publicized. They are here to witness the events as they unfold. Now, the main reason for establishing contact. We are about to move our ship to the region of space which lies between the two wormholes. You will have to decide with your conscience, and after consultation with your superiors, how you must act in response. I will close this conversation on that note. No doubt we will speak again soon.”

With that, Winterburn closed the comm link and immediately gave the order for the AUSWAS vessel to move towards the two wormholes.

Winterburn waited for this moment for a long time. A very long time. He knew this event would happen. He manufactured it. Now was his time and the true meaning for the Collective’s existence was about to reveal itself. After fifty years of meticulous planning, they were ready. The Collective participants were gathering and soon they would all ‘collectively’ play their part.

* * * *

Carla also had waited for this moment for some time. After two weeks of travel she entered the Tri-Star system and joined the other members of the Collective. Her journey was uncomfortable, and she spent most of the time wondering what she was doing.

Two days before she was due to return to the Academy from her parent’s home in Australia, Carla first felt someone summoning her. To begin with, it was just a feeling, but over the next 24 hours, it grew into an almost unstoppable force compelling her to seek out the Collective. She knew it was Winterburn and that he applied his
special ‘powers’ to make her feel that nothing else was important. She felt as she had when first in his presence: powerless and absolutely enthralled, almost breathless in her eager anticipation to be with him once more.

She felt compelled to head for the nearest space port. There she joined others who boarded a charted space cruiser bound for Titan. Two days later, she boarded a shuttle, which carried her and five other people to join the Collective in the Tri-Star system. She didn’t try to understand; her thoughts were only for Winterburn, and that she must be with him.

She allowed herself to make contact with Jake, the Academy and her parents, but this was merely a means to an end. She divulged the minimum, and blamed her enforced absence on the need to seek out her sister once again. Over the following days, once she was on board the shuttle, the force guiding her waned. She could allow herself to be distracted by other issues. She contacted Jake again and explained she was okay, but most specifically that he should not follow her. She didn’t know why. She wanted Jake with her but her instincts said that this was not about Jake. He would be putting his life in grave danger should he join her. Yet somehow she knew Jake would come. She knew he would not let Winterburn take her.

By the time the shuttle reached the Tri-Star system, the force Winterburn held over Carla and the others diminished. They began to question why they were here. Their questions remained unanswered. The shuttle pilots were instructed to deliver their passengers, come what may, and under no circumstances should they be persuaded to return them to Earth. The pilots were also under Winterburn’s influence and his control over them had not diminished. Carla was trapped; she needed Jake more than ever.

Dr. Cameron and his team were pleased. The first wormhole began to open, some thirty seconds after the sonic pulse equipment completed its initial cycle. The view was spectacular. At first a small circular void opened from within the gaseous membrane that had stood silent for an eternity. It was composed of a plasma/iron composite, which began to swirl, forming circular patterns in the darkness.

As the wormhole opened it formed a vortex, spiraling into a void of nothingness. Then, once it achieved its desired density, it spread. The void grew, and the membrane thickened.

Finally, the wormhole was open once more. A gateway to another region of space became reality, and the first major step towards the creation of the blue wormhole was taken.

Winterburn stood alone watching the spectacle. He, too, waited for this moment for a long time. His secret, the one he held alone for so many years, was about to be unveiled. The truth behind his beliefs, the reason for the Collective’s existence and the justification for his long ‘battle’ against those who tried to open the wormholes. Soon, the truth would be out. Winterburn couldn’t help but raise an uncharacteristic smile. His time was coming.

Cameron was satisfied that a complete and fully functioning wormhole stood in front of him. He gave the order for the despatch of the research vessel and two Alpha support vessels to commence preparations for their entry into the wormhole. In the meantime, his team collated information and prepared for the second phase of the operation: the opening of the second wormhole.

The second hole would be substantially larger than the first. Its spread, even in its shrunken dormant stage, was over five thousand kilometers in diameter. It was huge; the sheer size of it presented the team with very different challenges.

For a start, there was a substantial risk to nearby planetary objects. The pull from the wormhole would be considerable because the mass had probably grown substantially in size since it had last opened. Although there were no planets as such in the perceived danger zone, there were several small planetoids and a small asteroid belt, a busy section of space. In real estate terms, the region was priceless. It had two wormholes, three interconnecting but distinct planetary systems, and a plethora of other features, including gas clouds, ice belts and non-classified moons and orbiting satellites. The risk to many of these bodies was insignificant, but their value was real enough, and, as a commercial organization, the Nexus chiefs made it clear they wanted the region kept largely intact as a result of the ‘experiment’.

The Nexus fleet and the supporting craft were checked at a safe distance from the wormhole. This was a large headache to Cameron because of the swollen numbers of unauthorized private craft who amassed over the last few weeks.
Then there was the Betanica Sect. They showed an increased level of activity. It seemed likely they would again take steps to try to prevent the holes from being opened.

Cameron was ready for all of these eventualities. He was well-prepared and was not about to let a few minor issues stand in the way of what was likely the greatest deep space discovery in the last 100 years. His main concern was the AUSWAS ship. She positioned herself slap-bang in the middle of where they expected the blue wormhole to materialize. The Halo 7 and a large number of the private craft also joined the AUSWAS ship in the area. This wasn’t good. On the one hand, they might well be at risk from the pull of the second wormhole; on the other, if the blue wormhole opened, they could be pulled directly into it, or ripped apart by the contrasting forces of both the wormholes and the blue wormhole. It was time for Commander Hoskins and his team to deliver. Cameron opened a comm link directly to Hoskins who responded immediately.

“Commander, the AUSWAS ship and the other vessels and your ship must move away from the site of the new wormhole and the prospective blue wormhole. This must be achieved before we can commence work on the second hole.”

“I will do my best, but I doubt the commander of the AUSWAS ship will be in the mood to move. I will try light offensive tactics, but I may have to try something a bit more hazardous.”

“Do what you must, Commander. I am working to tight schedules here. If they won’t move, I will proceed with them still in the danger zone.”

Jonathan Hoskins didn’t like this imposition. He knew gentle persuasion would have no effect whatsoever and the only way he was going to move the AUSWAS ship away from the danger zone was by physical force. Alpha protocol was clear in such situations. He must follow the process before he could take effective action.

Hoskins tried to open a comm link with Winterburn, but was rejected. He ordered two Rapier 3’s to launch, and despatched an Eagle with two of his officers in the guise of ‘negotiators’. The Eagle tried to dock to allow the negotiators to board with a view to opening discussions. Winterburn was having none of it and withdrew his coupling clamps to prevent docking from taking place. Hoskins asked his negotiators to move to a safe distance, and again tried a comm link.

It was obvious Winterburn had no intention of either talking or moving. Hoskins covered all the peaceful means available to him and was left with two choices. He could physically move the AUSWAS ship, by clamping and pulling the ship out of the danger zone, or he could use the military option. The AUSWAS ship was smaller than the Halo 7, but was still powerful. Her enhanced drive systems could easily withstand any dragging pressure the Halo 7 could inflict. This then left just one option. Hoskins asked the lead Rapier pilot to fire two warning shots across the bow of the AUSWAS ship.

“Commander of AUSWAS research vessel. I am the lead Rapier pilot and have just fired two warning shots at your vessel. Your ship and its crew are in danger and need to leave this area immediately. Alpha has designated this area as a military zone. We will target your drive systems unless you leave the restricted zone immediately.”

Winterburn’s response to the Rapier pilot’s broadcast message was instant. The AUSWAS vessel fired two single laser cannon bursts at the lead Rapier’s communication port. This was an act of aggression and left Hoskins with little option, but to respond in kind.

Winterburn, though, had other ideas. “Commander Hoskins. You will have to destroy this ship to move us. I am prepared to use all of the weapons at our disposal to defend our position. Please recall your jump ships or we will destroy them.”

Hoskins knew he was beaten. He would not engage in a full scale battle with Winterburn, even though he knew that the Halo 7 would be victorious. With the comm link left open, he responded.

“Very well, Professor Winterburn. The experiment will commence with your ship inside the danger zone. We cannot guarantee your protection. It is highly likely your ship will be destroyed. We will seek to remove the other vessels in the area.”

Hoskins closed the link, and moved to concentrate his efforts on the smaller vessels which had joined the AUSWAS ship in the danger zone. Once again, his efforts proved futile. There were too many of them and it was far too dangerous to engage in a one-to-one with each of the smaller vessels, even if he engaged all of his jump ship capability.

Hoskins must admit defeat. He opened a comm link to the Botanic and urged Cameron to delay the experiment while he consulted with Admiral Shenke as to how best deal with the problem. Cameron didn’t agree. He would
proceed with or without the removal of the Winterburn and his Collective. His ships were ready, and they were about to engage the sonic pulse equipment once again. Hoskins gave the order for the Halo 7 to move to safe distance and he recalled the Rapiers.

Winterburn is a fool, he thought. He was about to die for a cause which was futile. The second wormhole was about to be opened.

* * * *

Cameron was having other problems. The Betanica Sect vessels engaged, and moved to surround the Nexus vessels to prevent the experiment from taking place. Admiral Shenke dispatched a squadron of Rapiers, who engaged with the Sects’ black interceptors. A fierce battle took place, with the Sect pilots holding their own.

Shenke ordered the despatch of a further squadron of Rapiers and a half-squadron of Sabres. This gave Alpha a numerical advantage, and they engaged in a dogfight with the Sect interceptors over a small area between Shenke’s fleet and the wormholes. The sheer number of jump ships in such a confined area was beginning to tell, and eventually the Sect vessels were forced to disengage. Shenke ordered two of his cruisers to plug the gap to protect the Nexus vessels on their vulnerable side. There was no room for the Sect to engage the Nexus ships. The experiment could continue.

Cameron ordered the experiment to commence within a few minutes of the Shenke’s latest intervention. Once again the sonic pulse equipment engaged and within a few moments the huge second wormhole opened.

* * * *

Winterburn smiled again. The sequence of events was inevitable. The second wormhole would soon be fully open and the blue wormhole would start to materialize. Everything he had done over the last fifty years led to this moment. The huge deception he orchestrated was about to be revealed.
Chapter Forty-Eight

The Real Winterburn

Fifty two years ago, Winterburn arrived on Titan.

His task was simple. He was engaged to bring about the opening of the blue wormhole to allow his people to enter this new galaxy and feed. He travelled through a fissure between the two wormholes in the Tri-Star system. The fissure was big enough for a small ship to pass through, but inadequate for the deployment of a mass Kryl invasion. The fissure had always been there, but was undetected because of its size.

Winterburn’s appearance was his first problem. The Kryl were human-like in stature, but there complexion was a pallid grey. The only characteristic features in his hairless face were his deep, penetrating eyes, which were deep scarlet. He quickly moved to disguise his lack of facial distinction by injecting pigment cells into his face and body. He used steroids and human DNA enhancers to replicate a human’s more distinct facial features.

The only aspect of his origins he couldn’t disguise were his eyes. He tried various lenses but found them ineffective. He injected pigmentation directly into his cornea but this was only partially successful. His eyes then would be his calling card. Since he could not disguise them, he would use them to help his cause.

Winterburn quickly established himself on Titan, first as a Cargo Pilot and then, as he made money, as an entrepreneur. He soon amassed a considerable amount of capital through the deployment of a fleet of his own ships, dealing in mining transportation. He developed his persona around a charismatic philanthropist who quickly became popular and engrossed in the more elitist sections of Titan society. He manufactured a ‘conscience’ encompassing many of the larger ecological issues, and then began to speak publicly on various related concerns before involving himself with the Betanica Sect and their beliefs.

This was all part of the plan. He established himself as a leader with a conscience. Despite his strange looks and the color of his eyes, he was accepted and on course to deliver his objective.

After ten years on Titan, Winterburn opened a division of one of his companies on Earth. The company quickly established itself as a leading deep space transportation company. It was then Winterburn established Nexus. He funded and incorporated the company with a board of directors, with his holding company—rather than himself—as the controlling interest. Within two months of its incorporation, the holding company sold its equity in the business and Winterburn acquired a fifty-one percent stake in the company via a separate holding company not legally required to divulge its investors. Over the next ten years, with little intervention from Winterburn, Nexus grew into its niche area of deep space exploration.

Around the same time, Winterburn became a priest of the Betanica Sect, and taught the beliefs of the Sect to like-minded Titans. He allowed himself to deviate from the standard teachings of the Sect and to preach the words of his own church, the Collective. Quickly he began recruiting his disciples.

Over the following years, Nexus moved towards the exploration and development of wormholes and other deep space transportation links. The Collective grew to protect the things Nexus supported. Winterburn established two organizations which ‘poles’ apart. No one made the connection between the two and only Winterburn knew the true reason for their joint establishment.

It was, perhaps, the man’s flamboyance which allowed him to develop such an elaborate and complicated deception. He wasn’t compelled to achieve his aims in any specific way; it was sheer confidence which allowed him to achieve these objectives in the manner he chose. This way, he covered all the bases. He could represent himself as being a man of conscience who could and should have the right to be there to help prevent the wormholes opening, and on the other hand, through Nexus, had no constraints of conscience. It was a commercial organization, governed by profit. Winterburn had created the conflict to bring about Alpha and ECG’s involvement, and on The Collective side the enrollment of the thousands of followers who would ultimately be so crucial to his objectives.

* * * *

The Kryl were a dying civilization. With no planet of their own, they travelled from one galaxy to the next in the vast Queen’s Ships. From here, they dispatched invading armies to consume entire civilizations. They were dying because they had nowhere left to feed. They dispatched a ‘finder’ through the fissure to seek out new feeding grounds. The finder located the Milky Way, with the potential for a vast and almost endless supply of food. They could not widen the fissure from their own galaxy. They needed to send an ‘organizer’ to achieve this.
Winterburn was tasked first, to facilitate the opening of the fissure, and second, to provide a supply of food for the starving advance army to feed on when they first entered the galaxy. The gathering Collective was that supply of food.
Part Three
Chapter Forty-Nine
The Blue Wormhole

The High Priestess knew time was short; she must stop the Nexus ship before it was too late. Her commanders plotted the flight of the missile from their current position behind the Alpha blockade.

The target was the Nexus sonic pulse ship itself. The low yield, Earth-sourced atomic missile needed to detonate within two hundred fifty meters of the Nexus ship. They calculated an explosion at this range would be sufficient to knock out the sonar pulse, and stop the wormhole from being created; the wormhole would then simply collapse in on itself and would revert to a gaseous mass.

To be successful, the High Priestess needed a sizable diversion. She elected to target the Alpha flagship, which given its sheer size and perceived lack of threat was left unprotected as Alpha spread its resources over a large area.

Shenke stared in disbelief when he realized the Sect was attacking his ship. Her shields were on low intensity and the initial impact from the Sect’s mother ship’s laser cannons was considerable. Two lower decks were ripped apart on the starboard side and, with no immediate prospect of shield protection, the laser pulse continued to cause heavy damage in the aft section of the ship. Shenke responded by turning the ship one hundred eighty degrees and brought the full shield protection on line. He then ordered the launch of two squadrons of jump ships, targeting the Sect’s Mother Ship.

The High Priestess knew she had done her bidding. She would stand and wait for Alpha’s inevitable response. She ordered the ships shields to be lowered. She didn’t have to wait for long.

Two teutonic missiles were delivered with pinpoint accuracy, immediately destroying both the Sect ship’s drive and her weaponry capability. The High Priestess knew her ship was done for: further jump ship attacks peppered the ship’s unprotected outer hull. She survived long enough to witness the final stages of her own missile attack on the Nexus Ship.

The missile reached its intended target before it was spotted by an Alpha lookout scouting the area around the Nexus ship, on watch for just such an attack. Her quick action saved the Nexus ship, as she broadcast the information to the nearest jump ship; the jump ship pilot responded immediately by firing several rounds of free-detoning chaff into the path of the incoming missile. The chaff did its job, and the atomic missile, exploded nearly a kilometer out of range for the Nexus ship.

* * * *

A nervous Dr. Cameron witnessed the attack on the Admiral Shenke’s ship and the failed attack on the Nexus Sonic Pulse ship. He knew the pulse was required to be broadcast for perhaps another two minutes before the second wormhole’s opening was assured. He glanced over at the AUSWAS ship to see how she fared, as the void—and then the wormhole—started to take hold. She held her ground but he watched her deploy full reverse thrust. Some of the smaller private vessels were not so fortunate; their power drives were inadequate. One by one they were pulled inexorably towards the wormhole.

Finally the wait ended. After nearly three minutes of sonic pulse application, the second wormhole opened. Phase two was complete. They must sit and wait for the third phase to commence.

The anticipation was palpable. Cameron’s team waited silently, not knowing how long it would take or exactly what would happen. They constantly checked and rechecked their data screens for evidence that the process started. Cameron dispatched his second wormhole investigation team through the wormhole. One could be forgiven for not jumping up and down in anticipation of that event or that of the first wormhole. They were waiting for something bigger, much bigger.

* * * *

It had all gone silent. The Sect and the Sentinel Patrol craft ceased all action. The vortex for the mature second wormhole was under control and there was no further pulling on the AUSWAS ship and its surrounding vessels. Everyone waited.

The first sign that something was changing came from the area between the two open wormholes. The unseen fissure expanded and a sudden burst of bright light blasted through the crack in the space fabric. It was still small, but the light was intense and drew everyone’s attention directly to it.
It was definitely growing. The first discernable sign of something more significant occurred about thirty minutes later when a flurry of blue gas emitted from the fissure. This gathered in orbit around the fissure.

From where Cameron and his team stood looking, the phenomenon was a bright ball of light surrounded by a blue gaseous membrane. It was still small, perhaps only five hundred meters across, but it began to assume life. It turned slowly at first, then faster and more violently until it assumed a more aggressive stance.

It spilled contents from its belly, while at the same time consuming elements from both of its bigger brothers—the wormholes on either side of it. The blue wormhole was about two thousand meters across and doubled in size every minute. Several vortices formed in the middle of the fissure. These quickly became one, and then it began to pull.

The AUSWAS ship was only about fifty kilometers from the blue wormhole. Cameron noticed she was pulling maximum thrust to stop from being pulled forward. The smaller ships behind were being pulled slowly towards the fissure. Another minute or so passed before the AUSWAS ship began to turn to face the eye of the perfectly-formed blue wormhole. Then, suddenly, the AUSWAS’s resistance was gone. She turned off her main drive and was pulled forward into the abyss. Some of the smaller ships ahead of her moved directly into the mouth of the oscillating vortex. Then they were gone.

The blue wormhole consumed everything in its path. Both the AUSWAS ship and the Halo 7 were dragged into its midst. The AUSWAS ship shot forward into the vortex.

Hoskins didn’t know how to respond. He was tasked with staying with the AUSWAS ship, but not to be consumed by the hole. He knew if he stayed, he would be sucked in, and yet he stood almost transfixed as he and his crew watched the spectacle ahead of them. It was almost as if they—and not the ship—were being guided into the hole.

Suddenly it was too late. The Halo 7’s engines could no longer sustain their current status and she was dragged forward. Hoskins ordered full reverse thrust, but the ship’s engines were powerless to prevent the relentless slide towards the hole. The Halo 7, together with hundreds of smaller vessels, was quickly absorbed into the vortex and then, just as suddenly, she was gone.

