

The Fighter Queen is born

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Science  
Fiction



# A VOW TO SOPHIA

JOHN BOWERS

Onja watched the tiny numerals spinning in her optics, her breath coming faster. Her threat board was still clear. Maximum optimal range was five thousand miles, and she was closing on fifty-four hundred. As the numerals spiraled downward she took a deep breath, let half of it out, and gripped her laser control.

Landon felt a rising sense of alarm, as if things were happening beyond his control. This whole thing felt wrong, somehow; he'd engaged the Sirians twice before, both times at close range with asteroids all around him. This was different, and scary. His gunner sounded very sure of herself, but she'd never done this before, so was he making a mistake by trusting her?

Landon almost jumped as a laser beam flashed above him, streaking out across space toward the enemy he couldn't see. It flashed again, then again.

"*Goddammit!*" he shouted. "What the fuck're you *doing!*"

The laser flashed a fourth time, then he heard his gunner issuing orders to the AI.

"Input! Shields up, full Ladar sweep, execute! They've seen us, Major! Full power! Let's get the rest of them!"

He heard the turret whining.

For a dumb five seconds he could hardly believe his eyes. His Ladar went to full power and his HH was suddenly alive with enemy signatures. He counted fourteen, and saw ghosts of four others that looked as if they'd been destroyed.

"Range forty-nine hundred! Let's *go*, Major! Let's *go*, let's *go*, let's *go!*"

# **A Vow to Sophia**

by

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Washington

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"*When* your turn comes," he repeated. "Don't try to asteroid me, Lieutenant."

"Then you're telling me that Captain Hinds can't keep me out of combat?"

"Captain Hinds makes the assignments. But I am the commanding officer. Now if you'll excuse me, I've had a long day."

Onja came to attention and saluted. His answer wasn't fully satisfactory, but seemed to imply that she would eventually get into a gun turret. That would have to do.

"Thank you, Major."

She turned on her heel and walked quickly away.

Landon watched her go, his eyes following her until she disappeared around a corner. She was one persistent girl! If she was even half as good as she believed she was, she might win the war all by herself.

Of course, nobody was that good. It simply wasn't possible.

But — *goddamn!* She was one *hell* of a looker!

\* \* \*

### **Lunar Base 9, Luna**

Suite 19 was the last door on the left as Johnny stepped off the lift. He placed his hand over the ID plate and the door opened. He stepped through into a tiny anteroom containing two chairs, a desk, and a coffee table. A narrow door to the next room was closed.

He shook his head in amazement — they called this a *suite*?

The inner door had to be operated manually. He shoved it aside and stood rooted in surprise — the woman inside was bent over at the waist, pulling on a pair of fatigue pants. As she pulled them up she saw him and also stopped, equally surprised. She was nude from the waist up, but made no effort to cover herself. She was black, good looking, and at least thirty.

She recovered first.

"I assume you're Johnny Lincoln?" She resumed tightening her belt, then reached for a bra. She held it a moment without putting it on, giving him a good look at her assets.

Johnny tried to speak, but nothing came out. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Yes, Ma'am." He swallowed hard.

She burst out laughing.

"Relax, Lieutenant. I'm your gunner, so anything you see isn't classified." She shrugged into the bra, then reached for her blouse. As she slipped it on, Johnny saw captain's bars on the shoulder.

"Denise Jordan," she said a moment later, extending her hand. "Don't sweat the captain rank; it's mostly complimentary, because I've been in the service so damn long."

Johnny dropped his space bag to shake her hand. He still felt off balance — things were moving very rapidly.

Denise finished buttoning her shirt and began brushing her long, wavy hair. It was dark red; whether natural or dyed he couldn't tell.

"You might as well know up front, Lincoln — Major Dunn assigned me to you because he thinks you need a firm hand. He doesn't much like you right now, but that's okay because everyone here hates him even more." She pinned him with a quick glare. "I didn't say that, by the way, and if you ever say I did I'll kick your ass."