Cameron stood in disbelief. He witnessed the sheer magnificence, the creation of an immensely powerful vortex: a mystery of space which man helped to create, but for which they had little understanding. Then, before his eyes, hundreds of space craft were consumed into its belly, including the Halo 7 and the AUSWAS ship. He had no idea where they went, if they survived, or whether this were a gateway to a distant galaxy. All he knew was that his task was done: he had opened the two wormholes to create something bigger in size and stature.

It threatened the remaining ships at the edge of the danger zone and the planetary objects beyond. The new phenomenon was still in its infancy, and yet it threatened to become the most powerful thing in the galaxy. Cameron ordered his ships to give way further, and stood almost ten thousand kilometers from the wormholes, in front of the smaller of the two normal wormholes. From here they were safe and could begin to observe the night’s sky, awash with blue and the galaxy’s latest star attraction.
Chapter Fifty
The Message

Admiral Shenke sat on one of the relaxation chairs in his state room. He listened to the communication from Professor Nigel Winterburn for the umpteenth time, and still couldn’t believe what he heard. Winterburn gave a detailed explanation of his subterfuge, who he was, and why he went to such extraordinary lengths to achieve his objectives.

If what he said was to be believed, Winterburn deceived Alpha into providing an open door to the Galaxy for his people, the Kryl, and if that weren’t bad enough, the Kryl were about to use the Galaxy as their new feeding ground.

Shenke remained cynical. At this stage it was pure conjecture, but there were some alarming aspects to the whole situation which supported Winterburn’s assertions. For a start, why did so many private vessels follow Winterburn through the blue wormhole? Winterburn’s connection to Nexus had been verified, and the Sect had preached for hundreds of years about the danger of opening the two wormholes together.

Now was hardly the time for reflection. He needed to keep this thing local. He must ensure Winterburn’s message didn’t get out. Which wouldn’t be easy; for starters, Winterburn broadcast across multiple channel links. That meant some of his crew, many of the journalists, Cameron and the other Nexus scientists and any else who could receive the transmission this far out in deep space heard his message. It would be difficult to keep a lid on this.

Shenke ordered a transmission blocker to be set up as soon as the message was first broadcast. This was powerful enough to stop anyone broadcasting to outside the Tri-Star region for the foreseeable future. It also collated together any transmissions sent and bounced them back to Shenke’s command center where the transmission data could be analyzed and blocked or released depending on the content. This was not exactly unusual in a war zone. Right now it was critical.

Cameron was in contact and demanded a meeting at the highest level to discuss the options available. Shenke put him off initially, but needed Cameron on his side so he agreed to a meeting later that evening.

He needed to turn his attention to the potential military threat posed by the Kryl. He must keep Alpha’s options open by exploring all eventualities, with the obvious solution being to render the blue wormhole defunct and prevent the Kryl from entering the Galaxy in the first place. There was the matter of the Halo 7 and the other vessels which accompanied the AUSWAS ship into the void. If he must destroy the hole, their escape route back to this galaxy would be gone.

Shenke’s lead advisor, Commander Chris Willis, had served aboard the Illustrious under Admiral Shenke’s command for the past five years and, before that, the two men’s careers intertwined as they each rose through the ranks. Willis supervised the repairs to the ship following the Sect’s unprovoked attack. He entered the Admiral’s state rooms with confirmation that all essential repairs were completed and the ship was once again in full battle readiness.

“So, what do we do Chris—your expert opinion, please?”

“I think we should engage the assistance of the Sect. After all, they want the damn hole closed, too. We need to speak to the Admiralty bench and possibly Admiral Rose too. He must be near to victory with the Sentinels.”

“I have not heard from Rose for a few days. Send a jump ship out of the communication jamming area and get a status update from Rose’s fleet. We also need to communicate with Earth. I will draft a coded message to Koenig, and we will need to send an Eagle back to Alpha One. We need the bench’s input—and fast. Have we heard from the Sect at all?”

“Not so far as I am aware. We do need to tread carefully, though: they may be on our side for this one, but they do have some pretty strange practices. Do you want me to open a line of communication?”

“Yes, please. I also need you to speak to the media representatives in the fleet and request that they comply with the communications ban. Give them something to work with, but point out the consequences of not complying.”

Shenke continued, “I am due to meet with Cameron this evening. I am hoping he will have a quick solution to getting the wormholes closed. Then perhaps we can forget the whole thing and pretend Winterburn and his cronies never existed.”

“Let’s hope so. We can’t forget Commander Hoskins though. He needs time to get out, if only for us to determine whether any of this is true.”
“Chris, I am certainly not going to forget Hoskins. The hole cannot stay open indefinitely. Assuming we can close the hole, I will give him twenty four hours to get back out.”

* * * *

Doctor Cameron stood in the Admiral’s anteroom observing the artwork on the inner walls and the views from the large observation window, which showed the three stars and their close-knit planetary network. The system was compact, and this region of space could well have made a wonderful tourist spot. He doubted whether that would now be the case.

“Ah, Dr. Cameron, come in please.” Shenke ushered Cameron into his state room and offered him a glass of chilled water.

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Cameron nervously. He was not comfortable in these surroundings, but he realized the importance of this meeting and wanted to quickly get started. “I presume you want to talk about closing the wormholes?”

“Yes, but there are other issues which we need to address first. I have put a block on all comm links for the foreseeable future. It is imperative the events of the last twelve hours, and in particular the contents of Winterburn’s message, don’t become common knowledge on Earth. I will be making direct contact with both Alpha Command and ECG. We don’t want anyone else to know about this.”

“I understand, Admiral. Please be aware that, despite appearances, the Botanic and most of the support craft are non-military. I cannot compel them to do anything. I presume you will prevent anyone from leaving the system?”

“Yes, we will. Please ensure you pass this on to your crew; not the Alpha contingent, they will be briefed separately. If we could turn towards the closure of the hole. I presume this can be achieved and, if so, how?”

“I have my team working in this at the moment. In theory we can reverse by using a different oscillating pulse. We need time to determine exactly what the parameters are. What concerns me is whether we have enough time. How long will it be before the Kryl come through the void?”

“You need not worry about the potential threat from the Kryl, if there is one. We will deal with any threat as it happens. I assure you we have every possible weapon available and at our disposal. In the meantime, we need the holes closed up A.S.A.P. I can deploy significant resources from Alpha to assist you too. Please do make use of their considerable expertise. I am sure you will find their help beneficial.”
Chapter Fifty-One

Nothing But Silence

Steve let Jake sleep on well beyond his allotted shift change. Not out of any form of compassion, but simply because he enjoyed the experience and he was not ready to hand over the controls. Piloting a craft, even a yacht and not a jump ship through deep space was what he dreamed of, even as a small child. He was fulfilling his dreams.

Steve piloted the Yacht for ten hours before he felt tired. Fortunately, Jake woke.

They had entered the Tri-Star system a few moments earlier, and both stared transfixed at the sight ahead of them. The ‘sky’ turned a deep shade of blue and stretched across the whole region surrounding all three stars and their respective planetary systems. It was breathtaking and yet unexpected. Jake had seen holographic displays of the system in his stellar classes, but he certainly didn’t recollect there being any blue tint in the holograms.

“This is not right,” He announced. “The system is highlighted as being spectacular because of the proximity of the stars and their systems, not the color. We may be too late. Is the blue tint caused by the blue wormhole?”

“I don’t know, but that’s not the only weird thing. There is no comm traffic. The frequencies are all silent. That can mean there is nothing in the system to make a noise, or Alpha imposed a block. Either way, this doesn’t look good.”

“Should I send a comm flare?” Jake asked with concern. Were they too late to help Carla?

“Best not to. We don’t know what we are up against. I think we should slow to impulse drive and enter the system slowly and unannounced.”

“There may be no comm traffic, but there are sure as hell going to be people listening. We could launch a probe ahead of us to see if it picks anything up visibly. That way we will have some idea as to what we are driving into.”

“Okay, yes. I’ll see to it. Do you want to take over your shift while I set the probe up?”

Jake agreed, and assumed his position in the pilot’s chair to begin his shift at the helm. He looked on apprehensively. He knew this would not be as straightforward as planned.
Chapter Fifty-Two

The First Kryl

Jonathan Hoskins could not believe what just happened. He had carried out his orders proactively, and had tried to persuade Winterburn to leave the danger zone. He never had any intention of taking his ship into the blue wormhole, travelling tens of thousands of light years, and yet here he was.

The Halo 7 travelled eighty four thousand light years in less than ten minutes. She was pulled into the blue wormhole, spinning out of control. As the vortex subsided and the stabilizers took hold, she came out of the wormhole on the other side, the Kryl Galaxy. There was damage and some minor injuries. The Stellar drive and the main shield system were offline and the medical center was inundated with injuries. All in all they were lucky. No one had died and the ship’s critical systems were all returning to a live status.

It was difficult to take it all in. Just as he had on the other side of the blue wormhole, Winterburn sent out a message. The content was much the same but the ending was different; Winterburn did not tell them about those who followed him into the vortex being the Kryl’s new food source.

So, the Betanica Sect was right all along. The Kryl did exist and their suggestion that demon-like creatures would extend from their galaxy into Earth’s looked to be a realistic proposition.

So where was Winterburn? Hoskins ordered a tracker be maintained on the AUSWAS ship. It was an easy task to reconfigure the tracker to determine their whereabouts. Hoskins knew he must first speak to Winterburn to negotiate. He must get the single Earth ship back through the wormhole before the Kryl mounted their first attack.

The first issue was to pinpoint and record the precise point in this galaxy where the blue wormhole stood. This was critical, as already the makeshift Alpha fleet drifted further into deep space. He stood on the bridge, with both hands clasped behind his back. He had just received confirmation that the Stellar drive and the defense shields were back on line.

Over eight hundred fifty private ships had followed the AUSWAS ship and the Halo 7 into the blue wormhole, and they all stood and waited. They were not sure what to expect. Hoskins broke the silence by opening a short range frequency hailer comm link.

“*To all Earth vessels. This is the Commander of the Alpha Fleet Cruiser Halo 7.*” He spoke calmly and tried to avoid sounding anxious. “*We have been pulled through the blue wormhole, and arrived in what we presume is the Kryl galaxy. We have all heard the message from Winterburn and, understandably, are all anxious. My job is to get everyone back through the wormhole before we are threatened by the Kryl. We have already drifted some distance from the hole and need to get back to within close proximity of it A.S.A.P. I have set up an open comm link which will allow you to communicate your status to us directly. We will then begin to effect or assist in any repairs required to anyone’s vessels and bring together a more exact exit plan.*”

Hoskins closed the link, pleased with his speech as he felt he had delivered the facts clearly and concisely without creating a sense of panic. He felt sure that many out there were in a situation completely beyond their comprehension and were probably scared out of their wits. He turned his attention back towards the tracker and Winterburn.

“*Commander, we have a fix on the AUSWAS ship again. She is travelling away from us at one-quarter stellar velocity. There is a problem though, sir. We just picked up our first sighting of the Kryl. There is a large mass approaching from the grid, sector four. I can’t be sure at this stage whether it is one big ship or thousands of little ones.*” The young Lieutenant look scared as he completed his report.

“Thank you Lieutenant. Good work. Number One, are there any other sizeable craft in this makeshift fleet?”

“Yes,” replied his first officer, “There is a small freighter and several large shuttles in the group. What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s discuss in my ready room.”

“Becket, you have the con. How long before the Kryl fleet reaches us?”

“About ninety minutes at current velocity, sir.”

“Thanks. Keep me updated.”

The commander and his first officer entered the ready room, and Hoskins set about explaining his dilemma.
“We have to get Winterburn and bring him back with us, and yet somehow we need to be here to shepherd these ships back through the wormhole. I want you to seize command of the freighter and take a third of the crew with you, including jump ships and infantry. I want you to seek out and capture Winterburn and bring him back to us. We will then all depart together. I need this done with a minimum of force and within twenty-four hours.”

* * * *

Commander Jacques knew he had entered new territory, not just because he was tens of thousands of light years from home. It was his first command, and he and his crew were in a makeshift Alpha ship, they had a new enemy, they were in a new galaxy, and were about to pull off an assault on an enemy craft. They would extract Winterburn, destroy the vessel, and then return to the blue wormhole, joining the vast majority of the his stranded compatriots before re-entering the wormhole and praying they would exit the void back in their own galaxy. There were so many ifs and buts, yet as he reflected further, he realized his task was probably the lesser of two evils. Within the next hour the Halo 7 would engage the Kryl. They had no comprehension of whether the Alpha Battle Cruiser would have any impact on the Kryl fleet. Jacques wandered whether he would ever see his colleagues on the Halo 7 again.

His crew commandeered a small cargo freighter; the existing crew was quite happy to be evicted to the relative comfort of the Halo 7. The newly conscripted vessel set off immediately in pursuit. The ship’s NAVCOM locked onto the tracker pulse being emitted by the AUSWAS ship. They had already started to close, and Jacques and his crew felt the pangs of anxiety which always manifest moments before battle.

* * * *

Hoskins knew he asked a lot of his first officer. Certainly Jacques was more than competent, but the freighter was probably not, and it was already becoming clearer the new enemy might be technically superior to the Halo 7 and its flotilla. The Kryl fleet was within teutonic missile range, but he wanted to conserve his more powerful weapons. He was prepared to use any of his weapons to achieve his aim. Failure was not an option.

The Kryl fleet were upon them and yet neither fleet fired an opening salvo. There were about two hundred of them. The ships were small, less than ten meters in length and were shaped like a teardrop, bulbous at the rear graduating down to a sharp tip at the front, but with no other visible features. Each ship was translucent, but easily detectable as each ship glowed a luminous red on their underside, presumably their drive mechanism. It was unlike any ship design Hoskins had ever seen. This did not bode well.

These vessels were followed by ten larger ships, perhaps two hundred meters in length. They were the same shape, translucent and again outlined beneath by a red glow projecting into space. The Kryl fleet, with their ominous and almost menacing red glow, looked very sinister.

This, then, was their new enemy; but the biggest surprise was yet to come. Behind the glowing fleet their followed a monster: a gargantuan vessel, two to three kilometers in length. Its similarity to the other Kryl ships was obvious, and again the dominant red glow made the sky surrounding the ship glow almost crimson, so deep was its color.

They closed to within five hundred meters and still neither side took the first shot. This all changed in an instant. From beneath each Kryl ship, a beam of red light burst through, instantly penetrating the shields of their new enemy. The small Earth ships’ inadequate shielding was shredded; the Kryl weapons caused devastation almost instantly.

Hoskins knew he must respond and ordered a full out attack, with bursts of plasma cannon, teutonic missiles and phased plasma weaponry. At first there seemed little success, with even the smaller Kryl vessels seemingly impenetrable. Eventually the smaller vessels weakened, and slowly Alpha’s fire-power began to penetrate the Kryl vessels’ shielding.

Buoyed by this success, Hoskins ordered a squadron of Rapier 6’s to be launched to carry on the assault on the smaller vessels. This did not last long. The Kryl turned their attention to the Halo 7, and their bigger more powerful weapons began to smash into the ship’s shields. At first the shields held, but inevitably the mass onslaught began to penetrate the shields around the weaponry housings.

After just a few minutes, all resistance was over. The Kryl won a resounding victory and the battle ended. The makeshift Earth Fleet’s troubles were far from over. It was time for the Kryl to feed.
Chapter Fifty-Three

The Space Yacht

The type 75 Orion Space Yacht took two more days to reach the far side of the Tri-Star System and the locale of the wormholes. As they drew nearer, Jake and Steve watched in awe at the spectacular sight of three wormholes side by side and the pure brilliant blue emanating from the blue wormhole surrounding the sky in front of them. It did not take long for them to realize what had happened.

Two Rapiers pulled along either side of the space yacht, and their pilots gave them the signal to follow. They both knew better than to argue with two fully-deployed Rapiers. Jake pulled the yacht into their wake and having identified themselves with their Alpha call signs, they set course for the Alpha Fleet flagship, the Illustrious.

There was no sign of private vessels, and even stranger was the lack of any communication traffic. The whole area continued to be devoid of sound. The two Rapiers headed towards the Illustrious and her main hangar bay. She was huge. Neither of the trainee officers had ever been so close to a Type A ship of the line. There was no denying that she was a beautiful thing, if only in the eye of the beholder. You must believe to appreciate its sheer beauty.

The hangar itself was vast. It was the size of a large sports stadium and housed hundreds of jump ships, shuttles, Eagles, and several larger support craft. This was only one of the hangars on the ship, albeit the largest one. They were guided towards a landing pad at the rear of the hangar, with the two jump ships putting down on either side of the Yacht.

Jake and Steve were led directly to a small debriefing room on the same deck by two security crew members and asked to wait for the duty security officer. Lieutenant O’Brien entered the room and offered them both coffees before asking them to sit.

“Gentlemen. Can you tell me what two Alpha trainees are doing in a space yacht in the middle of the Tri-Star system?”

Steve piped up first, answering in a typically nonchalant way.

“We are on vacation. What the hell is an entire fleet doing out here?”

“As if you didn’t know, Enson? I am sure you are here for the same show as everybody else. Can you tell me what your involvement with Winterburn is?”

It was Jake’s turn to reply.

“What do you know of Winterburn? Where is he? We’re here looking for him, but more specifically for someone who followed him out here. We are here legitimately and with the permission of our Academy.”

“What do you know of Winterburn?”

Jake then went on to detail his meeting with Winterburn, and Carla and her sister’s involvement with him. The Security officer said nothing and listened intently. He then stood and headed towards the door.

“Gentlemen. Your knowledge of Winterburn may be of interest to my superiors. Please wait here. I will arrange for your debriefing to continue shortly.”
The Security officer left the room. Jake and Steve drank their coffee and waited patiently. Steve started to get edgy.

“There is definitely something they are not telling us here. There is no sign of Winterburn; there is a huge Alpha presence and the blue wormhole is open. What are they waiting for?”

“Don’t forget what we are here for, Steve. We came to find Carla and bring her home.” This was the first time either spoke about her in the last two days. The subject became taboo, because every time Carla’s name came up, Steve accused Jake of having an affair with her. Jake continued to deny any wrongdoing but the constant lies made him uncomfortable. However, this was definitely not the right time to talk about his newfound relationship with Carla.

Steve could not understand why this became such an obsession with Jake, unless something was going on between them. Steve was about to react, but pulled back and simply said, “I have not forgotten Carla, and I know you haven’t. Your obsession continues. We have to assume she is with Winterburn, but where, I don’t know. I suppose it’s possible they may have gone through one of the wormholes.”

Lieutenant Commander Peters walked in.

“That’s astute of you, Mister Costello. Apologies for eavesdropping on your conversation. I needed to get a grasp of the real reason why you are here. I am the Fleet’s Chief Intelligence Officer. Your collective experiences and, in particular, Mister Carter, your personal knowledge of Professor Winterburn, is of significant interest to me. I am going to transfer you to some more hospitable surroundings and allow you to freshen up; then we can continue this conversation. Before I do, I am going to play a message we received from Professor Winterburn moments after his ship entered the blue wormhole.”

The intelligence officer played the message and Jake and Steve listened intensely. The message finished and they sat in silence. There was no disputing the severity of the situation. The wormhole must be closed, but Carla was probably in the Kryl’s galaxy and in great danger. Jake knew he could not just sit and watch this one out.

As promised, they were allowed to freshen up and eat a light meal before they were taken to separate interview rooms. They were subjected to two hours of intensive questioning by members of Commander Peters’ team. They answered the questions delivered as accurately as they could. Jake, in particular provided them with a detailed physical and character description of Winterburn and discussed the fixation he had created in his disciples. Steve affirmed Jake’s story by highlighting Carla’s strange behavior in recent months.

They were led into a small conference room, where Commander Peters thanked them for their useful input.

“We now move on to what we should do with you. Unfortunately, in the current climate, you cannot be allowed to return home at present, Your knowledge could compromise the situation at home, which remains delicate. We have to get some idea of our new enemy’s intentions. You are both Alpha personnel, and I understand from your PS files that you both have considerable jump ship experience. I am, for the time being, putting you in the hands of the Illustrious CAG, who will grant you a temporary commission and will, in all probability, draft you into his reserve jump ship team. As soon as we can return you to Earth, I will send word; but in the mean time, gentlemen, I thank you for your assistance.”

Jake and Steve were led back towards the main hangar and into the CAG’s ready room, which looked out upon and gave a clear view of the main deck.

“Come in and sit down, Enson Carter and Costello. I have been briefed on your background and availability. I am pleased to say that I am only too grateful for additional pilots, albeit rookies. I am drafting you into my reserve fleet. As you have not yet graduated, you will understand I cannot make you front line combat-ready and, in any case, the jump ship variants are probably not yet familiar to you. Do either of you have any preference for Rapier or Sabres?”

Both Jake and Steve answered immediately. Unsurprisingly, Jake opted for Sabres and Steve for Rapiers.

“Very well,” the CAG replied. “You are drafted in. Enson Costello, please report to the fore jump ship deck. Lieutenant Simmons will show you your barrack room and flight schedules. Enson Carter, you can follow me down to the main deck. The Sabre CAG is beginning a briefing shortly.”

Jake did not get a chance to wish his friend good luck, but gave Steve a nervous acknowledgement as he left the CAG’s ready room and headed for the Sabre Flight deck. As he exited the hangar administration block, in front of him stood a squadron of Sabre 4’s, and a crowd of pilots gathered round a makeshift briefing board. The Sabre CAG had just started to address his pilots. Jake stood at the back while the Sabre CAG was brought up to speed on his
new addition.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I am pleased to announce we have a new team member—a rookie and still a baby I am afraid. Enson Carter, please approach the briefing board.”

Jake moved towards the front of the crowd and the CAG continued. “You come highly recommended by the ship’s CAG.”

“Today you will be flying a Sabre 4, which I presume will be your first time. We are on a two hour patrol of the region and you will fly wing-man to Blue Leader, Lieutenant Hope.” He gestured towards a female pilot, who acknowledged him briefly before turning her attention back towards the CAG.

“Okay everyone: ‘We make hay while the sun shines’. While there is no action, you guys get to do some flying, so make the most of it. You all know this, but if things get bad, you could be drafted into the combat squadrons quickly, so please ensure your familiarity and, above all, your concentration levels remain at peak. You can make your way to your ships. Enson Carter, please follow me.”

Jake was led to the front of the squadron and a gleaming new Sabre 4. He could not believe his luck and, for a moment, he briefly lost sight of his overall predicament, of Carla and the Kryl. He climbed aboard the Sabre 4 and strapped himself in. He was joined by a technician, who made adjustments to his flight position, to accommodate Jake’s frame, and to his helmet so it matched his DNA and cortex frequencies. Thirty seconds later, Jake Carter—call sign Blue 7—launched into space. He picked out the Blue Leader and expertly tucked himself behind her wing.

* * * *

The Sabre 4 was every bit as responsive as described. Its controls were instantly intuitive, and its subtlety beyond anything else Jake had encountered. It was simply stunning to fly and Jake quickly grew in confidence. Their flight path took them away from the fleet and towards the first of the three interconnecting planetary systems, before sweeping back and passing the rear of the fleet directly in front of the three wormholes, keeping to a safe distance to avoid being pulled in. The first circuit took about twenty minutes and as they swept past the last of the twelve planets and headed back towards the fleet for the second time, Jake was very much in the zone. It was a calming place to be, and Blue leader followed a simple flight pattern, making the job of wing-man simple. There was no comm traffic, because of the comm block. The pilots used signal wing and tail tip movements to acknowledge and pass on tactical information. Jake found himself looking at the range details and weaponry status. The ship was fully loaded, with maxed shields and a full range capability. He began to think the unthinkable.

All he needed to do was to lose altitude at the wrong time and he would be caught in the blue wormhole vortex and be pulled through. It was as simple as that. He pulled himself tighter towards the Leader, as he tried to bluff himself into believing he would not try it, but he already had made up his mind. He needed to find Carla, and he might not get another chance.

The squadron flew past the first and smallest wormhole and headed towards the blue wormhole. This was it, it was now or never. He pulled himself in tight deliberately, and then suddenly, as if he were a rookie who realized he was too close, pulled away in an exaggerated fashion at exactly the wrong point. He made it look as if he briefly lost control, just long enough for the blue wormhole to pull him into its vortex. It may have looked slightly blatant, but a good pilot would always try to fly face-on to a phenomenon of this type, before pulling out of the curve at maximum thrust.

Then it had him. The vortex was pulling the Sabre 4 and there was nothing he could do. He made it look as if he tried to reverse thrust and managed to open a channel to the group leader but it was too late. Jake Carter’s Sabre, Blue 7, entered the blue wormhole.
Chapter Fifty-Four

Alpha One

The encrypted message was broadcast by the Eagle as soon as it cleared the comm block imposed by Admiral Shenke’s fleet. It was a Priority One message, marked ‘For your eyes only’ for the urgent attention of Admiral Koenig. It was received at Alpha One communications, who then delivered the unopened message to Alpha One HQ and directly into the hands of Admiral Koenig. Such communications were not unusual, although direct comm link was more commonplace. Encrypted messages of this type were, by their nature, deemed both critical and urgent, and Koenig was appreciative of this. His desktop decoder quickly downloaded the message and began deciphering it. When completed, he entered his password and re-scanned his genetic imprint for final verification. The message content was then made available to Admiral Koenig.

“Gentlemen, I think we need to be careful that the contents of this message don’t leak from these four walls. This is a grave matter and could potentially be devastating. We need to determine the full extent of the threat, and then act decisively.”

Admiral Koenig invited his inner cabinet to an urgent meeting to discuss the content of the message from Admiral Shenke.

He played the message in its entirety first, and then opened the meeting for discussion. It was Admiral Kohn who offered his opinion first.

“We have to be clear about the extent of the threat and we won’t know until the Kryl pass through the blue wormhole. That may never happen. We do have a fairly considerable force in situ with Admiral Shenke’s fleet. He is highly regarded and dependable. In addition, Admiral Rose should shortly be available as the conflict in the Ionian system draws to a close. If we ask Rose to take his fleet to the Tri-Star system, we will have a formidable force in place. Whatever the Kryl send through, I am sure they won’t break through Alpha’s defenses in the region.”

“That is, if you don’t mind me saying my friend, naive.” This time Admiral Clarke addressed the Quorum. “We have no idea about the capability of the Kryl or what form a ‘potential food source’ would take. It is possible they may have no interest in us at all. I do agree we should deploy Rose and his fleet to the area immediately. Surely the Sentinels’ reason for fighting us in the first place has just been made obsolete. They cannot defend something when it is too late. That battle should be over.”

“Well it isn’t. The Sentinels are still fighting, and it looks as if they will to the last man.” Koenig was cross that his closest colleagues had not come up with a more sustainable solution, other than wait and see what happens. “I agree we should use the forces available in the area, but I am not convinced we need to deploy Rose’s already-overstretched fleet. We need further updates from Shenke before we act decisively. In the mean time, gentlemen, this is priority one. We must be extremely cautious.”

“Will you be advising President Roslyn?” asked Kohn.

“Yes, I need him to know. This will put the fear of God into ECG so I will play down some of the more dramatic elements of Shenke’s message.”

* * * *

President Roslyn was staying in his Lake Lugano Villa. He decided only last week that a week of solitude would improve his deteriorating mood. A week away from the media might stall the steep—and continuing—decline in his approval ratings. He needed a miracle, or some kind of political or economic disaster, to save the day and turn his second term as president around. His opponents snapped at his heels, and his own party tried to disown him. He needed something, and that something just fell onto his lap.

The private comm link from Admiral Koenig was a surprise, as had his unusual request for the two of them to meet in private and unofficially. He accepted, and immediately invited the Admiral to join him at his villa for a long weekend, some recreational activity and private discussions. Koenig declined an extended visit and opted instead for a brief meeting followed by dinner. Four hours later, he received his own copy of Professor Winterburn’s message together with some commentary from Admiral Shenke and Admiral Koenig. The news was appalling, but this was exactly what he was looking for. This was a crisis requiring strong leadership and moral guidance. It would also necessitate rejoining of Alpha and ECG. It seemed Roslyn was about to get his way. Koenig’s private yacht landed on the banks of the lake just two hours later.
They greeted each other courteously. The two men did not hate each other; they did have a grudging respect for each other but would never be friends. They were miles apart on most issues, which Koenig felt was unlikely to change. Still, the surroundings were glorious, and there was no denying he needed Roslyn’s help and he needed it now. The cost of the Sentinel War escalated massively in the last month or so, and the lack of funding from other sources including the APF left the war chest empty. The APF in particular surprised Koenig with their steadfast refusal to provide additional funding while the ‘unjust war’ with the Sentinels took place. How ironic that the Sentinels were right all along.

“So Admiral, we have a huge problem. Have the Kryl come through the wormhole yet?”

“Not as far as I am aware. I am still waiting for a further update from Admiral Shenke. We should shortly be deploying Admiral Rose’s fleet. The trouble is, we are desperately short of funds. We need something quick and unofficial if we are to defend the wormholes properly.”

“Quick and unofficial? Haven’t we had active discussions to increase our cooperation in these areas? Surely, having let the official talks progress, we should be in a position for a political rejoining. I think enough progress has been made for to achieve this quickly.”

“No,” said Koenig. “We must keep this unofficial for the time being. We have to consider the consequences of this thing getting out to the media. They would put their collective heads together and cause mass panic. They already know about the Sect and their beliefs. If they find out we need funding to send additional resources to the Tri-Star system, it would be bedlam.”

“Very well. I don’t want that any more than you. It will be ECG who has to pick up the pieces, not Alpha. Let’s be honest, you’re protecting your interests in this matter. You don’t want to be seen with the begging cap in hand, so to speak, pleading for financial assistance from ECG. I can keep this covered up, and I can provide you with funds to assist you immediately. I have to, in the interests of the protection of Earth and its people, not to save you any embarrassment. What are you looking for?”

“A drawdown facility in the first instance.”

Roslyn laughed. “I am sure you are. I shall make funds available, via a third party source to protect your interests. You realize I want something in return?”

It was Koenig’s turn to laugh. “I cannot commit to bring ECG controlling influence, you know that.”

“One step at a time, Admiral. Let’s commit to making this meeting a regular occurrence. We can look beyond that and the duration of any drawdown facility once it is in place. Do you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then; let’s eat, and we can discuss more specific details afterwards.”

The two leaders sat down to a three-course meal prepared by the President’s resident caterers. The dinner conversation was varied but difficult. Roslyn tried to discuss his interest in sports, in particular soccer and the World Series, but found Koenig to be severely lacking in knowledge in this area. He moved on to the environment and climate change, but Koenig was clearly uncomfortable discussing this issue too. Eventually they moved onto the Sentinel War, the wormholes and the Kryl.

This was inevitable. Small talk is not an option for Koenig, thought Roslyn. He is a shallow and one dimensional man. I can control him and Alpha too.
Chapter Fifty-Five

The Ionian Front

General Yoshi knew it was hopeless. They had been losing hard for a long time. They were outnumbered, and the only thing keeping Alpha from finishing them off was the threat of nuclear strikes.

The will had left as well. The idiotic humans had opened the wormholes, and the blue wormhole had appeared. The Sect would have you believe that the Kryl would come through the hole and destroy every living thing in the galaxy. The entire rationale behind the war with Alpha disappeared, and even the High Priestess was gone.

This was not just about the wormholes, not as far as Yoshi was concerned. He wanted Alpha destroyed and right now that was unlikely to happen. He would attack the Alpha Flagship and destroy it, together with the fleet commander, Admiral Rose. He would die trying, but that was an acceptable loss. He would take away their leader and then fall on his own sword.

* * * *

The progress pleased Admiral Rose. They were being hindered by localized atomic charges, but in the last ten days avoided any further significant fatalities. This was critical after so many deaths. When the battle finally ended, he could declare final victory, achieved with relatively little recent loss.

He could not let this final chapter of the war drag on indefinitely. His fleet was needed elsewhere. Although the main reason for the war was removed, the Sentinel generals continued their offensive strategy, which suggested the war was about a good deal more than protecting a couple of wormholes. Tomorrow, he thought, I will commence the final attack and clear the remaining larger critical vessels.

* * * *

Yoshi looked at the figures. His ship’s offensive capability was zero. The only high impact weapons remaining were three low-yield atomic charges; These were all that remained in his dwindling fleet. His shields were at thirty-five percent, and dropped each time Alpha delivered a deadly teutonic missile into the ship’s hull. A few got through and it was impossible to maintain parity. Put simply, his shields would give up completely within days and he had no answer. With no drive system to speak of, he had thrusters left. The most sensible action would be to surrender but Yoshi had no time for cowardice. He must finish the job. That meant he needed to get as close to the Alpha flagship as possible.

He put his plan into action. He set a course for the Pacific and crawled forward under thrusters at less than two hundred fifty kilometers per hour.

How close will she allow us to get? he wondered. There was no reason to suspect anything other than he brought his ship alongside to surrender. He gave the command for the ship to reduce speed and drop shields. It was now or never. His fleet thought he finally had come to his senses, and surrender would take place. Yoshi’s ship arched to come on course to run close alongside the Pacific. The pain will be soon be over, he thought.

* * * *

The Pacific Battle Bridge Commander had the con and paged the Admiral to advise the Sentinel Mother ship prepared to draw along side. Everything pointed towards a surrender, even her shields were down. She was within five hundred meters of the Fleet’s Flagship when Admiral Rose entered the bridge, together with the ship’s captain and his chief advisor.

“Bring her on screen and let’s see her come in. Let’s be cautious, everyone. This is not over yet. Jump ships and gun teams to standby.”

Rose enjoyed this. There was precious little to enjoy about the last few weeks.

“They are coming alongside. Wait. Sir, they are accelerating and have drawn in by five degrees. Sir, they are going to ram us.”

“Take evasive action,” said the Bridge Commander, but it was too late. They collided a few seconds later. The Sentinel Vessel crushed the battle bridge, and then followed through, smashing the Pacific central command and
munitions sections before coming to a complete halt. Thirty seconds later, both ships exploded. Yoshi ignited all three atomic weapons in the nose of the Sentinel vessel.

Devastation was complete. Admiral Rose and his colleagues on the Battle Bridge were killed upon first impact. The nuclear explosion put an end to any salvage plan, ripping the innards of both ships into oblivion. There was nothing left.

Yoshi saw the destruction of the battle bridge before the charges ignited. He prepared his sword and his fate was decided with the short fuse delay. He allowed time to confirm the Alpha ship was destroyed. Yoshi took his sword and took his last breath. He raised his sword into the air and brought it down, slicing through his abdomen from his left shoulder to his right thigh. This is my victory, he told himself and he smiled.

Five seconds later, his body and 5,000 others were ripped to pieces. Yoshi and Rose were dead.
Chapter Fifty-Six

Rose Is Dead

“We have confirmation, sir. Admiral Rose is dead and the Sentinels have surrendered on an unconditional basis.”

“Thanks, Commander.” Koenig turned to Admiral Koln. “Well, the Sentinel War is over. They have already pledged their forces for a joint initiative against the Kryl. I am calling for the Admiralty Bench to sit in special session to discuss this urgently.”

“I thought you wanted to keep this close to your chest?”

“I do, but the deployment of one hundred plus ships is not exactly non-substantial. We don’t need to say anything at this stage, other than their arrival is a possibility. That’s all we do know anyway.”

“Rose, this is a big loss.”

“My God, yes, it is. He will be missed. Shenke is more than adequate and he is growing in stature, but whether he is up to commanding a full fleet in a combat environment yet, I don’t know. There is no one in the area more qualified, so he will remain in command.”

Roslyn should have been worried. He should have been gravely concerned about the Kryl and what they would do if they came through the wormholes. All he could see was political advantage. He drafted header terms for a draw down facility for Alpha, which was to remain on his desktop and not released into general contracts. This was standard protocol for unofficial documents of this type.

The leak would have to come internally from his technical team. This would not be easy, because hacking into the mainframe of Alpha’s Commander In Chief would never be a simple task. He must make sure other ‘non-critical’ data leaked at the same time to give this ‘security breach’ some credibility. He spoke to the on-duty tech team manager at Alpha’s Central Command HQ, who provided remote access to his desktop, allowing a periodic security sweep. The leak files were all in the same file, for which he deleted the password and set as default. This was then a relatively simple task to hack in, copy and transmit the data to a third party system, where the info could be read and distributed to the media. That was the easy part. He must find someone stupid enough to do it. He ran his finger down the security clearance list. This showed the names of those with clearance to unlock his desktop and gain access to his files remotely. The target leaker was a certain Lieutenant Brad Chambers. Chambers had some history locally for leaking and selling critical Alpha papers, when a discreet leak to the media or general public was politically appropriate.

The document containing the status of the wormholes and the perceived threat from the Kryl was released directly onto the local Alpha domain and, from there, copied remotely to over eighteen hundred local distribution sites. By 9 a.m. the next morning, the news spread like wildfire. Panic was about to grip the Earth.
Chapter Fifty-Seven

Escaping the Kryl

The jump ship fell limply like a small rock dislodged from a mountain pass. It was falling towards a light. As the light drew nearer, the view became clearer. It wasn’t a light, it was a doorway. A doorway to the Kryl Galaxy. Jake Carter and his Sabre 4 were about to go through it.

When Jake came to, he’d been unconscious for nearly ten minutes. His spinning ship had cleared the blue wormhole. Suddenly aware of his predicament, Jake subconsciously assumed control of the vessel and brought her around. She suffered little from her enduring free-fall, but the NAVCOM was offline. He looked around and noted nothing of any particular significance. The star configurations looked markedly different, but in all other respects he could have been in the Pegasus galaxy or even the Solar system. As he explored his surroundings further, he realized he was not alone. Earth vessels surrounded him. Not Alpha but private vessels attempting to travel back toward the wormhole. They were pursued by the Kryl.

Jake did not stick around long enough to find out. His sensors picked up an Alpha Battle Cruiser presumably making good her escape.

Now’s not the time for heroism, thought Jake. He pulled the ship away from the Kryl and the departing Earth vessels, towards the Battle Cruiser and engaged his ion drive. The Sabre accelerated briskly and was instantly taken from the threat of the Kryl. He set a pursuit course for the Battle Cruiser and opened a comm link.

* * * *

“Sir, we have picked up an Alpha comm link from a jump ship on an intercept course with us. She is catching up quickly.” He paused and then added “She will be in weapons range in thirty seconds.”