Johnny nodded, feeling a little better. He continued staring at her, with no idea what to say.

"The point is, this squadron has never been in battle. The war's almost a year old and Luna's been hit half a dozen times, but we never show up until it's time to count the dead." She put the brush down and turned to face him, leaning against the bulkhead. "Some of us are getting a little tired of that, tired of jokes in the O-Club from the other squadrons about virgin pilots and bullshit like that."

Johnny frowned. He didn't like the sound of this at all.

"Then here you come, already an ace before you even joined up. As you might imagine, certain people might feel threatened by that." She tilted her head. "I'll let you figure out the rest. Any questions?"

Johnny shook his head in confusion. "With all those combat opportunities, how come the 213 never gets into it? Just bad luck?"

Her smile was sad and ironic.

"Like I said, you figure it out. I've said too much already."

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"But first things first."

Her lips found his cheek and he felt an instant erection. His heart pounded suddenly.

"We have two hours until the squadron meeting," she said softly. "I think a pilot and gunner should get acquainted as quickly as possible, don't you?"

He blinked. "I'm supposed to read —"

"Read it later. I can tell you everything you need to know. The first thing you need to know is that I haven't been laid in six months, and you're the cutest unattached white boy I've seen in all that time. Any problem with that?"

He grinned. "Is that an order, Captain?"

"Damn right it is."

Her lips locked onto his and Johnny forgot all about Major Dunn.

\* \* \*

Johnny felt a bit self-conscious as he accompanied Denise to the squadron meeting. A handful of pilots and gunners were already seated, and Denise began making introductions. The faces went by in a blur, as did the

names — Stovall, Marcos, Burgundy, Palmer, de los Santos. Everyone was friendly and they all seemed a little in awe of him — they'd heard the stories and knew him by reputation.

"Ten hut!"

Everyone snapped to attention as the executive officer walked in. He stopped in front of Johnny and looked him up and down.

"You made it," he said. "I wasn't sure you'd survive boot camp."

"Yes, sir." Johnny felt his scalp tingle as Capt. Walters shook his hand.

"Good. You know how to fly formation now?"

"Yes, sir. In my sleep."

"And you can follow orders?"

"Yes, sir, they were pretty persuasive about that."

Walters grinned. "What's your call sign?"

"Railsplitter."

"Computer-generated, or did you make it up?"

"I did. It's a play on the family name."

Walters nodded. "Welcome aboard, Lincoln."

## Chapter 14

### **Late June-Early July, 0221 (PCC) — Asteroid Base 131, Solar System**

Over the next month, Robert Landon led two patrols, but left most missions to his captains. He now had thirty operational fighters, which had to be shared between three squadrons; most patrols consisted of fewer than a dozen ships. No contact was made, but mines were laid in areas where sensors showed heavy traffic, and two patrols later found wreckage that indicated results. The Ladar Tank still showed signs of frequent enemy activity, so Landon knew the enemy was still out there and, apparently, growing stronger. His frustration lay in not being able to do anything about it; his own force was so small that he feared a full-scale confrontation; such a battle would very likely wipe out his fighters, leaving AB-131 completely naked.

He had more crews than he could field, but he needed ships. His chances of getting them seemed more remote every day.

"There has to be some way to draw the bastards out!" Hinds fumed one afternoon as they discussed the situation in Landon's office. "They can't possibly have a base around here, but..."

"But there's a hell of a lot of activity in the area," Landon said. "Trouble is, Jack, even if we manage to draw them out, they could fin-

ish us off. Our force is mighty thin, and even if we win, they'll know we have a base nearby."

"They already know that." Hinds's scowl darkened. "They'll find us eventually, and when they do, we're history. In which case, I'd love to fill the sky with Sirian blood before that happens."

"Go out in a blaze of glory?"

"Better than going out with a whimper."

Landon nodded unhappily. He knew through coded SpectraWavs from Luna 1 that half the asteroid bases had already fallen. Ceres and Vesta were in enemy hands. The picket line was faltering, but the longer it held, the more time it bought for the Federation to crank up its defense. His position was completely untenable, but it was the only one he had, and his job was to hold until relieved.

"We can't very well force a battle," he said, "without knowing where they are or how to draw them out. But if we do get the chance, we'll hit 'em with everything we've got."

"I like the sound of that."

"Even if it finishes us," Landon said. "A single victory of any magnitude will buy time, and time is what we need."

A few minutes later the two men stepped out of the office; the afternoon patrol would be returning soon and Landon was in the habit of being present whenever a patrol came back. As he stepped into the corridor, he felt a twinge of annoyance. Onja Kvoorik stood

there waiting for him, almost at attention, a salute snapping toward her forehead.

"Permission to speak to the Major, sir?"

She was like a bad habit — she'd been to see him at least once a week since she arrived. Landon returned her salute.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

Hinds stepped into view and her blue eyes blazed with sudden anger.

"I would prefer to speak to the Major alone!" she said.

"I'm here and you're here. If you have something to say, then say it."

"Yes, sir." She threw a visual dagger at Hinds, then turned back to Landon. "I've been here five weeks, Major. I have not been assigned to a squadron. I have not flown a mission. Every other gunner who arrived with me has flown missions. Every gunner in the Pool has flown at least one mission. I have the best training record of any gunner in the Fighter Service."

She stopped, her eyes darting to Hinds again. Landon felt a fleeting satisfaction at her obvious discomfort. He pushed the needle a little.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Sir, I..." She glanced at Hinds yet again.

"Yes? What is it, Lieutenant?"

Hinds stood beside him, glowering at her. Her face flushed slowly crimson, but she did-

n't back down. Her eyes reflected her growing rage.

"Major, I hereby request posting to a squadron, or at the very least, a slot in the Pool rotation. I volunteered to fight, I am trained to fight, I am ready and willing to fight. Let me pull my weight, sir!"

Landon stared at her a moment longer, then turned to his XO.

"Captain?"

Hinds looked startled. For just a second he seemed nonplussed, but recovered quickly.

"We have no openings at the moment, Major."

"Bullshit!" Onja's eyes gleamed her hatred.

Hinds swelled with sudden rage. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, turning his eyes on his commanding officer.

Landon stared back at him, his expression neutral.

"Major? That was insubordination! Do you want to let her get away with that?"

"You still have concerns about her loyalty?" Landon asked bluntly.

"Yes, sir, I do. I'm reluctant to send her out with her hand on enough firepower to wipe out one of our squadrons."

Onja's mouth dropped open in astonishment. Her eyes darted from one officer to the other.

"In that case," Landon said, "why don't you take her out yourself? That way, if you sense

any danger to your patrol, you can override her systems."

"I won't fly with *him!*" Onja snapped.

Landon withered her with his gaze — or tried to. "If you want to fight so badly," he informed her, "you'll fly with whoever you're assigned to."

"Major, if I fly with him, he'll expect me to sleep with him! He's been fucking me over ever since I got here, but as my pilot he'll try to fuck me for real."

"That's defamation of a superior officer!" Hinds roared. "You could get a star-court for that!"

"He's all about power," Onja went on recklessly. "Every gunner I've talked to said so, and the way he handled my case confirms it. I'll obey any legitimate order *you* give me, Major, but I will *not* fly with *him!*"

Landon held up a hand to stop her tirade. He studied her for several seconds, evaluating her words. Hinds was right, of course — she was stomping all over military protocol, but she also had a point. He wasn't sure what Hinds had against her, but he'd already carried it too far. He glanced at Hinds, whose mottled face was diffused with blood.

"I'll handle this, Captain," Landon said quietly. "That will be all."