“Can you verify her Alpha coding?”

“Yes, she is using a current and authorized Alpha code. She is a Sabre 4 sir, but the call sign suggests she is being piloted by an Enson.”

“Let the tractor beam bring her in and bring the pilot to me.”

* * * *

“What are you doing out here, Enson Carter?” asked Commander Hoskins.

“Same as you, I would imagine Sir. I am looking for Professor Winterburn and I assume that as we are not on a definite course, that you don’t know where he is.”

Jake was in an assertive mood. His confidence surprised Hoskins.

“On the contrary, Mister Carter. We do know where he is and we have a vessel locked into an intercept course some distance ahead, but on our current heading. I should thank you for your actions, which have not only provided us with the precise location of the blue wormhole fissure, but also have given us the opportunity to slip out of harm’s way and away from the Kryl fracas. That will facilitate a more prompt departure when the time comes. What do you know about Winterburn?”

Jake went on to explain Carla, her sister and his meeting with Winterburn. He explained for what felt like the umpteenth time, why he came to the Tri-Star system and finally here.

“So, you seem to have covered yourself, right up to when you decided to go A.W.O.L. in one of Admiral Shenke’s prize jump ship. Let’s hope it was worth it.”

Hoskins paused and then continued. “I think you have to be realistic. Winterburn shot off after we arrived here. I doubt he had time to pick up stragglers prior to departing. Carla is probably in one of those ships pursued by the Kryl. I would not hold out too much hope. You are welcome, given your obvious skills and the fact that you arrived with a Sabre 4, to join us in our pursuit of Winterburn.”

“I need to find Carla. If there’s any chance she might be out there, I need to find her. If it’s okay with you, I am going to refuel and then go out and look for her.”

Hoskins immediately regretted the impression of desperation he created. “Enson, I cannot allow that. The Sabre is Alpha property and I need every ship I can get. That includes you. Your skills and knowledge of Winterburn make
you a prized possession. I need you to stay with the ship while we continue our pursuit of Winterburn. A number of
private vessels docked with the AUSWAS ship prior to the blue wormhole opening. Joely was likely to be in board
the AUSWAS ship already; there is a fair chance Carla is on board too.”

* * * *

Winterburn saw the pursuing freighter on the ships scanners. The AUSWAS ship should try to outrun her, but he
was intrigued as to why a ship of this kind, a non-Alpha ship, would pursue at all. He turned towards his new crew.
They were all Kryl.

“We must take nothing for granted. The humans are intelligent, yes. They are also complex and would stop at
nothing to rescue one crew member when they might be putting other lives at risk. We will allow them to come a
little closer, but must be wary. It is possible there is an Alpha contingent aboard and that would not be good. How
long until we reach the Queen’s Ship?”

“No long. Should I prepare the cargo?”

“No. I need to speak to them first. I owe them that. Let me know if there any changes with the freighter and when
we are in communication range of the Queen’s ship.”

Winterburn was in command, although he was a warrior. He was a Kronan, part of the Kryl hierarchy second only
to the Queen herself. He was a cut above the workers and drones who attended him. Right now it suited him to
remain proactive. He approached the main cargo hold and two soldier drones moved aside as he entered. Within the
hold sat two large storage containers adapted to accommodate the ‘live’ specimens.

“What the hell is going on, Winterburn?” asked a bespectacled man in his fifties standing at the entrance of the
storage facility as Winterburn walked in.

Winterburn moved towards the center of the main reception area.

“Patience, please. I am about to explain. There will be an opportunity for questions afterwards.”

There was none of the God-like adoration Winterburn previously coerced his captives with. They were free to
make up their own minds, draw their own conclusions and pour scorn on everything he was about to say. He turned
to Joely first. “My dear girl. I see you have reunited with your sister.”

“Don’t you dare call me ‘dear’ Winterburn. You brought us all here under false pretenses. Are we to die at the
hands of you and your crew?”

Winterburn laughed. He assumed many of the personality traits of his human ‘friends’ over the years and learned
to understand the nuances of human behavior perfectly.

“You have no reason to fear me. You are the lucky ones. We will shortly arrive at our destination and you my
friends will be presented to the Kryl Queen. You are, I can assure you, all safe.”

Winterburn’s own natural personality began taking over and his physical attributes were already showing more of
a significant resemblance to the other Kryl onboard. “Be absolutely certain, if you step out of line, I will kill you
personally.”

“Alpha will come and rescue us,” Carla broke the silence. She had hardly spoken for the last forty-eight hours, but
she was happy to put herself at risk to ensure her point was recognized.

“Don’t push me, Carla. You are only here because your sister is important to me. You are also being naive. This is
Kryl space, in our galaxy not yours. Alpha has but one ship in the entire galaxy. The Kryl have tens of thousands.”

Just then a communication message came from the Bridge. The Alpha freighter launched three jump ships, and
they quickly closed the gap. Winterburn left the humans to their accommodations and headed for the bridge. If he
was concerned, he did not show it.

“How long before we are under cover of the Queen’s shield?”

“About forty-five minutes, my Kronan. The jumps ships will be in attack range within a couple of minutes.”

“Then we will have to keep them at bay, until the sanctity of the shields affords us protection or a Kryl security
battery arrives. Increase to maximum velocity and divert all non-essential power to security controls and weaponry.”

The ship went into stealth mode. This was an advancement Winterburn insisted upon when defensive upgrades
were fitted, prior to their departure from Earth. It was costly, but well worth it, affording protection equivalent to
Alpha’s ships of the line.
The jump ships circled the area several times before they located and locked on the stealthy ship via infrared-enhanced viewing capability. They needed to keep in close, to ensure they could keep the AUSWAS ship in view and sustain weaponry lock, and this presented the AUSWAS ship with the opportunity to deploy its own laser cannons.

The jump ships started their attack, and the AUSWAS ship’s shields did provide resistance briefly, but Alpha’s close-proximity flying allowed their weapons to break through the AUSWAS ships shield capability. It was only a matter of time before they broke through and took the ship.

“How long before we reach the Queen’s shields?” Winterburn repeated his earlier question

“Imminently, but our shields won’t last, my Kronan.”

“The security battery?”

“There are two on their way. It will be too late for us by the time they get here.”

Winterburn disliked the negativity. “We will hold them off long enough to deploy aboard a rescue vessel. Keep targeting the jump ship.”

* * * *

The requisitioned freighter kept back some distance. Its shields were not up to battle strength. Commander Jacques launched three more Rapiers and the Eagle troop carrier, which carried the mobile infantry and whose job it was to board and take the AUSWAS ship. He received the signal from his lead jump ship to advise shield penetration was sufficient to deploy boarding forces.

*It is going well,* he thought.* With a bit of luck we can grab Winterburn and head back towards the blue wormhole before we encounter Kryl fighters.*

Just as the new Rapiers deployed, the Kryl Security Battery appeared from nowhere at high velocity and their five ships attacked the freighter. Their weapons immediately penetrated the freighter’s limited shielding. Jacques acted quickly and redeployed the three Rapiers. The plan was going well, but unless the jump ships quickly turned it around, all was lost.

Almost as if fate played a watching brief, the Halo 7 arrived. Hoskins immediately sensed the freighter was in trouble. He ordered the Battle Cruiser to arc and pull into a steep descent, heading directly towards the Kryl battery. At high velocity, the Kryl ships were forced to move aside as the Halo 7 plowed through the middle of them. Hoskins quickly ordered the deployment of five more Rapiers. They launched and immediately joined the fray. He then ordered two further Sabres to head to the AUSWAS ship and join in the battle to assume control.

* * * *

Jake wasn’t expecting to be involved, but Lieutenant Temsouri had no hesitation in deploying the Sabre 4 into a battle of this type. She knew he was a rookie but hardly a novice. She needed the swift and subtle Sabre derivative to get close to the AUSWAS ship and really ‘batter’ them with her laser cannons. Jake obliged and launched quickly, immediately setting course for the AUSWAS ship.

* * * *

Carla watched the battle from within the storage accommodation, which conveniently afforded them a good view of the entire show. She saw the jump ship, the Kryl fighters and the freighter. She realized that as long as the Kryl didn’t deploy any further ships, some kind of rescue looked likely. She watched as the Alpha jump ships continued to pepper the AUSWAS ships shields, and then a massive explosion somewhere at the rear of the ship proved the shields were disabled. She watched as the Eagle pilots brought their ship alongside the AUSWAS ship, and witnessed the deployment of a battalion of mobile infantry gain almost immediate access to the Freighter. Two of the jump ships entered the hangar bay and she heard a brief exchange of hand weaponry fire.

*The AUSWAS ship must be in the hands of Alpha,* thought Carla.

* * * *

That was not the end of Kryl resistance. There were thirty Kryl onboard in addition to Winterburn. They were highly-skilled, well-armed and heavily protected foot soldiers, who would lay down their lives for their Queen and their Kronan. That meant defending the ship and their Kronan, down to the last man.
The Kryl held three key positions on the AUSWAS ship. They still controlled the bridge, had a contingent of ten soldiers in Engineering, and a further ten in the cargo area, whose sole purpose was to protect their precious cargo.

Major Richard De Vere commanded the one hundred marines who made up the Halo 7’s mobile infantry. He used sixty marines today, thirty of whom took several key positions aboard the ship. Resistance must be limited, although De Vere noted the Kryl were using some kind of adaptive shield technology, meaning that following the initial skirmishes, all the Kryl’s suits were adapted to form a greater defense against Alpha’s hand blasters and hypercannons. The blasters in particular were proving inadequate, even at the highest settings, and the marines were forced to deploy the much heavier hypercannons to make any impact on the Kryl’s technology.

The Kryl’s weaponry was effective. The marines’ armor plated suits were cut to pieces by the rapid fire laser streams. Vision was extremely limited, and the infrared vision devices were not coping in the smog created by the constant laser fire.

De Vere was an experienced campaigner. He knew he had both the tactical and numerical advantage. The Kryl confined themselves to areas of the ship which were difficult to defend and his marines made advances within the three key areas.

Engineering was the first to fall under Alpha control. De Vere’s subordinate officers took and secured the Engineering deck with no losses, and also secured two Kryl prisoners. The Bridge remained secured by heavy blast doors, with a contingent of three Kryl holding off Alpha’s advances in the badly lit corridor in front of them. De Vere personally led this assault, and patience remained the key. He lost three personnel but the odds were still in his favor.

The battle to secure the human cargo took place in a more wide-open arena. Fifteen marines were joined by Jake Carter, who had landed his Sabre inside the AUSWAS ship, armed himself and made his way to the nearest marine—who had, in turn, directed him to the cargo area. The marines cleared the corridor and exchanged open fire with the Kryl. The storage containers housing human prisoners were in view. Jake, armed with a hypercannon, was in the most-forward position with two marines either side of him.

The lead marine prepared an assault on the Kryl soldiers immediately to the left of the storage containers. He engaged his hypercannon, and stood to commence his advance while Jake and the second marine provided cover. He cleared the twenty meters between his two Alpha colleagues and the containers, but in doing so he took two direct hits. The one to his leg smashed the bone in his knee; the other severed an artery in his lower thorax. He was clearly in agony but managed to control his aim, and held the new position while he waited for his fellow marine and Jake to join him.

* * * *

Alpha was not faring as well as Hoskins might have hoped on the outside. A further Kryl security battery joined the fray and Hoskins was forced to deploy additional Sabres to assist in the battle. It didn’t help that he lost Jake Carter, who, he assumed, landed his Sabre on board the AUSWAS vessel, intent on only one thing: to rescue his loved one. To complicate matters, the freighter was in deep trouble. Hoskins isolated the freighter from the line of fire, and an evacuation was underway.

The Kryl vessels were weakening, and it was only a matter of time before Alpha secured victory in the space battle. His first officer joined him on the bridge. Jacques may have lost his first command, but he orchestrated a successful, highly charged offensive. Winterburn would soon be secure, and then they could turn about and head towards the wormhole.

* * * *

Back aboard the AUSWAS ship, Jake and the two marines successfully crossed the deck. They defended their position immediately in front of the storage containers. The lead marine was in trouble. He lost a great deal of blood, and battle conditions meant it was impossible to pull him back for medical attention.

_He needs help soon_, thought Jake. The marine was dying. The second marine continued to defend the position while he waited for several more of his colleagues to join him. Jake crouched down and held the hand of the dying lead marine. He doubted whether he would make it.

After another ten minutes, the cargo area fracas was over and a contingent of six marines, including a medic, crossed to Jake and his companion’s position. The medic arrived too late. Jake had held a dying man in his arms in combat for the first time, his death occurring only moments earlier.
A marine sergeant placed a plastic explosive charge on the storage container door and stood aside while the charge ignited forcing the door off its hinges and backwards into the container. Visibility was limited following the explosion, but Jake and three marines entered. The prisoners gathered on the far side of the container, having heeded the marine’s prior warning of the impending explosion.

In all thirty-six human prisoners were rescued. Jake only cared about one. He held her in his arms and kissed her. He had Carla back and it was time to bring her home.

* * * *

Winterburn knew the battle was over. He prepared to be taken, and all that would inevitably arise from it. He knew he was far too important to the Kryl Queen for her to allow him to be taken. She would order his return imminently. He also knew he had done his job. The blue wormhole was open, and by now the advance Kryl fleet would have entered the Tri-Star system, in advance of something much bigger.

He opened the blast doors and held his hands aloft. He acted the human once again, despite the fact that his facial features had returned to his original Kryl form.

Major De Vere stepped forward onto the bridge and approached Winterburn who sat on the command pedestal.

“Professor Winterburn, I presume.”

“Yes, Major. May I congratulate you on a job well done? Your marines are as good as they say. All you have to do is take me and your human companions off this ship and back through the wormhole. Do you imagine that will be an easy task?”

De Vere did not rise to the bait.

“I am acting under orders from my superiors just as I am sure you have been. You are correct, we will take you back through the wormhole where, I imagine, you will undergo extensive interrogation. Take him away, Corporal Pearce.”

* * * *

Carla was overjoyed to see Jake. She could not believe he had come all this way to rescue her. She told him she should have been cross, since her messages explicitly requested he not come. She always knew he would. Joely, too, seemed genuinely pleased to see Jake. She had met him previously but was heavily influenced by Winterburn, which was not a way to meet your sister’s new love.

Jake sought permission from De Vere to depart the AUSWAS vessel with both sisters aboard the Sabre 4, and within a few minutes he departed on route to Halo 7.

Jake was overcome with emotion. He travelled thousands of light years and got what he came for.

* * * *

Jonathan Hoskins was pleased. The mission to recover Winterburn was a success, and they were on course to return through the blue wormhole fissure and the Tri-Star System. There were losses—fifteen in all, including four jump ship pilots and eight marines. These were acceptable losses, given what they achieved. He would deal with the unpleasant communications to the dead men’s relatives’ later. He was ready to talk to Winterburn.

As the ranking officer in the field, it was his right to carry out the initial interviews. He looked forward to the opportunity to grill Winterburn on the Kryl’s plans. He looked forward to having a certain conversation with both his CAG and Enson Carter. Carter should never have been authorized to board the AUSWAS vessel, but he knew Carter’s youthful enthusiasm, naiveté, and his intent to find the Stevenson sisters meant he would have tried anyway.

Hoskins was not overly concerned. He would chastise the young Enson but would not make it official. By all accounts, Carter proved his excellent jump pilot skills and took an integral part in the capture of one of the sections of the AUSWAS ship. In addition, he was blooded, witnessing his first real death in combat. The realities of war, especially on the ground, were not pleasant. All in all, this was an excellent grounding for a young officer to experience, one which would stand him in good stead for future endeavors.

Hoskins turned his attention back to Winterburn, and was just about to head off to the Halo 7’s detention deck when Commander Jacques opened a comm link to him.
“Commander we have sighted a further fleet of Kryl vessels on a route to intercept us. I have raised the ships status to condition yellow.”

Hoskins sighed. They were not out of the woods yet. It was clear that they may have to engage the Kryl again before they reached the wormhole. This would be an excellent time to discuss these matters with Winterburn.
Chapter Fifty-Eight

Where Is Jake?

Steve spent the last three days on call with his Rapier squadron. He had not taken to jump ship shift routines easily. After six shifts off and six on, he was relieved to be free to take some time and visit the leisure facilities aboard the Pacific. His first task was to make contact with Jake. He knew the information board should show Jake’s squadron and shift details. He needed to check these and then arrange to meet up with Jake when they were both free. Clearly they needed to meet urgently, and he was surprised, given Jake’s enthusiasm to find Carla, he had not made contact already.

Steve stood in front of the board, unable to believe what he saw. He took his eyes away and looked again, the entry was clear: Enson Jake Carter M.I.A.

Missing in Action. Oh my God, thought Steve. What the hell does that mean out here? He opened a comm link to Jake’s CAG and the answer soon became clear. Jake Carter had gone AWOL.

He had gone through the blue wormhole, out playing the hero once again. His actions were obsessive, thought Steve, unusually so for Jake.

There was definitely more to Jake’s’ recent relationship with Carla. There must be something more. Jake must have been seeing Carla behind his back and the stupid bastard stole a jump ship. Oh, my God, if he makes it back I am going to kill him. If he brings Carla back. Oh shit, I hope he brings Carla back.

Steve Costello was not the only person who had just found out what happened to Enson Carter. Admiral Shenke was advised in his daily briefing. He was annoyed but said nothing.

“I am sure you can deal with your CAG and her subordinates on this matter Commander. We do have more pressing matters to attend to. Let me know if Carter returns. Now to more pressing matters.”

“Dr. Cameron, do you have any news for me on the closure of these wormholes?”

“Some, certainly, but nothing of any substance yet.”

“Doctor, I don’t need to express to you the urgency of the situation. Are you taking full advantage of the Alpha facilities we have available?”

“Admiral, you have to understand the extent of this. We have six days to come up with a way to close something that took twenty years of research to devise how to open. We looked at your overall weapons capability, and none of them will do the job. To explode any of them, within the hole, will serve simply as a catalyst to allow the hole to grow.”

“What about conventional methods? The pulse resonator. Can’t it simply be put into reverse? Surely this is the most obvious and straight forward route to pursue?”

Cameron grew angry. He was usually an even-tempered man, but Shenke exerted significant pressure. If he were honest, he didn’t know how they were going to close the wormhole.

“We ruled out the resonator on day one, Admiral. It is going to take something completely different to close what we have opened. To be honest, we have no idea what that might be. In any case, it has been nearly a week with no sign of any ‘invasion’; surely we have to start looking at the possibility that the wormhole goes nowhere and the Kryl will never be able to come though. Assuming they exist, that is. I presume you are aware of the growing sense the Kryl don’t exist and Winterburn’s words are those of a mad man?”

“Yes, I am aware. However, we need to stay on task. It is imperative you keep looking and exploit all Alpha facilities available to you.”

Cameron sighed. He knew when he was beaten. “We will continue to look, and as soon as we reach a solution, I will be in contact.”

***

Steve Costello enjoyed a beer. He sat at a table in the officer’s mess, with two jump ship colleagues from his squadron. This is long overdue, he thought. Jake has gone AWOL, Carla has completely disappeared and I am on an A-class star ship, in the middle of nowhere, waiting to take a jump ship into combat for the first time.