Hinds grimaced, saluted, and stalked away. Onja watched him go, her hatred evident in every muscle.

"Let's take a walk, Lieutenant."

Landon began walking toward the hangar bay, Onja at his side. Neither spoke for several minutes, the time it took to arrive at the observation deck where they could watch the returning patrol. Landon peered through the foot-thick Solarglas. The patrol hadn't arrived yet. He turned to the girl.

"I know you think you have cause to dislike Captain Hinds," he said quietly, "but — don't interrupt! You don't like him, but you have to keep a lid on it, all right? He's fully within his rights to file charges against you for your outburst back there, and he'll probably try. I'll talk him out of it, of course, because I don't have time to fuck with a star-court. But I want you to stop provoking him."

"Major! Everything I said was true!"

"I don't care, all right? We may be stuck out here on the ass-end of the Solar System, but we're still part of a fully functional military service. As long as I'm in command of this combat wing, we *will* observe military protocol. Is that clear?"

She glared at him in resentment for what seemed like forever, then relented.

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "Good. Now, about your request."

She came almost to attention again. Her eyes flickered hopefully.

"Let's try this," he said. "I haven't flown many patrols lately, and I need to get back into the cockpit. I don't have a regular gunner, so next time I go out, you'll fly with me. Will that be satisfactory?"

Relief flooded her gorgeous features. For just a moment, he thought she was going to smile, but she didn't quite make it.

"Yes, sir! I'll fly with you anywhere, any time. Thank you, sir!"

Landon allowed a ghost of a smile to cross his lips. "And I won't expect you to sleep with me."

Once again she threatened to smile. Instead, she saluted him crisply.

"Thank you, Major."

"You just behave yourself. If I catch you baiting Captain Hinds again, the deal is off."

"I'll be good, sir."

"Dismissed."

\* \* \*

## **Lunar Base 9, Luna**

Johnny Lincoln rarely had contact with Major Dunn after his first day. He wasn't sure if Dunn was avoiding him or what, but it hardly mattered — until he'd proved himself to Dunn's satisfaction, he'd just as soon keep a low profile.

Capt. Walters seemed to actually run the squadron. He posted the orders, issued the chewings, and led most of the patrols. The patrol area, to Johnny's surprise, was nowhere

near Luna. Instead, the 213 usually flew some kind of intermediate cover over Terra, usually near one of the poles. It made for a long day every time, requiring several hours to arrive on station and the same number of hours to return.

To Johnny it made no sense, especially the North Pole, because there was nothing there of value to the enemy. Walters explained the logic — patrolling ten thousand miles above either pole placed 213 in position to respond in any direction. In the event of another enemy strike, they could intercept the enemy before anyone else did, and perhaps blunt the thrust to some degree.

The good news was that Walters, already familiar with Johnny's ability, quickly made him a section leader. Johnny's wingmen were Phil Stovall, call sign Blowtorch; Billy Burgundy, call sign Vintage Red; and Pablo Marcos, call sign Polo. The four of them flew well together and the wingmen didn't appear to resent Johnny's assignment as flight leader. Off duty, the four pilots and their gunners were like members of the same club, drinking and dancing and hanging out together.

Now, Johnny reflected, if only they could get some action.

\* \* \*

**Monday, 16 July, 0221 (PCC) — Washington City, North America, Terra**

Several QuasarFighters had been turned over to the Fighter Service for testing a few weeks after the war began (one QF actually got into combat during the December strike, but scored no kills). Oliver Lincoln III had received reports of the results as the testing progressed, ordering two minor design changes as a result. Testing continued through the winter and spring; by summer the Polygon made its final evaluation, and on July 13, LincEnt was offered a contract.