Two weeks ago, he celebrated his Academy Top Gun success. Today he was in a war zone in the officer’s mess
with two complete strangers having a drink. If this weren’t difficult enough to comprehend, Alpha had a new enemy, seeking Earth as a feeding ground. *This is electric,* he told himself. *This was what he had signed up for.* Not being with Carla didn’t bother him anymore. He just went along for the thrill. No-one could question that a thrill was exactly what he was getting.

* * * *

Shenke stood alone, staring out of his state room viewing window. He just received news of the leak to the media of the events unfolding in the Tri-Star System and by all accounts the media fuelled widespread panic across Earth, its colonies and beyond. Alpha took the brunt of the blame and President Roslyn was reveling in his newfound role as Protector General. *Typical,* thought Shenke, *the media frenzy was inevitable as was the public’s response.* He took great care to prevent the story getting into the wrong hands and yet…

His thought process was interrupted by an internal comm link.

“Admiral, a large number of unidentified vessels have just been sighted exiting the wormhole. It’s the Kryl, sir.”

Shenke sighed deeply and paused before replying.

“Take us to Battle Stations, Commander Willis. I am on my way to the bridge.”

Shenke found himself in command of Alpha’s first line of defense against the Kryl. It was ironic how, after so many years as a mainstay commander—one of the most experienced and most overlooked senior-ranking officer in the fleet—he was finally in command. His small and insignificant force stood between the Kryl and Earth. The late Admiral Rose’s Fleet was on their way, but they would arrive too late to help him.

Shenke entered the Command Center and stood transfixed on the enhanced viewer ahead of him, as he witnessed the mass of Kryl vessels slowly drawing toward them. He looked closer, and noticed the front line of the Kryl armada was composed of a vast number of small, probably single seat vessels. These were followed by a smaller number of battle cruiser size ships and were followed finally by the gigantic mother ship. They were all of the same design, albeit of different sizes. They all shared a sinister characteristic; each ship glowed red on their underside, casting a crimson hue against the shadow of the blue wormhole which lay behind. The sky turned a deep shade of purple.

None of Shenke’s bridge crew interrupted him as he slowly absorbed the sight in front of him. They all took time to take in and comprehend exactly what it was they were seeing. Commander Willis finally disturbed the silence.

“It would seem our first line of defense is going to be jump ship, sir. I have launched fifteen squadrons and have laid a further ten as backup.”

“Thank you Mister Willis. Where are the Sec? I thought they were here to defend the region too?”

“They are standing by sir. They lack any coherent direction. Perhaps they are as stunned as we are.”

“Contact them and ask for their immediate support. There are far too many Kryl ships for this fleet to deal with on our own.”

* * * *

Enson Costello watched in disbelief from the main hangar deck’s observation platform. Over two hundred jump ships had launched and a huge battle was imminent. He was on standby, having cast aside his drink and responded to the ship’s battle station alarms and comm link requests for immediate battle deployment. With the alcoholic imbalance in his body medically neutralized, he would soon join the fray. He was ready.
Chapter Fifty-Nine

The Winterburn Interrogation

Hoskins entered the interview room, just as Winterburn sat down on a chair in front of an empty table. The room was small and partially lit. Hoskins pulled the only other chair in the room towards the table on the opposite side to Winterburn and waited for the two security staff to leave the room before he sat down. He waited as the security team outside prepared their observation equipment, and then the lighting above the table was directed into Winterburn’s face. This was an old and fairly straightforward intimidation and interrogation technique.

“Professor Winterburn. You have been a difficult fellow to track down.”

Winterburn smiled and said nothing. His face was both expressionless and featureless. Only his piercing red eyes protruded from an otherwise pallid but perfect complexion.

“Did you have some questions for me?”

Winterburn finally spoke. His accent was quintessential English public school; his demeanor was polite but forthright; he was everything he was supposed to be and yet, one look and it was clear he was not human. How were people taken in by this? thought Hoskins.

Winterburn smiled again.

“Your thoughts are transparent Commander Hoskins. I have shed my former human characteristics. A shame, really, as I had grown accustomed to them. I am telepathic, and that, my friend, is just one of the ploys I use to grow peoples’ acceptance and confidence in me.”

Hoskins tried to clear his mind and averted to standard interrogation techniques.

“Why did you choose Earth?”

“We didn’t choose Earth. We became aware of the existence of a link between our galaxy and yours. A galaxy rich in natural resources and food. Earth is but one planet of many hundreds of thousands in your galaxy as a whole.”

Winterburn spoke clearly and slowly. He seemed eager to answer Hoskins questions.

“The blue wormhole was not accessible from our galaxy apart from a small fissure, larger but similar to the one at your end. We were able to deploy a small vessel through the fissure and into your galaxy. I arrived over fifty years ago. I sought out the most likely populated planet and made my entrance. The rest I believe you know.”

“You seem keen to provide us with the answers.”

“To hold back how I got here serves no purpose. Neither do our intentions, or that you won’t be able to hold me. I already manipulate the minds of your crew. A Kryl fleet is on route to intercept you.”

Hoskins was angry but tried not to show it.

“You will find we will be a good deal harder to control than your former disciples. Our resolve to protect ourselves is paramount.”

“And futile. Your existence as a race is in our hands. You will be consumed at a rate we deem appropriate. Already an advance fleet has entered your galaxy. A much larger invasion force will follow in due course. I have nothing further to add at this time. I wish to return to my holding cell. You will be compelled to release me back to my people in due course.”

Hoskins was horrified as the full magnitude of Winterburn’s statement sank in. They are intending to consume us. He elected to ignore this and concentrate on military issues only.

“I will not. You will be subjected to lengthy interrogation by my colleagues and you will provide further answers, as will all your captive Kryl colleagues. I assure you that you will not be released soon.”

Hoskins stood up and left the room immediately. He was angry and worried. He felt a pulling force as Winterburn entered his mind and tried to extract his thoughts. He convinced himself he had not allowed Winterburn to delve too deeply. He doubted whether everyone in the ship could hold off Winterburn’s advances so easily.

* * * *

Jake was grounded by his CAG the moment he arrived back at the ship. He was confined to his quarters while
Carla and her fellow compatriots were taken somewhere else in the ship. Jake didn’t know where, but he was
determined to see her again. He had not come all this way only for her to be taken away so soon after he had her
back. He was not angry; he reasoned his CAG had every right to detain him. He was not particularly concerned that
he was grounded, either. His brief experience of the Kryl had been unpleasant. All he wanted was to get him and
Carla back safely home. He was concerned, however, about the Kryl fleet gathering on the horizon. He doubted
whether the Halo 7 had the capability to hold them off. The only recourse was to exit the Kryl galaxy as quickly as
possible. He persuaded himself the ship’s commander had the same intentions.

* * * *

Carla was confused. She felt the compulsion again. She felt pulled towards Winterburn and a connection had once
again been made. She could do nothing however, as her guest accommodation, although pleasant enough, was time-
lock secured, a necessary precaution, according to the Alpha commanders, to ensure Winterburn didn’t once again
try to manipulate his former captives. She was stronger this time and understood what Winterburn tried to do. She
was also less convinced of her sister’s resolve. The two sisters requested accommodation together, and at first they
enjoyed the opportunity to spend some time together. Now it looked as if Joely’s deeper connection to Winterburn
unsettled her.

“Why won’t they let us out? I need to get to Winterburn. I need to see that he is okay.”

“Why do you want to see him, Joely? He was your captor for over six years and his ultimate intention was to
consume you.”

“He would never have consumed me. He loves me. I have to find a way out of here. Carla, you are part of Alpha.
You must know how to get us out of here?”

“No.” Carla was firm. “Winterburn is an alien, whose sole intention is the destruction of the human race. He
doesn’t love you. He deceived you all this time and once again he is trying to connect with us. You must try to shut
him off.”

“I can’t, Carla. He is too powerful. I must go to him.”

Like a possessed and enraged caged animal she rushed for the door at full force. She fell to the ground exhausted
and deflated.

“Help me Carla,” she said. “Help me.”

* * * *

Hoskins took the ship to maximum thrust as he tried to outrun the Kryl fleet. He briefed the whole crew by comm
link that Winterburn had tried to exert pressure on them, and they were to resist under all circumstances. So far, it
had seemed to work. Winterburn could not get to his former captives, either; they were in time-locked quarters. He
just needed a bit more time to get as close to the blue wormhole fissure as possible.

Hoskins decided he needed to know more about Winterburn and the effect he had on people. He would speak to
the rescued prisoners, but first he would speak to Jake Carter. He headed for the hangar deck and his CAG.

* * * *

Lieutenant Obeya Temsouri was in the CAG operations room when Hoskins entered. She was alone so he went to
her and they embraced. He reminded himself, as always, that this was wrong, that he had a wife at home expecting
his child and to whom he had promised his infidelity would cease. He persuaded himself, as every other time, that
this was not the time to cease his relationship with Obeya. He composed himself, however; this was a time for action
and not passion.

“You should not have allowed Enson Carter to board the AUSWAS ship. What happened?”

Obeya was professional enough to know there was a time and place for their relationship. She was taken aback by
the Hoskins bluntness. She realized he was under pressure.

“There was little I could do once he made up his mind. I have grounded him and confined him to his quarters. He
is a good pilot and will one day make a good commander, I am sure of that. Although acting in his own self interest,
he did play an important part in securing Winterburn.”

“I agree, and I won’t take the matter further. I do, however, wish to speak to him about his knowledge of
Winterburn. Can you take me to his quarters?”
Jake Carter was enjoying a well-earned rest when Hoskins entered. He was surprised to receive the ship’s commander at his door, especially with the ship at battle stations.

“At ease, Mister Carter. I want to talk to you about Winterburn. I need an insight into what it feels like to be under his control.”

“Well, sir. I am afraid you need to talk to someone who was cast under his spell, and I was not. He can only influence certain people. You can feel him trying to pull you in, but for me he never established any real control. I didn’t feel drawn to him in any way. Carla, or more so her sister, would be more able to provide an insight.”

“Very well. I will send for them in due course—and I think perhaps you again as well. Your relationship with them may help to bring this all out into the open.”

With that, the commander left, and Jake felt a sudden sense of unease. Yes, he would see Carla again, but something didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel right at all.

Winterburn felt his power enveloping his disciples. There was some reluctance but he gradually exercised control once again. His fellow Kryl also exercised their influence. They gradually engaged the minds of the humans. They would fall under the Kryl’s power like every other race who ever encountered them.

The interrogation was surprisingly lengthy, but there was no pain. Winterburn felt the pain of interrogation once before from his own kind before he achieved his high status. The primitive and ineffective techniques deployed by the humans made no comparison to those adopted by his own people. He revealed no more than known already. He alone would dictate the extent of any information provided.

The Kryl armada was small. It was deployed by the Queen’s ship, following a subspace message from Winterburn. The Kronan’s request was treated with the highest priority. The Human ship was visible ahead. It travelled at light speed but could easily be overtaken. They’d surround it and draw in, then dispatch drones to take the ship. The Kronan would be collected and returned to the Queen’s ship where he would report personally to the Queen.

The Kryl force spread into a curved attack formation. They were nearing their prey. Soon the small fleet would feed.

Hoskins detected the formation change of the Kryl fleet himself and immediately placed his jump ship squadrons on standby. He would not give in so easily. A battle was the last resort, with escape still being the most preferred option by far. They neared the fissure and would have to slow to prepare for their departure from this galaxy. That would be the time when the tactic would be won or lost. He needed more information, and called for the Stevenson sisters and Jake Carter to meet him in his ready room. Carter had just arrived.

“Enson Carter. Please take a seat, the ladies will be here shortly. As you can see from the viewer, this is a critical moment.”

Jake and Commander Hoskins watched as the Kryl’s circular formation completed. They were still closing in, but were outside weapons range. Hoskins was not taking any chances.

“Increase velocity. Let’s have all we’ve got.”

“We are already running at maximum, sir. There is no guarantee the stellar drive will hold at this velocity sir. We are also putting a huge strain on the ship’s hull.”

“She can take it. Just keep it going as long as we can and keep running diagnostics. We don’t want to be caught out with a sudden power dip.”

Hoskins was in his element, but Jake saw the strain on him as he sought to maintain his strategy, balanced on a knife’s edge. He watched as the commander moved to his next comm link.”

“Where are the Stevenson sisters? They should be here by now.”
“They left fifteen minutes ago sir.”

“It doesn’t take fifteen minutes to get to the bridge from anywhere in this God damn ship. Send a security detail and find out what’s keeping them.” He paused as if deep in thought and then added. “Double the guard at the detention center. They may be under Winterburn’s influence.”

Jake could not believe what he heard, but then he realized why he was feeling so uneasy. Winterburn had her again.

“Are you suggesting Carla and her sister are trying to release Winterburn?”

“Possibly, Mister Carter, possibly.”

* * * *

Carla already forced the lock on their time-locked accommodation and they had slipped their guard. They relieved him of his firearm and left him with a sore head and with his hands comforting his groin. Joely acted completely under Winterburn’s influence. He guided her to him. Carla was also under the Kryl’s power.

They arrived at the detention center and entered the ward room unseen as two guards discussed the placement of security pending Hoskins’s latest instructions. They encountered no resistance as they entered the cell area. The guards were all clearly already under Winterburn’s spell. Carla found Winterburn’s cell and deciphered the lock codes. Expertly, she found the first two numbers, the third, the fourth and then finally the fifth. The detention cell door opened and Winterburn was free.
Chapter Sixty

Shenke’s Battle

The Kryl Fleet stopped moving forward and stood motionless less than ten thousand meters from Admiral Shenke’s fleet. There was complete silence in the command center, until Shenke stood up.

“Open a general comm link asking them to identify themselves.”

“Aye, Sir.”

“No response. Sir, should I send again?”

“No. We will wait for them to make the first move. Stand us down from battle stations, but maintain alert status. Keep the jump ship squadrons from closing to within five thousand meters.”

Shenke was pensive. He knew he could attack but he could not understand why they hadn’t. They had superior numbers, weapons advantage and they were not advancing. Why?

“Sir, the Sect Commander just boarded. Shall I have him delivered to your state room?”

“Who authorized his arrival?”

“That was me, Admiral.” Commander Willis stood up and moved towards Shenke’s command chair. “He said the meeting was scheduled.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know sir. He was most insistent that he speak to you personally.”

Shenke sighed. “Very well. If there is any change whatsoever, please let me know. I will be in my state room.”

The Sect Commander stood facing the door when Shenke entered. He saluted by crossing his palms to his chest, and then spoke.

“Admiral Shenke. Thank you for meeting with me. I am here to transfer control of the battle to us to allow us to fulfill our commitment.”

“What do you mean ‘transfer control’?”

“We are the Sect Guard, and we are compelled to stop the Kryl from entering the galaxy. It is our obligation, and you won’t be required.”

Shenke let out an exaggerated cackle. “It is a bit late to stop them from entering our galaxy. They are already here. Your forces won’t be strong enough to defeat the Kryl. You are welcome to join us but under my overall command.”

“I repeat, you need to stand down Admiral. Our forces are trained for exactly this situation. It is your fleet which would not be successful.”

Shenke grew impatient. “What makes you think your forces will fare better than ours? Your lead ship disintegrated as I recall.”

“No, the High Priestess switched the shielding off. She failed in her obligation to keep the wormholes from open. She took her life.”

“Plus the lives of hundreds of others on board, I don’t doubt. Why are you so convinced your ships and your pilots are better than ours?”

“Not better, but more able in this situation. My pilots have trained for this day for a long time.”

“This still doesn’t give them any advantage over Alpha. You are as in the dark as we are as to their capability.”

“We have witnessed the Kryl in action before. We know what they are capable of and we have trained accordingly.”

“I thought you had never seen the Kryl before.”

“Seen, no; your perception of things is masked by your ignorance. We have developed beyond the senses of sight or hearing. We have sensed the Kryl from across this galaxy into the next and into the next.”

“Is this your religion or some kind of telepathy?”

Shenke found himself mocking the Sect Commander. He must restrain himself from digging deeper. This strange
little man, human like only in form but alien in every other way asked him to allow them to take on the Kryl. They would all die. How long would they last?

“I cannot agree to pull out. I do, however, respect your beliefs, and if you don’t work with us then we will have to work side by side. Hopefully the outcome will be the same.”

“I cannot persuade you to leave the battle to us? Should you not be concentrating on righting your wrongs? The wormhole needs to be closed, if the Queen’s ship comes through everyone will die.”

“What is the Queen’s ship?”

“The Kryl have no planet they call their home. They have travelled the galaxies for eons reducing each galaxy to rubble and moving onto the next. The Queen’s ship is a vast citadel, home to millions of Kryl.”

Shenke was suddenly interested. The Sect Commander provided an insight into the Kryl, or the Sect’s belief in the Kryl. Maybe this should be explored further.

“How do they feed exactly? Sorry to deviate. This seems like an opportunity for you to give us valuable insight into what and who the Kryl are.”

“I welcome the opportunity Admiral, especially if it helps to convince you of the necessity for us to fight alone. However I won’t belabor the point. With regard to feeding, the answer is not in the way you think. They feed just like you and I do. They are omnivorous to the extent that, day by day, they eat meat and vegetables. By meat, I mean cultivated livestock, like cattle. They are divivorous too, meaning they have a periodic requirement for brain-stimulated, or electrical impulse, energy. This is derived from intelligent beings. Put simply, they suck the energy from the cerebral cortex, without touching it and without consuming the flesh, the bones, the organs or any part of the physical anatomy.”

“The Sect always suggested they consumed their prey.”

“Yes, we stayed away from revealing the true extent of their consumption. The fact is that to say they feed on electrical impulses from the body is hardly frightening, when you consider the alternatives. The Sect wanted people to fear the Kryl, to make them believe that they would be consumed, without explaining exactly how.”

“So, why the change of heart? Why are you telling me?”

“Because things have changed. First, the Kryl will begin to demonstrate their method of killing. The second is that we currently have no High Priestess to govern us, so I am no longer constrained from telling you the whole story. From my perspective, it serves to assist my reasoning.”

Shenke was impressed by the little man. He was intelligent, and his command of the English language was demonstrable. He wanted to explore this further but a comm link interrupted him.

“Sir, the Ionian Fleet just entered the Tri-Star region. Admiral Haines opened a secure comm link to you, sir.”

“Thanks. I will take in my study.” Shenke turned to the Sect Commander. “Can we continue this discussion shortly? I’ll arrange for some refreshments to be brought in.”

Shenke headed towards his study and opened the comm link.

“Admiral Haines. I heard about Rose. I presume you are in command of the Ionian Fleet.”

“I am, and I have been ordered to report to you, Admiral.”

“How many ships do you have?”

“Three hundred twenty ships of the line. We lost our flagship, but we are at battle readiness and have a full complement.”

“We were not expecting you for another few days.”

“Our orders were to proceed at maximum. We were aware of the need to get here as quickly as possible.”

“Oh, Admiral. Let’s meet A.S.A.P aboard the Pacific. You are my senior commander and we need to meet to establish some parameters and battle tactics.”

“How near to battle are we?”

“It is imminent, but with the addition of your support and The Sect Guard we should be able to mount a significant offensive capability. Let me know when you are on board the Pacific.”