Oliver flew to Washington City for the signing ceremony; Henry Wells flew in from London to join him. Half a dozen high-level officers were present, their tunics top-heavy with colorful decorations. The details of the contract were explained in a closed session, and Oliver agreed to the terms. He would deliver four hundred fighters within three months, and fifty per month after that until all front-line squadrons had been converted over. At that time the contract would be re-evaluated, with the option to continue or cancel. A LincEnt subsidiary would produce spare parts, for which LincEnt would receive a percentage.

It was a lucrative contract, even though the profit margin was barely five percent per unit. Oliver already had sixty-odd QFs in stock for immediate delivery, and could spin the plant up to full production in less than a week.

Oliver was invited to sign the contract, which already bore the signatures of the military men present. He picked up the stylus and stared at the document a moment, then leaned back in his chair and scanned the faces around the table.

"I have one request, gentlemen," he said quietly. "A personal favor."

"Yes?" Admiral Rubens said.

"I can deliver sixty fighters by the day after tomorrow," Oliver said. "Enough for three squadrons. I'd like your assurance that the first squadron to be converted will be ZF-213, now operating out of Luna 9."

Rubens frowned at the presumptuousness of the request.

"Mr. Lincoln, we already have a schedule in place for which squadrons get converted, and when. I'm afraid we can't alter that."

"My son is with the 213," Oliver replied. "He tested the QF from day one, he knows it better than anyone alive, and he can make immediate use of it. Hell, he can even train the pilots in his squadron how to fly it. I don't think it's too much to ask, do you?"

Rubens exchanged disapproving glances with two other officers, and it was clear they weren't happy.

"Mr. Lincoln, we're extremely impressed with your product, but we take a dim view of a contractor trying to tell us how to conduct our

business. I'm afraid I'll have to decline your request."

Oliver stared at him for ten full seconds, then put down the stylus and scooted his chair back.

"Gentlemen, you have a nice day."

Oliver rose and started for the door. Rubens leapt to his feet.

"Sit *down*, Mr. Lincoln! You can't just walk out of here!"

Oliver turned back, eyebrows raised.

"I'm a private citizen, Admiral. I can do anything I want."

"We need your signature on that contract!"

Oliver nodded slowly. "Yes," he said, "you do. I'm surprised it took you this long to realize that."

The brass hats exchanged glances again, uncertainty in their eyes.

"You're going to just walk out of here, turning down a multi-billion-terro contract?" Rubens sputtered in disbelief.

"You're going to *let* me walk out of here?" Oliver countered, "because of your stupid fucking *pride*?"

"Jesus Christ!" Rubens muttered, "I don't believe this!"

"I'm not asking for all that much," Oliver said in a reasonable voice. "I just want my boy flying the best fighter available. Don't forget, he shot down five Sirians on August 9 — in

the QF. He was still a civilian then, so imagine what he might do with a QF now."

"Admiral..." Henry Wells spoke up from his seat at the end of the table. "May I suggest that we consider what's best for the service here? Is it going to cripple the war effort to convert the 213 ahead of other squadrons?"

"Well, no, but —"

"Do you not believe this new fighter will give us an advantage over the enemy?"

"Yes, certainly it will!"

"Then what are we quibbling about? Outfit the 213 first. Christ, man! Let's get on with the war!"

Rubens glared at the senator for a moment, then glared at his colleagues. One by one they shrugged or nodded. Finally he turned his glare on Oliver.

"All right!" he said. "But no more favors!"

"Fair enough," Oliver said. "Now, as soon as you put that in writing, I'll sign the contract."

\* \* \*

## **Tuesday, 17 July, 0221 (PCC) — Arctic Circle, Terra**

When it came, it came like a bolt of lightning. Johnny had been with the 213 for three weeks, and the squadron was patrolling above the Arctic Circle, strung out over three hundred miles of orbital space. For the first time since Johnny had arrived, Major Dunn was leading the patrol.

The first indication of trouble was a single SpectraWav call from somewhere to the south, over the North Pacific.