Shenke closed the comm link and returned to his discussion with the Sect Commander.
“Our numbers have swelled dramatically, Sect Commander. We really should all work together on this.”

“I reiterate what I said before, Admiral: we will work alone, but not against you. Did you wish to discuss the behavior of the Kryl some more?”

“Yes, please.”

Shenke and the Sect Commander proceeded to discuss the Kryl in further detail. The Sect Commander revealed that the Kryl could consume the electrical impulse energy over time or all in one go, meaning death could be immediate or could be dragged out over many years, with the victim’s motor neuron functions gradually depleting over time. Shenke learned the Kryl used a form of the consumption to gain ‘mind control’ over their prey. Some could control and influence people over distances, and this was likely to have been the way that Winterburn established control over his ‘disciples’.

“So, Winterburn was consuming his victims as well as controlling them.”

“No. They can only consume their prey over short distances. This was simply mind control. The principle is the same though.”

The discussion went on to discuss the Queen’s ship in more detail and the tactical and offensive capabilities of the Kryl ships. After a further half-hour of discussion they agreed to work side-by-side but independently and Shenke thanked the commander for his help.

Alone again. Shenke turned his attention back towards Cameron. He was in mid-discussion with the Doctor when the fleet suddenly went to Battle Stations status. The Kryl Fleet moved forward.

“How long before Admiral Haines’ vessels are in position?”

“About an hour. Looks like they are going to miss the start.”

* * * *

The Kryl Fleet launched an all-out offensive moments later. Alpha responded immediately by launching three hundred jump ships who quickly engaged their Kryl one-man counterparts in a dogfight above the main fleet battle. The Kryl battle cruisers fired a multitude of plasma weapons which impacted immediately on the Alpha Fleet. The effect was devastating. Before Alpha was able to re-modulate their shield frequencies, seven ships of the line were destroyed by the plasma attacks alone. Alpha, though, was far from defeated and Shenke ordered direct attacks on the Kryl battle cruisers within Alphas weaponry range. Again and again, the Kryl plasma weapons pummeled the Alpha Fleet. This time the shields held up for longer, allowing the Alpha ships to regenerate and defend themselves.

Above, the jump ship squadrons were engaged in the fiercest battle of all, with over one thousand vessels fighting one-to-one in a confined space above the fleet. Alpha’s jump ship losses were appalling.

They lost half their fleet within the first ten minutes of fighting and Shenke was forced to launch a further three hundred vessels immediately. Still the losses mounted, and another three hundred jump ships were dispatched. It wasn’t their individual capability, it was the sheer number of Kryl vessels and their superior maneuverability that was losing the jump ship battle.

The Sect Guard waited for the right time to engage the Kryl. Timing was critical. The Sect fighters entered the jump ship foray all at once and immediately they transformed the status of the battle. Their weapons delivered their payload accurately and with instant success, while the Kryl vessels made little impact in the initial skirmishes between them. This allowed the Alpha jump ships to regroup and target specific Kryl groups. At last they, too, began to make an impact.

Shenke witnessed the battle from the command deck. It was not going well. The Kryl superiority was telling and they had not deployed the considerable weaponry of their mother ship. The Sect Commander was true to his word, they were a formidable fighting force and they were certainly making a major impact on the Kryl Fleet. Whether they would still be around at the end was another matter, but for now he was grateful for their assistance.

The Kryl’s tactics began to work. They continued forward en masse while attacking the Alpha Fleet, and were less than a thousand meters from Shenke’s fleet. They intended to use their numerical advantage to swarm Alpha and take on each ship on a one-to-one basis, while the excess Kryl ships took turns attacking their particular prey. Shenke needed Admiral Haines’ fleet and fast.
Chapter Sixty-One
Roslyn–Koenig

Roslyn’s plan worked. His political astuteness paid off once again, and his personal approval ratings rose almost overnight to an all-time high. The leak spread as anticipated and the media grasped it with both hands. Inevitably there was exaggeration and, within twenty-four hours, headlines containing “Invasion Imminent” and “Human Cattle” were prevalent. Mass hysteria was avoided when he broadcast a live clarification of the severity of the situation and the likelihood of invasion. He dumbed-down the risk, but made sure the blame fell firmly in Alpha’s court. He emphasized the importance of Earth’s defense shield, and clarified that the shields were under ECG’s control and not Alpha’s. He reiterated the huge investment was justified and the shields were state-of-the-art and fully utilized. He would personally ensure they were maintained correctly and kept one hundred percent effective and fully operational, not just during this crisis but indefinitely. He also stated Alpha’s lack of investment in Earth defenses and poured scorn over their policy for space exploration, while investment in the defense of Earth and its colonies was ECG’s prime directive. The political genius that Roslyn possessed turned a bad situation into good and created fervor of patriotism at the same time.

So why did he feel so bad? Alpha’s latest report from the Tri-Star region made depressing reading. Roslyn’s assertion to the public was that the threat of an invasion was unlikely. That statement looked a little threadbare.

He needed to speak to Koenig urgently. He opened a personal comm link and waited patiently for a secure encrypted link to be established. He would need to choose his words carefully; Koenig would not be pleased with the way Roslyn handled the crisis.

“Ah, President Roslyn. The savior of the masses, whereas I presumably am the devil.”

Roslyn was not accomplished at eating humble pie. As a politician, when faced with an embarrassing issue, he was used to going on the offensive. Somehow this didn’t seem the right time for that.

“Perhaps I took advantage of the panic gripping the planet and, perhaps, to blame Alpha was a little unfair.”

“My God, that’s tantamount to an apology from a politician! By the same token, we accept that perhaps we should have heeded the Sentinels’ and the Sect’s warnings. The worst crime here is the leak, which I will assume came from your own personal desk top.”

Roslyn was not about to admit to this. True to form, he went back on the offensive, armed with an acknowledgement Alpha regretted its actions.

“I assumed opening one hole would have been more than sufficient for your ego and then perhaps you could have opened the other later once the original wormhole dissipated.”

“We all have our crosses to bear, Roslyn. I presume you contacted me for a reason?”

“How worried should we be about the threat from the Kryl?”

Koenig paused briefly as if he was looking to find a way out of what he needed to say.

“In short, we don’t yet know. We assume the Kryl force we are fighting is an advance fleet and that a much larger force will be on its way in due course. Certainly, from reports received right up until this evening, things don’t look good. We have over three hundred fifty ships of the line under Shenke’s control. They are joined by the fleet from the Ionian System. Losses are already mounting and not a shot has been fired from their mother ship. Put simply, we need to find a way to close the blue wormhole.”

“Do you have resources working on that?”

“Yes, considerable resources. We also have the Nexus company and Dr. Cameron—who is, I understand, a leading expert in the field—working on this directly. Not easy within a battlefield environment, but once we find a way, we can take action immediately.”

“You will keep me updated on developments?”

“I presume you will continue to facilitate your funding line and you will back off from your political offensive against Alpha.”

“Very well, Admiral, I will back off. I think we need to work together on this.”
Chapter Sixty-Two

Winterburn’s Escape

Within minutes of releasing Winterburn, eight of his Kryl drones were also released. They arrived unopposed in one of the smaller cargo bays on the lower hangar deck. There, primed and readied for takeoff, sat an Eagle Transport shuttle. Unlike the main hangars, it was quiet and all they needed to do was load up and take off. Winterburn was in no hurry. He waited for the Kryl mini-fleet to wreak havoc, then they would slip away unnoticed, and he would be back en route to the Queen’s ship.

* * * *

Hoskins was in his ready room watching his viewing screen. The Kryl fleet were in formation and had closed to within ten thousand meters. They were within his firing range, but his priority was to get the ship to the wormhole fissure as quickly as possible—but this was not his only problem. Winterburn was free, somewhere on the ship, together with a number of his compatriots, including Carla and Joely Stevenson. Winterburn used his powers to corrupt the two sisters first, and then his crew, in order to gain his freedom. Where he was, was anyone’s guess, but clearly his objective was to seek out a vessel and leave the ship.

Realistically he headed for one of four smaller hangar/cargo bays where his intention was to take a shuttle or an Eagle. Hoskins ordered Major De Vere to despatch troopers to each of the four cargo bays. He awaited De Vere’s report. He sent Enson Carter to join De Vere armed with a hypercannon. Carter could be of use in some way to free Carla Stevenson from Winterburn’s grip.

He had no idea whether his strategy would work. The Kryl could presumably take control of De Vere, his troopers and Carter, allowing them to free the ship without a fight. Hoskins may have to destroy the escapee’s ship to prevent them from fleeing further.

His thought processes were interrupted by Commander Jacques entering the ready room.

“Jonathan, the Kryl have commenced an attack. They are targeting our stellar drive.”

Hoskins leapt to his feet and headed for the bridge.

“Give me maximum power, everything we’ve got.”

“Should we launch jump ships?” asked Jacques.

“Negative. We are nearing the fissure. If we commit to a battle, we could lose everything.”

“With respect, sir, it’s a bit late for that.”

“Aft shields down to thirty percent.”

“One more hit, sir, and we will lose our shields; then they can take out our stellar drive at will.”

Hoskins admitted defeat, “Take the SD off line, bring us around and raise frontal shields to maximum. Mister Jacques, make ready with the plasma cannons and PBA, and ask the CAG to launch ten jump ships immediately.”

There were twenty-five Kryl ships in total, with twenty single-seater fighters, a battle cruiser and support vessels. The Kryl fighters broke their formation and swarmed the Halo 7, buffeting the whole ship with plasma weaponry and laser cannons. The Rapiers launched from the main cargo bay were in the thick of it immediately. The two Sabres stood back and waited for the Kryl to come to them, the idea being that they would pick the Kryl fighters off one by one as they came into range; this was standard defensive strategy.

Hoskins knew what he was doing, but was conscious that, somehow, he needed to turn this into an offensive against the Kryl. The solution came to Hoskins immediately. He would launch an attack on the battle cruiser with Sabres and teutonic missiles both, directly from the Halo 7’s torpedo tubes and the Sabres. To seize the initiative, he must take out the hub. He spoke to his CAG directly.

“Lieutenant Temsouri, I need you to launch three more Sabres. Pair them off with the two already in situ for an attack on the Kryl Battle Cruiser.” Hoskins felt confident in his attack strategy, but he needed more. “Launch fifteen more Rapiers: five to cover the Sabres and the remainder to support the current jump ship initiative.”

“That leaves us three jump ships left, including Enson Carter’s Sabre 4. We will also have only one pilot. I have two in the medical center and Mister Carter is currently not on the hangar deck.”
“I am planning this to be over quickly, Lieutenant. Proceed with my orders.”

The battle continued with only modest success on either side. The Sabre attack on the Kryl Battle Cruiser proved ineffective but Hoskins elected to continue the strategy, relying on the probability that Alpha’s attacks caused unseen damage to the cruiser’s defensive shields. The Halo 7’s shields continued to hold, but their strength was gradually weakening.

* * * *

Winterburn watched the battle unfold and waited for the critical point in number of vessels in the direct vicinity of the Halo 7 before he called for his crew to board the Eagle.

De Vere positioned himself and ten of his marines on the far side of the bay, reasoning this was the most likely cargo bay as it was the nearest to the holding cells. As the Kryls headed for the Eagle, he ordered his marines to open fire with their hypercannons.

Three Kryl were killed immediately, but De Vere’s offensive was short-lived. Winterburn and his drones telepathically penetrated the Troopers brains, and one by one they fell to the floor, their brain stimulus consumed. De Vere and Jake witnessed the brief exchange from their vantage point at the next exit shaft. Fortunately, they were outside the Kryls’ killing range.

The remaining Kryl and Winterburn, with Carla and Joely, hastily entered the Eagle and power-locked the vessel’s bulkhead doors. Jake leapt up from his hiding place, realizing what was happening; but it was too late. Winterburn smiled as he recognized Jake’s face through the port window. Their time would come again. The Eagle launched immediately. All Jake could do was stand and watch in dismay as the Eagle accelerated and departed the Halo 7 via the exit shaft. Winterburn had Carla, and there was no way he could get to her.
Chapter Sixty-Three

Cameron’s Solution

Cameron nearly gave up. They had simulated the use of every type of weapon in Alpha’s considerable arsenal and plowed the ship’s reference databases for option after option after option. The Alpha technicians were helpful, but concluded there simply was no way to close the blue wormhole.

He stood observing the battle from the Botanic. He knew there must be a solution. The question is did he have enough time?

The ferocity of the fighting increased in the last hour. The Kryl continued to pummel the Alpha ships of the line, and gaps appeared in the fleet’s defenses. The jump ships fared little better, and only the Sect divisions held their own. Alpha needed more ships.

Just as it looked hopeless, Admiral Haines’ fleet arrived. Haines immediately drove his forces directly into the middle of the Kryl armada, causing the balance of power to shift back in Alpha’s favor.

Cameron immediately felt better. The arrival of the large Ionian Fleet could bring an end to this battle, but it was just the beginning. How long would it be before the next Kryl fleet arrived, and how would a continually-diminishing Alpha Fleet deal with that threat as it grew? He realized that giving up was not an option. They must have missed something. There simply must be a way to close the wormholes. With renewed vigor, Cameron reviewed every possibility they looked at right from the start. If they covered every possibility, then the answer must lie in the methods they already had looked at. They must have done something wrong.

Cameron locked himself away in his laboratory with no technicians to assist him. This was all about him and he worked best this way. He looked first at the conventional methodologies. Using the pulse resonator always had seemed a likely possibility, but at what frequency?

After nearly two hours constantly reconfiguring his simulator, Cameron decided he would leave this particular option and come back to it later. He would try something else. He stood up and walked to the viewing window once again. From here, he saw the whole battle. He was safe behind the lines of the combined Alpha Fleet, but still saw the constant barrage of heavy weaponry lighting the sky in hues of red, orange and purple, with flashes of red and green laser and plasma streams projecting through the clouds of smoke and flames. Cameron decided he would look at Alpha’s weapons once again.

Teutonic missiles didn’t have the yield. Atomic weapons would simply engulf the void and dissipate. Neither the plasma nor laser cannons made any impact. That left the PBA, which was theoretically the best prospect. Once again, the yield was the problem. There was too much power. He looked at a combination of the weapons Alpha had at their disposal, but the conflicting forces of each tended to cancel each other out. Positives and negatives like opposing forces in an electric current. This was going nowhere. Then, suddenly, he realized what they had missed.

The subspace weaponry was considered and ignored because the wisdom was that a positive force was required to impact on the wormhole. A negative force would simply do nothing, or would it? Cameron considered the theory of subspace and then the advancement to antimatter converters and stellar speed drive systems. The antimatter converters worked by smashing matter and antimatter together in a confined space to cause a power surge which, in turn, created the propulsion. It was efficient and immensely powerful. What if both matter and antimatter weapons were used in conjunction with each other? This was basic stuff, but his head was clouded by so many different issues. Was this the right track? In theory, the right mix, contained within the wormhole, could create a huge positive power surge.

He scratched his head and looked at the evidence again. Was this a possibility and, if so, how had they not considered this? Was the answer to the problem to use a combination of all Alpha’s conventional weapons and an appropriate yield of subspace charges? Cameron started to enter his hypothesis to his computer. He was onto something here.

“Ah, Admiral Shenke. I think we may have a solution to the closing of the blue wormhole.”

Shenke was resting in his state room. He had not slept for 24 hours and tiredness briefly caught up with him. Shenke suddenly became interested.
“What is the solution?”

Cameron went on to explain his theory and the detailed the findings of his computer simulations. The bottom line
was that it should work, providing sufficient—and in balance—yields of both matter and antimatter forces are
deployed.

“Have you verified this with Alpha’s scientists?”

“Yes, we have worked though my hypothesis and the simulations this morning. They are in agreement. The
problem is: will we have sufficient quantities of both matter and antimatter charges?”

“So what is the answer? If we are going to run short of conventional weapons then we will have to look at finding
a way to end this battle. Thank you, Dr. Cameron, you may have saved us all. I will consult with my colleagues and
will report back to you shortly. I presume this will all take time to set up?”

“Yes, Admiral, we will need time. Let’s hope we will have enough.”
De Vere was a tough nut to crack, but losing every one of his groups in such a fashion was difficult to comprehend.

Jake paid his respects and left De Vere and his investigation team quietly. He didn’t really know where he was going, but walked along the passageway which gently sloped upwards from the rear of the ship towards the front. Carla was lost to him once again. Why had he not stayed with her, or insisted she and Joely be allowed to stay with him under his protection? It was too late. The Eagle had gone and he was left to try to comprehend what life would be without Carla. He couldn’t, and why did he have to? Surely there was still another chance. He had a Sabre 4, for God’s sake. He could catch up with the Eagle in no time, disable her and rescue Carla and Joely. He could put a bullet in the back of Winterburn’s head for good measure.

He found himself heading towards the main hangar bay, partly because it was the part of the ship where he was based but also because the Sabre 4 was housed there. He didn’t really have a plan and would look at his options when he got there. As he rounded the corner into the CAG command area, he was surprised to see Commander Hoskins standing talking to his CAG and gesturing towards Jake’s Sabre 4.

“Enson Carter, please join us. I have just received Major De Vere’s report. Witnessing the loss of all those troopers must have been unpleasant.”

“Yes, sir, although seeing Carla and her sister being taken by Winterburn again is equally distressing. I was hoping...”

Jake was interrupted by Hoskins, “You were hoping to take the Sabre 4 and carry out a daring mission to rescue your girlfriend plus bring back Winterburn and his crew with you. To what end? Do you really feel that you—on your own—could take out Winterburn and all his fellow Kryls armed with a hypercannon and a couple of stun grenades?”

“I don’t know, sir. I am still trying to comprehend what happened. Surely you don’t want Winterburn to get away.”

“No, I don’t. You are right. We will need to deal with the Eagle and prevent it from getting away. By deal with I mean destroy. I am going to ask you to come to terms with this as quickly as you can, Jake. Carla and her sister are as good as dead. We need to act quickly to take the pain she would ultimately experience away from her. I need you to pilot the Sabre 4 and destroy Winterburn’s Eagle.”

“Sir, there is enough room in the cabin for up to four troopers. It would be a tight fit but we could dock and take out the other Kryl one by one. Then I can bring the Eagle around and return to the Halo 7.”

“I cannot allow that, Jake. Having Winterburn alive would be useful, but not imperative; making sure he and his men don’t get back to their fleet is. We are short on ships and pilots. At present all we have is you. Your orders are to seek out and destroy the Eagle. Is that clear?”

“Commander, sir. Can we have a go? Perhaps Lieutenant Temsouri could join me and we can board the ship together. Surely they are still of some value to you?”

The Halo 7 was under constant barrage. The threat from the mini-Kryl fleet was considerable and yet Hoskins initiative began to pay off.

Hoskins knew this was the last chance. He must persuade Jake Carter, and if he was not willing to move then the alternative was to take the Eagle out with a teutonic missile.

Hoskins sighed. Not for the first time today, he was heavily influenced by his crew. He knew he could not send Jake alone. Perhaps sending Obeya with Carter would be a better combination.

“Very well, Lieutenant Temsouri and Enson Carter. Please go about your business. I am giving you one chance to be successful. If you are unable to board, take out or capture Winterburn you must use the Sabre to destroy the Eagle. If you can bring back your friends that will be a personal bonus for you.”

Obeya started to protest, but Hoskins would have none of it. “We don’t need you on the hangar deck right now, Lieutenant. Get the job done, get back here and by then we will have finished off these bastards and we can get ourselves home.”
Jake took control when they first launched the Sabre 4. Obeya assumed command and familiarized herself with the new variant’s controls. Jake could tell she was impressed, but he could also tell she was good, very good.

“You’re not totally human are you?” he asked Obeya.

“Is that a problem for you?”

“No. Your control and response times are remarkable.”

Changing the subject, Jake looked at Obeya and said “Lieutenant, I really do need to rescue Carla and her sister. I don’t know why, but I’m immune to Winterburn’s powers. I probably stand a better chance than most of being successful.”

“What makes you think that you are immune?”

“Something he once said, and just a general feeling I have. I don’t know why, but I didn’t want to mention it in front of Hoskins, he doesn’t seem to be the most tolerant of commanders.”

Obeya let it go. “As Commander Hoskins said, Enson, we only get one chance. If we get in close enough to dock and you can access the Eagle, your primary objective is to capture or kill Winterburn. I won’t wait around if I feel our objective is in jeopardy.”

Jake acknowledged Obeya’s comments. They sat in silence as they continued their pursuit, a job made much easier by the Eagle’s lack of stellar drive capability and range. Once they determined which direction the Eagle was heading and the NAVCOM determined a fixed position, it was an easy task for the Sabre, at SD velocity, to catch the Eagle.

“There she is in front of us, Carter. You’d better get suited up and prepare the docking clamps.”

Jake set about the arduous task of putting on the radiation-proof exterior suit and helmet he would need to manually attach the Sabre’s docking clamps to the Eagle’s bulkhead. They would need to get in close, which was in itself dangerous. The Eagle was equipped with thirty-two cm Laser cannons, which at close range could penetrate the Sabres shields.

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The Kryl pilot aboard the Eagle saw the Sabre coming and tried to out run it, but this was futile. The Eagle opened fire on the Sabre as it began to close to within two meters. Obeya was wise to the Kryl’s tactics and she deployed additional shielding to the Sabre’s vulnerable areas.

Jake readied to commence the clamping procedure. He waited patiently for a lull in the Eagle’s close range offensive tactics, and then, having sealed the Sabres inner hull, he opened the canopy outer door and stepped out on the wing. Immediately he felt the force of the two ships’ propulsion systems tugging at him, trying to release him of his grip and allow the two ships to part. Jake had some practical experience of spacewalks, but only in a controlled environment. This was different.

The clamping column was recessed into the wing structure. Jake pulled the column release button, and a recess within the wing opened, allowing the column to push out into Jake’s hands. He gave the thumbs-up to Obeya, who pulled the Sabre to within thirty centimeters of the Eagle. Jake then reached out and clamped the first of the three clasps and locked it in place. With the second and third clasps then in place, the two ships were connected. By now, the two ships were travelling at a nominal thruster velocity, but the repetitive Eagle laser cannons’ firing made the process infinitely harder than it should be.

Jake knew the setup of the Eagle like the back of his hands. His first two years at the academy had seen him complete hundreds of simulated and actual Eagle flight hours. Jake must open the bulkhead doors. He opted for the fastest method by firing a single blast from his hand laser to the doors’ locking mechanism and, within moments, he had access to the Eagle’s inner door. It was just a case of blowing the interior blast door inwards and he would have access to the interior of the Eagle.

* * * *

Winterburn watched the progress being made by Carter. It was clear his new adversary was confident. So he should be, he thought.

“Please leave the crew of the jump ship to me. Your chance to feed will soon be upon you.” The Kronan was situated in the aft passenger area of the Eagle shuttle. This particular variant was fitted as a troop carrier, with two
passenger compartments, a holding cell and the cockpit. The blast door was situated towards the rear of the main compartment, which was currently occupied by three Kryl. The remaining Kryl drones were in the cockpit. Carla and Joely were in the holding cell. Winterburn released his influence on both of them the moment the Eagle took off, now that their part in all of this was over. Once again, the two sisters were Winterburn’s prisoners.

* * * *

Jake was protected from the Eagle’s laser cannons by the Eagle itself, but he could clearly see Obeya was not. The Kryl were bombarding the cockpit area with cannon blasts, and it was only a matter of time before her shields failed. He thought it was necessary to obtain control and remove the weapons threat as quickly as possible. Jake placed the charges on the inner door and was in the process of setting the timers. It was imperative that he created as much havoc as possible when the door opened. He applied more charges than he needed, to ensure that the blast door blew right in on itself. He would then launch a combined stun-cloud grenade, and then fire indiscriminately around the main passenger compartment while he sought cover to protect himself from the Kryls’ weaponry. Jake took a big gamble. He was still reliant on his assertion that Winterburn could not seek to control his mind and that the other Kryls could not either. He also bargained on both Carla and Joely being held in the holding cell and not in the main compartment. Jake was nearly ready. He needed to protect himself from the blast which meant exiting the outer door and remote detonating the charges. Jake commenced his assault on the Eagle.

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The blast pushed the Eagle’s inner door off its hinges and into the Eagle’s main compartment. Jake threw his stun grenade, waited five seconds and then charged into the main chamber with his hypercannon discharging plasma bursts to all four corners of the compartment. It had gone just as Jake planned, and he found himself aboard the Eagle with three dead Kryl by his side.

So far so good, he thought. He needed to find Winterburn though and again as anticipated Winterburn, was in the smaller rear compartment. He was on his own.

Jake was just about to open fire again, when Winterburn interjected, “I have to say I am impressed with your entrance and your persistence. If this is about Carla and Joely, then they are lucky to have you on their side.”

Jake ignored him. “I am assuming control of this vessel and returning you and the ship to the Halo 7.”

“I doubt that, Jake. Do you really think you will be given the opportunity to return to your vessel? Look at your jump ship; it is already beyond repair. You would have to seize control of this ship. My drones will overpower you before you get a chance.”

“Did you see what happened to the three Kryl in the main passenger compartment?”

“Do you think that would have happened had I not asked them to leave you to me?”

“You cannot control my mind. I have already proven that more than once. You and your fellow Kryl will stand down and allow me to take control of this ship.”

“I am afraid you have been duped, my young friend. I asked my drones to leave you to me because I have been waiting for you since the first day we met. You could say this moment has been etched on my mind ever since. As for us not being able to enter your mind…” Winterburn laughed.

“That is correct. I cannot enter the mind of the person who is about to take my life. I have known from the moment I saw you that you are my killer and that it would take place here on this Eagle. That is your destiny and mine.”

Jake frowned. Winterburn was mad.

“What do you mean, I am your killer?”

“Kryl, and particularly my caste, a Kronan, have many gifts, and insight into their own demise is one of them. This has always been the case, my friend. I have always known I would die by the hands of a human, shortly after the galaxy fissure opened. I have achieved my objective and it is my time to die. Joely and Carla are merely part of the timeline that leads to my death. I must meet Joely to meet Carla, so that ultimately I would meet you here today.”

“Are you going to try to stop me?”
“From killing me? There will be a struggle and I will die. It is as simple as that. Don’t think for one moment that puts you in the clear. My drones will assume control of your mind and kill you.”

Jake was suddenly scared. He quickly told himself not to be taken in by Winterburn’s lies. “I am afraid I don’t believe in destiny, Winterburn. My job is to return you to the Halo 7 alive and I intend to deliver you.”

“Such naiveté. Your inability to comprehend the realities of life and death beyond the actual and physical is and will be your peoples’ downfall. This is the reality. I have foreseen my death and it cannot be changed. It cannot be ignored. I have done my bidding and I am ready for my life to end. You will take my life.”

Jake decided to ignore Winterburn. Clearly he could not exercise any control over him and he was playing games to try to get Jake to slip up. Jake decided to take the initiative.

“I am going to take control of the ship, Winterburn. You are my prisoner.”

Jake didn’t realize but that was the moment that Winterburn waited for. Jake’s words were the switch in Winterburn’s head that told him that his life was about to end.

Winterburn lunged forward and grabbed Jake by the neck. Jake fell to the ground with Winterburn on top of him, strangling him. He must do something. He managed to free his left arm and reached into the inside right hand pocket of his tunic and pulled out his hunter’s knife. Winterburn was squeezing hard. Jake tried to respond. He pulled the knife up and then down straight into Winterburn’s neck, severing the jugular and killing Winterburn instantly.

The Sabre was in a bad way. The Eagle continued to pummel the jump ship. The shields were down and the cockpit had all but disintegrated. The drive systems were smashed and the right wing was ripped off. Obeya had seen quickly that the jump ship would not hold. Shortly after Jake entered the Eagle, she suited up and exited the jump ship armed with a hypercannon. Obeya entered the Eagle and headed straight for the cockpit. The two Kryl inside assumed the jump ship pilot was still onboard and that she was probably dead. This was to be their down fall: Obeya slipped in behind the first of the Kryl and slit his neck with her hunter’s knife. The second Kryl saw her instantly and tried to enter her mind. Obeya recoiled. She felt the penetration of the Kryl into her mind but she held back the pain, her Barcudian side was stronger than her human side. The Kryl could not assume control and could not neutralize her electrical brain stimuli. Obeya realized that she was in control and lifted her hypercannon and squeezed the trigger. The second Kryl died instantly. There were no Kryl alive aboard the Eagle.

She staggered to her feet and composed herself. She must take control of the Eagle. She quickly re-programmed the NAVCOM and the shuttle began to arc and turn back towards the Halo 7. It would be a long haul back, but they were on their way.

Jake sat on the floor, with Winterburn’s body in his lap. He pushed the body to one side and stood up and brushed himself down. Winterburn’s death throws was dramatic and there was a huge amount of blood. This was the third time Jake witnessed death in as many days. He realized that the ship was banking and coming back on herself. Had Obeya taken control of the ship? The answer was immediate as Obeya entered the rear compartment accompanied by Carla and Joely. Jake lunged forward and grabbed Carla and Joely and hugged them both closely.

“My, you have been busy.” Obeya said.

“So, it would seem, have you,” replied Jake.

“The other Kryl?”

“All dead, and we are returning to the Halo 7. Without light speed it may be a long way back, especially if we have to catch her before she goes through the fissure.”

“Do you think Hoskins will leave without us?”

“I don’t know. At the end of the day, he needs to preserve the lives of all of his crew and not just us. I guess a lot depends on whether they have defeated the Kryl attack yet.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Jake. He pulled Carla closer and they kissed passionately.

He was not going to let her go again.
Chapter Sixty-Five
Halo 7 Victory

Jonathan Hoskins was worried. Obeya had been gone far too long, and she was not answering her comm link. He regretted sending her with Carter the moment they had left the ship, not least because Carter has shown himself to be utterly reckless. Obeya had spoken highly of Enson Carter; she promoted him as brilliant although immature. That immaturity had twice shown itself, and Hoskins, even under pressure, felt that he should have been able to notice these character traits himself without having someone else point them out to him. As for Winterburn, he had shown himself to be totally ruthless, and he was surrounded by another five Kryl.

This could be a bad day, he thought.

He was suddenly dragged back to reality. The Assistant CAG reported some success in the last half hour, and his latest report suggested the dogfight between the jump ships and the Kryl fighters was nearly over. The reports from the Sabre group attacking the Kryl cruiser suggested the beginnings of something good. The cruisers’ shields were all but depleted, but only two Sabres remained to continue the assault. Although the Halo 7 continued to fire alternate rounds of plasma cannons and teutonic missiles at the Kryl cruiser, he needed Rapier back up to finish the job.

There were no reserves, though, and until the Kryl skirmish was won he could not risk releasing any of the Rapiers to assist the fight against the cruiser.

Hoskins was also worried about the condition of the Halo 7. She was still intact and her shields held up remarkably well. There was damage to the main SD drive and the auxiliary shield harmonics were currently failing to consistently alternate the shield polarity. Even if the battle ended in success, they still must get to the blue wormhole fissure, and goodness only knows how many other Kryl ships were out there waiting for him. He needed something positive.

He didn’t have to wait for too long. The call from Obeya was brief but it was good news. She was okay and they were bringing Winterburn back, albeit dead. The bad news was that the Sabre was defunct and the Eagle, with no light speed capability, would have her work cut out just to get back to the Halo 7.

Again Hoskin’s train of thought returned to the here and now as yet another huge explosion rocked the command bridge.

“Shield status?”

“Holding steady at twenty seven percent. The harmonics are still not working properly. A few more hits like that and we are done for.”

“Thank you for your summary, Mister Jacques. This battle is being won, so let’s draw on the positives if you will please.”

“Update from Sabre group leader. The Kryl cruisers shields are down.”

“Target the cruiser with everything we’ve got.”

“PBA?” asked Commander Jacques.

“No. We won’t be able to transfer the power reserves quickly enough. The fucked up shield harmonics are making life difficult.”

“Sir. The frontal shields are failing.”

“Compensate.”

It was too late, and a huge plasma cannon burst from the Kryl cruiser smashed into the side of the ship’s frontal lobes. The force of the explosion rocked the ship once again, but Hoskins knew that this one was bad. “Get a team down there A.S.A.P. Get some temp shielding in place quickly, dammit.”

It was clear that both the Halo 7 and the Kryl cruiser were severely weakened, and, although no critical systems were damaged in the latest impact, the shield harmonics made the Alpha vessel a sitting duck. This battle could go either way.

The battle continued for another half an hour, with the Halo 7’s shields periodically failing, but somehow managing to stay in operation when hit by enemy fire. Hoskins waited for some news to indicate they were back on
top. It was a long wait, but finally it all came together.

“Sir, the Rapier group reports the Kryl fighters have pulled back.”

Finally some real good news. “Excellent. All jump ships to target the cruiser immediately.”

* * * *

In the end, the jump ships won the day. The Rapiers’ superior capability in an open fight, and the Sabres’ ability to pick off its targets at pace and indiscriminately, proved to be the crucial factor in a contest which Alpha should have lost. There was no time to carry out a battle analysis. The Kryl Cruiser was destroyed and that was that. Hoskins pulled back both the two remaining Sabres and five Rapiers and started to assess the damage to his ship. She was still intact and the stellar drive still functioned, at reduced capacity. The shield’s harmonics were repairable if they could be brought off line. By far, the biggest problem was the gaping hole in the frontal lobe of the ship. The hole was twenty-five meters across and spanned three decks. Twenty-eight crew were lost in that section of the ship alone.

“We can patch up the hole, but the bulkheads have been damaged. How she will fare inside the wormhole is anyone’s guess.”

“I agree. Long range scans are showing a buildup of Kryl activity. I don’t think we have much choice. As soon as the harmonics are up and running, get some emergency shielding and stabilizers in place, and then we are going to need to head straight for the fissure.”

This is going to be close, he thought. Will Obeya have enough time to catch up, or will they have to take the Eagle through the wormhole separately? Things had not changed much. It still had the potential to be a bad day.
Chapter Sixty-Six
The Closure of the Wormholes

Things were looking up for Shenke. The combined forces of Alpha, the Sect Guard and, surprisingly, a small Sentinel contingent from General Yoshi’s Southern Fleet were making real inroads into the Kryl armada.

The Sentinels joined the fray some two hours previously. Shenke was advised of their arrival. He prompted his commanders to draw off ten ships and 200 jump ships. He anticipated the Sentinels came to join in the attack on the Alpha fleet and not to help them; however, the new Sentinel General, promoted from within by general agreement from the ranks following Yoshi’s death, had made immediate contact with the Pacific and offered his services. This bizarre turn of events had surprised the Alpha Command Team and it was initially greeted with suspicion, but, after a period of reflection following a further explanation from the Sentinel General, they realized that the offer was genuine.

It was General Yoshi’s personal crusade against Alpha that kept the battle against Admiral Rose’s fleet going after the wormhole had opened. Once he was dead, the new general quickly decided their interest lay with assisting Alpha and the Sect. The Sentinel force numbered only seventy-five vessels, but this was the edge Shenke needed to finish the Kryl off.

The Sentinel Fleet joined the attack on the mother ship which Shenke initiated four hours previously. Some one hundred twenty-five vessels surrounded the huge Kryl vessel and bombarded it with plasma fire. The majority of Kryl cruisers surrounding it were engaged in one-to-one fighting, with over two hundred Alpha ships commanded by Admiral Haines and the larger Sect vessels. The remaining Alpha vessels protected their flagship, which was itself engaged in a fierce battle with eight Kryl cruisers defending their own mother ship.

* * * *

In the meantime, the jump ship battle still raged separately from the main battle. The losses were huge on both sides, but Alpha’s problems began to mount up. They deployed over thirteen thousand vessels in total: nine thousand seven hundred fifty were lost and the remainder were either engaged, in repair or on fast turnaround for re-engagement. The pilots were exhausted, and this was beginning to tell.

The Kryl had more vessels. As fast as one Kryl fighter was destroyed, another would replace it. On the plus side, both the Rapiers and the Sabres held their own. They may have been technically inferior, but their pilots were not and this was telling. The Pacific chief CAG was charged with the fastest possible turnaround of ships. He had never seen anything like this, but his CAG teams were coping remarkably well. They were adapting to the situation and delivering.

The Pacific battle group destroyed five of the obstructing cruisers, and was beginning to get a clear line of fire towards the Kryl mother ship. This was critical. If they could destroy the mother ship, then the battle would be over. Shenke ordered his ship to move in closer to the Kryl vessel. He planned to use the PBA, and needed to get within one thousand meters to gain the maximum effect. This was a dangerous but calculated strategy, one he had used before.

“PBA online sir, range calibrated.”

“Raise the accelerator to two three five mark seven,” came the reply from the PBA weapons chief. This was his baby. The huge Particle Beam Accelerator was the single largest piece of equipment on the entire ship. When raised, its dimensions were greater than the average Alpha battleship.

The twelve interconnecting beams were already in place, held back only by control rods which when removed would send each beam into the huge central cylinder forcing the particles along it and squeezing them into a second much smaller chamber. The collective point was where all the laser particles hit their maximum intensity. It was here where the beam accelerated to its intended target.

Many Alpha ships carried PBAs but the star ship PBA was the full-size model. At full strength, it could decimate a planet the size of Earth in minutes. It was a formidable weapon, but had its drawbacks. Range was always an issue. Too close and the explosion would take out the firing ship as well as its target; too far and the beam would break up before it reached the target. Calculation and calibration were critical, and the PBA weapons chief was charged with getting the calculation right.

“Have we verified our calculations and carried out full diagnostics?” asked Shenke.
“Yes sir. The calibrations have been verified and all systems double-checked.”

Shenke waited for the signal from the battle group commander who led the attack on the mother ship. He had pulled all ships back and waited. Timing was critical.

“Engage the PBA.”

The weapon fired microseconds later and the full force of the PBA penetrated the mother ship. Her shields were weakened sufficiently and the timing was right. She was immediately engulfed in a fireball. Seconds later she exploded, sending parts of the huge ship ricocheting through the fleet, the jump ship fracas and beyond. The Mother Ship was destroyed.

Immediately, Shenke and his team moved to target the smaller cruisers. They were suddenly on their own, their infrastructure was ripped apart. The Kryl fighters were quickly in trouble. Their enhanced capability was, in part, powered remotely by the mother ship. This was lost instantly and, one by one, the Alpha fleet and their Sect counterparts took out their targets. Resistance continued but this battle was won and would soon be over.

Shenke turned his attention to his next problem and left his senior commanders to continue to execute the battle. Dr. Cameron answered Shenke’s comm link immediately.

“It was a fire show, Admiral. Can I assume we are in the ascendency?”

“Yes, Doctor, which means I need you to get the subspace weapons set up. How many charges do we have?”

“We have made up thirty charges, although half would probably be sufficient. We need the majority to fall on or within the mouth of the blue wormhole. It is imperative that one penetrates the center of the wormhole itself. This will then implode the center of the wormhole, with the other charges sealing off this end. I presume we will be deploying the charges imminently?”

“Yes, as soon as the jump ship battle is won. I estimate completion within the next three to four hours. I understand that we are using Rapier 7’s?”

“Yes, my understanding is that there will be two squadrons one coming in from the left and one from the right. They will need to get as close as possible to the wormholes without being pulled in. I am leaving the technicalities of deployment to the CAG. This is going to be dangerous for the pilots though. I presume volunteers will be used?”

“To a certain extent, but we need the best pilots. Most of those are exhausted, so we do have certain limitations. How long after the charges are deployed before we can expect the hole to close?”

Cameron smiled. “It will take about ten minutes for the center charge explosion to reach the center of the wormhole. It will be dragged along by inertia, to an extent, but it has a long way to travel.”

“Will they see anything the other side?”

“No. They will only witness the explosion if they are at this end of the wormhole. If they are at this end they will be vaporized. Are you thinking about the Kryl, or the Alpha vessels still in the Kryl galaxy?”

“Both, really. In any event, nothing will stand in the way of the charges’ deployment. If this works and we have finished off the Kryl here, then the whole Kryl ‘invasion’ can be archived once and for all.”

Cameron shifted uncomfortably. He had done his bit. Success or failure was down to the jump ship Pilots. He smiled again and paused briefly. “It will work, Admiral; It will work.”

* * * * *

On the other side of the wormhole, Hoskins sighed deeply. He lost over one hundred crew members, and they were still the wrong side of the wormhole and light years from home. He found it hard to look on the bright side. He was tasked with following Winterburn, and he interpreted that task as recapturing him and bringing him back to Alpha. That task failed, and for the loss of so many people. Would it not have been better to stay with the individual ships when they first entered the wormhole? What happened to them? He thought. If they were all dead that was yet more deaths on his conscience. Clearly his interpretation was wrong.

The Halo 7 was at maximum thrust. The Stellar Drive was offline and the ship ran under the power of one of the ion-reformatting drives, at a sub-light speed of 0.78 SD. He calculated their estimated arrival at the blue wormhole fissure in a little less than thirty-six hours. This would allow for further repairs to be carried out, and for Obeya, Carter and the Stevenson sisters to catch up. The Eagle was in a pretty poor state and there was no way they should risk entering the wormhole with a ship in that condition. Hoskins would decide nearer the time as to whether they should wait for the Eagle to return or enter the wormhole immediately. Right now, his mind was clear; he would
wait, but the pressure was building—more Kryl ships were being monitored on the long-range scans. If they were heading for the wormhole, then he would be through it and out the other side now rather than encounter them again.

The Eagle experienced further problems. Jake’s Rambo-esque style onslaught on the Kryl and the demolition of the Eagle’s inner access door, together with the close proximity laser attack on the Sabre, created serious flaws in the Eagle’s structural integrity. This was accepted, and Jake and Obeya took turns patching the blast areas while the other manned the pilot seat. The repairs were temporary and the Eagle’s hull continued to weaken from its original state.

The Sabre was disconnected manually and allowed to float free before scuttling remotely. She had done her job. They left Carla and Joely to recover from their ordeal in the main compartment, having first transferred all the Kryl bodies to the rear compartment to join Winterburn.

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The compartment was carbon-frozen to preserve the Kryl bodies during transit. Obeya asserted that now the Alpha forensic teams could examine the bodies even if they could not clearly talk to them.

The Eagle’s drive system was failing intermittently. Obeya discovered the Eagle had lost several hundred heat-shield tiles during the skirmish with the Sabre. Both of these new problems were irreparable, given the current circumstances. The drive system would require cooling off and shutting down before a repair could be effected, and to fit replacement shields meant someone would have to manually affix new tiles from the outside. Both of these fixes were desirable, but impossible, given the relative movements of Kryl vessels on the scanner. The lack of heat shields meant travelling through the wormhole would be impossible, and the drive system problem meant a further reduction in velocity to under two hundred thousand kilometers per hour. At that rate it was going to take another twenty hours to reach the Halo 7.

Jake left Obeya in the cockpit and joined Carla in the main compartment.

“Where’s Joely?”

“She’s lying down in the containment cell. She’s finding this hard. She loved him you know.”

“He was a monster.”

“Yes, but she spent the last six years with him, constantly by his side. Inevitably, there was something between them. Remember, Winterburn was human when we first met him.”

Jake laughed. “With one important difference. He was probably sucking the life out of her when he fucked her.”

“Don’t be so coarse Jake. I don’t expect you to understand. Just tolerate her.”

“What about you, Carla? How are you?”

“I am okay, I suppose. I have to accept now that my actions were beyond my control. It’s difficult; I think it is going to take some time.”

“We have all the time in the world, Carla. Soon we will be back on Earth and it will be back to the Academy. I am sure we will just pick up where we left off.”

“You are forgetting two important factors. The Academy is hardly likely to let us back in just like that—and then there’s Steve.”

“Alpha looks after its own. Obeya believes that they will turn a blind eye to our collective wrongs, given the end result. As for Steve, what is the issue with him? He just has to accept that it’s you and me.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself Jake. As I said, I need some time, and in any case, Steve doesn’t know we had a relationship.”

“What do you mean had? Carla what are you saying?”

“I am not saying anything. Look, Jake, I do love you but I need some time. There’s my sister and Steve and the academy. If we are allowed back in, will we be allowed to graduate this year? Please just back off for a while. Nothing has changed. I just need some space.”

Jake was about to respond but decided on reflection it was best just left for. “Okay. If you want me for anything, you let me know?”

Carla agreed. Jake rubbed her shoulder to show he understood, and then returned to the cockpit.
“Any changes?”

“No. Everything is holding steady. You know if we don’t meet the Halo 7, we are going to have to navigate the wormhole in this ship?” Obeya had been thinking.

“Yes, I do. Best not to think about it. For now, we are going forward and the wormhole is getting closer.”

* * * *

Cameron sat at a temporary workstation on the Pacific’s command bridge. From here, he could oversee the firing of the subspace charges, when the order was finally given for their delivery.

The battle continued on for a further twelve hours before the final Kryl ships were destroyed or headed for the blue wormhole to escape the Alpha-led offensive. Shenke presided over one of the most successful rear-guard battles in space history and, despite huge losses, he came out on top.

The cleaning-up exercise commenced immediately, and the various factions collected their dead and started to quantify the losses and identify the bodies. This grisly process was the other side of war, the unglamorous side, which every general must undertake. The communication of each loss to their loved ones must be made. Cameron was not accustomed to such horrific scenes. He felt sick to his stomach, but tried to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Shenke ordered the two squadrons of Rapiers that would undertake the delivery of the subspace weapons be made battle ready and the selected pilots rested. The selection process was rough. Volunteers had initially been requested, but after the CAG and medical teams filtered through the various applicants, only seven pilots were found fit to undertake the operation. The remainder were selected from the reserve lists, most of whom were there for a reason, i.e., because they weren’t considered fit for full active duty.

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One of the selected pilots was Acting Lieutenant Steve Costello. Steve was jubilant for this chance. This was what he did and the first chance he would have to truly make a difference. He had little time to reflect on his own personal losses. The general consensus had been that none of the vessels which passed through the wormhole to the Kryl galaxy would ever return. If Steve had thought otherwise, he would not have been able to preside over shutting the door and throwing away the key. No one would be able to get back, even if they were still alive.

The pre-flight briefing was still six hours away. Steve lay down on his bed and tried to sleep.

* * * *

The Halo 7 neared the wormhole fissure. Hoskins gave the order to slow to thrusters, as it slowly began to dawn on the crew of the Halo 7 exactly what had happened to those ‘disciples’ who were left behind when Hoskins made the decision to go after Winterburn. There were over one hundred ships, all completely still and all lifeless. Some still had power, others were split in two, but all were the same. The bodies each contained were completely lifeless.

The bridge lay silent as they took in the spectacle. It was Hoskins who broke the silence: “We must catalogue each vessel and identify the inhabitants. This will be their graveyard but we have to take some time for these people.”

Hoskins tried to reason that he acted under orders, but somehow it didn’t cut. He made the wrong decision. He should have been here for these people. This massacre could have been prevented. The least he could do was give them some time, while they still could. How long did they have?

The gathering Kryl armada showed on the short-range scanners. They were not moving forward; he presumed they were preparing the fleet for an advance. Hoskins was clear in his mind. If they advanced, he would enter the fissure immediately. Obeya would have to find her own way home.

The Eagle was being tolerant and held steady at one hundred ninety-five thousand kilometers per hour. Jake had the comm and rechecked the various system integrity levels for the tenth time today. It was 11.00 hours and, according to both the NAVCOM and Jake’s manual calculations, they should rendezvous with the Halo 7 in approximately three hours. He monitored the scanners closely. He was aware of the buildup of Kryl warships on the horizon and he knew the defenseless Eagle could be extinguished in seconds should the Kryl elect to do so. He just needed to keep going and concentrate on getting the ship back to safety.

Obeya was in the co-pilot seat and was in a pensive mood. She had just spoken to Jonathan Hoskins again. The
conversation was brief and to the point, for fear of identifying their position. Jonathan made it clear he would leave without them if he must, but would do everything possible to hold off. Obeya felt sick to her stomach. Why had she agreed to go on this stupid mission? All she could do was wait and let fate make its choice.

The identification process was complete. Two hundred thirty-six more lost souls and Hoskins blamed himself for every one of them. He must save those still with him. He would reflect on all the losses attributable to his actions later.

The Kryl fleet moved slowly forward, and he knew he could not wait much longer. Obeya was still some forty-five minutes away. He had a hard decision to make. If he waited for her, the Kryl fleet would be on top of them; but if he left her, it would surely be the last time he ever saw her. His crew were expecting him to give the order and Jacques, in particular, looked edgy and impatient. He just needed to hold on a little longer.

“Jonathan.” Jacques had tried speaking to him and he had not heard him. “Can we take a few moments in your ready room?”

Hoskins put his hand to his face and sighed. “No. I know what you want to talk to me about, and I appreciate your attempt at diplomacy. We have to leave.”

“It needn’t be. We could dispatch a Rapier to them. They could then leave the Eagle and come through the wormhole in the Rapier. We would be gone, but they would stand a chance in the blue wormhole in a ship that is not falling apart. We send it remotely and they can pull it in via their tractor beam. It’s a risky strategy, but Obeya is a great pilot. That would give them the chance they need.”

Hoskins had not thought of that. It could work. The Rapier might be destroyed by the Kryl before they had a chance to enter the wormhole, and yet it was still the best option.

“Okay, I agree. See to it personally, Number One, and let them know in advance of our plans. I will make the Halo 7 ready for entry to the fissure.”

A few minutes later, an unmanned Rapier 7 took off and jumped to SD velocity. It headed for a rendezvous with the Eagle and quickly made up for lost time.

On the Halo 7 command bridge, Jonathan Hoskins and his crew were ready. The ship’s diagnostics reported structural failings, but they were small and there was no choice. They must go, and Hoskins was ready.

“Take us forward, helm. Manual control, steady as she goes.”

“Aye, sir. Steady as she goes.”

The Halo 7 thrusters moved the Battle Cruiser forward. The ion drive engaged, and the ship accelerated to sub-light cruise velocity. They entered the fissure at 13.47 p.m.

Just two minutes later, a group of ten Kryl fighters followed the Halo 7 into the wormhole.

* * * *

“They are sending us a what?”

“A Rapier. Remotely. We will pull it in and board. It will be a tight cabin, but this gives us a chance. Can you get Carla and Joely suited up and get the hatch open? I’ll slow us down and pull her in. It should be only a couple of minutes. Thanks, Jake.”

The usual docking clamps were damaged by the removal of the wrecked Sabre earlier. They had no choice but to utilize the rarely-used cargo doors, which opened upwards and covered a third of the ship’s overall surface. The Eagle was designed originally as a payload carrier, but the majority were converted to carry troops or passengers. The main passenger compartment remained protected and pressurized while the cargo doors were open, but it was still standard protocol to suit up whenever the doors were open. Jake, already suited, pulled his helmet on and pressurized his suit.

The Rapier arrived promptly, and was lowered down carefully into the compartment where Jake attached four manual clamps to hold the jump ship in position just above his head. The usual Rapier access route was via the wings, both of which rested on top of the Cargo hatch. This was not the most desirable route but Jake needed to gain access and then, manually, open the hatch at the bottom of the cockpit. This was an escape hatch, but served its purpose for this exercise.

Jake clambered across the wing and accessed the cockpit. He opened the bottom hatch so Carla and Joely could enter the jump ship. Carla took Joely to the rear of the cramped cabin, where she pulled down reserve seating from
the wall. Jake meanwhile set up the NAVCOM to direct the Rapier straight into the path of the wormhole. A suited-
up Obeya joined Jake in the cockpit. Four minutes after Jake secured the Rapier, the docking clamps were remotely
blown and the Rapier lifted off from the Eagle with Obeya at the controls.

* * * *

The Eagle was blown to oblivion by the auto-destruct Obeya triggered as they left the cockpit. Winterburn and his
crew received the send-off they deserved, thought Jake.

The order to launch the Rapiers came at 14.00 hours precisely. The two squadrons, laden with their lethal
subspace charge cargo, lifted off from the Illustrious. They headed out beyond the fleet in opposite directions in a
wide arc, to allow each jump ship to build up sufficient speed and momentum to make their bomb drop. Steve was in
the Blue squadron, whose job was to deliver their charges via the left hand side, pass across the smaller wormhole,
and then deliver his charges to the middle blue wormhole. Each Rapier would make just one pass and deliver its
payload via a bomb drop. As long as the majority fell within the exterior corona of the blue wormhole and one or
more were delivered directly into the wormholes mouth, then the mission would be accomplished. Steve sat at the
back of the squadron just behind the group leader as they accelerated away from the Illustrious. The jump ships
commenced their circular run at maximum velocity. They would slow down as they reached the drop point. It was
essential they reach velocity to prevent them being dragged into the wormhole as they delivered their cargo.

Just as each squadron lined up to make the pass over the wormholes, the Halo 7 exited the wormhole. They were
pursued by a group of Kryl fighters who, on exiting the hole, spread out and immediately started attacking the
stricken Alpha Cruiser. Hoskins pulled the ship toward the Alpha Fleet, relieved to see Alpha still had a large
presence in the area.

“Admiral Shenke.” Hoskins emergency comm link to the Illustrious was answered immediately.

“Commander Hoskins. Welcome back. You timed that well.”

Hoskins interrupted “Sir, the entire Kryl fleet is just about to come through, you need to prepare.”

“The holes are about to be closed, permanently. We will go to battle stations.”

Shenke ordered the change of status, and stood by as he watched the jump ship patrols engage the Kryl Fighters
which followed Hoskins through the hole. He prayed they would not get in the way of the subspace charge delivery.

The Blue Squadron flew over the first wormhole, and the lead ship prepared to unload its cargo. As the pilot
crossed over the blue corona of the wormhole, he fired his tiger missile and accelerated away. His job done, he could
return to base.

The missile was pulled into the hole, but fell short of entering and embedded itself in the gaseous plasma
membrane surrounding it. The next eight missiles were delivered to the corona, but each one missed the center of the
hole. On the other side, the Red squadron also delivered their payload. They each failed to deliver a missile directly
into the hole. Just as the tenth pair of jump ships were about to deliver their missiles, two Kryl fighters intercepted
and forced the remaining members of the Red and Blue squadrons to pull up and void their drop.

* * * *

The Red squadron was in disarray, but the Blue squadron was behind them. Steve Costello decided it was his time
to deliver. He opened a comm link and assumed command. He pulled the Rapier round in a tight arc and set up his
second run, followed closely by the remaining members of the Blue squadron and two from the Red squadron. Two
of the Blue squadron pulled off and commenced battle with the Kryl fighters.

In position, Steve pushed back on the yoke and allowed his thoughts to control the jump ship and its passage
across the wormholes. Accelerating all the time, he closed down deep within the corona itself and just when it
looked as if his Rapier might be pulled in, he delivered his missile and accelerated up and away from the wormhole
at maximum velocity.

Steve’s missile entered the center of the hole. The remaining blue squadron vessels delivered their cargo into the
corona from their position high above where Steve delivered his. The payload was delivered and the charges could
do their worst.

* * * *

Obeya and Jake were fighting to maintain control of the Rapier, which was in danger of spinning out of control.
They had hit a gaseous cloud in the center of the wormhole, which briefly knocked out the NAVCOM and the directional stabilizers. Obeya manually corrected the stabilizers, but they required constant adjustment. Jake wrestled with the controls. He knew they were nearly through. He just needed to keep the ship away from the wormhole walls.

A shard of light suddenly appeared on the horizon and Jake instantly recognized it. The missile was fired into the center of the hole. He knew he must avoid it at all costs. The wormhole wall would be his solace. He pulled the ship close to the lining of the wormhole and allowed the momentum of the vortex to pull the Rapier along, compensating all the time and preventing the ship from pulling out into the middle of the hole. The missile passed them and exploded seconds later. The timing was critical. Jake accelerated at maximum thrust as he saw the explosion gathering force below him. This would be close. The walls of the wormhole began collapsing.

*How long before we are free?* he thought. He pulled the ship into the middle of the hole and closed his eyes.

The Rapier freed the wormhole seconds later. The blue wormhole was collapsing in on itself. The delivery of the subspace charges was a success, and the wormhole was sealing.

The Rapier touched down in the Halo 7’s main hangar bay. Obeya, Jake, Carla and Joely jumped down from the wing onto the comparative safety of the hangar bay floor. Commander Hoskins was there to receive them. He didn’t care and embraced Obeya passionately. *I almost lost her. Let them think what they like.*

* * * *

Jake Carter looked out and stared at the spectacle in front of him. The wormhole was no longer blue and the other two holes had disappeared. *We made it,* he thought.
Epilogue

The Kronan witnessed the closure of the wormhole from his ship. The cruiser cloaked and escaped from the Kryl mother ship seconds before the PBA smashed into her and destroyed his fleet. The Kronan was strong and wise. The blue wormhole only slept. One day soon, it would open again and the Kryl fleet would enter this galaxy and join him. Until then he would wait. He was in no hurry.

In the center of the fissure, a small blue gaseous cloud grew. The subspace charge fell short of the center of the wormhole and exploded in the corona above. The closure of the wormhole was only temporary. Already the gaseous cloud consumed everything in its path.

About the Author:

Chris Burton is a business advisor and part time writer, who lives on the edge of the South Downs National Park in rural England, with his wife, two young children, two dogs and a cat. This is his first novel.

Visit his blog at: http://alphaonethejumpilot.blogspot.com
or his website: www.chrisburton2212.weebly.com
twitter: chrisburton99
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