"Mayday! Mayday! Any military station, I am under attack. Repeat, I am under—"

The transmission ended in a burst of static, but Johnny felt his blood surge as his heart kicked into turbo.

"Johnny, what was that?" Denise demanded anxiously from her turret.

"Sounded like trouble," he said. "Some ship just died out there. Get ready."

But Major Dunn, call sign Denmark, didn't issue any orders. For over a minute the squadron continued on course. Then Walters came through the headset.

"Denmark, Tobacco Road. What are your orders, Major?"

"Hold formation!" Dunn replied bluntly. "We've been assigned to guard this sector, we will hold our position. Let them come to us."

Johnny gritted his teeth and was about to respond when transmissions began arriving from other stations.

"Attention all military spacecraft. This is Western Pacific Space Traffic Command. Code sequence Alpha November niner seven. Enemy spacecraft have been detected approaching quadrant three four North. All combat squadrons execute discretionary interception. Repeat, this is a battle alert. Execute discretionary interception."

The controller went on to give coordinates and approach vectors of enemy forces, all duly recorded by the computers aboard the GalaxyFighters. Johnny and Denise armed their weapons and waited, confident they would quickly receive orders to engage the enemy.

"All sections," Dunn broadcast, "we will hold position and see what develops. The enemy is too far south for us to intercept without leaving our patrol area vulnerable. Repeat, hold your position pending further orders."

"Jesus Christ!" Denise shouted from behind Johnny. "What does that bastard want, a holo-invitation?"

Someone else apparently was as frustrated as Denise; at that moment an unidentified transmission went out from one of the fighters.

"Wassamatter, Denmark? You wanna die in bed?"

Dunn came back on the air, his voice shaking with anger.

"Last traffic, identify!" he ordered. When no one responded: "Who *was* that, dammit? Railsplitter! Was that you?"

"Denmark, Railsplitter. Negat."

"Maintain SpectraWav silence until further notice!" Dunn ordered and went off the air.

"Son of a bitch!" Denise muttered.

The squadron continued its circular patrol as reports of combat engagements began to

arrive. At least two squadrons had managed to engage the incoming strike, but things didn't go well. The enemy strike force was powerful, and Federation losses were high. The strike penetrated the atmosphere and within minutes civilian stations began reporting attacks on major eastern cities, including Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Hanoi, Bangkok, Shanghai, Jakarta, Manila, and Taipei.

The minutes dragged into a half-hour, and Johnny felt his body tremble with rage. Here he sat, in a fully loaded and combat-ready fighter while enemy ships devastated large cities and slaughtered thousands of civilians. Every second he waited decreased his chances of punishing those doing the killing. This was worse than running away.

"Johnny, I'm picking up bogies inside the atmosphere. Enemy ships climbing out. They've finished their strike and they're leaving."

"I see them. They're gonna exit over Siberia."

"We can intercept them, Johnny, but we've got to go now!"

"Input: compute attack profile on bogies bearing two seven three degrees. Lock in."

"Ack," the AI replied crisply. "Attack profile programmed and locked."

Johnny's heart hammered faster than ever as he broke SpectraWav silence.

"Denmark, Railsplitter. Request permission to engage enemy ships climbing toward orbit. They're sitting ducks, Major. They're climbing over the pole to make an easy getaway; if we catch them before they break atmosphere we can take them down."

"*Negat, goddammit!*" Dunn roared. "Hold your position, Railsplitter! That is an *order!*"

"Asshole!" Denise gritted.

Johnny chinned his transmitter again.

"Say again, Denmark? You're breaking up!"

"You heard me, Lincoln! If you break formation I'll have you up on charges!"

"Denmark, are you there? I think my SpectraWav is out."

*"Lincoln, you son of a bitch! You heard me! Hold your goddamned position!"*

Phil Stovall's voice came into Johnny's cockpit from his position off Johnny's right wing.

"Railsplitter, Blowtorch! I'm with you! Let's go get 'em!"

"*Stovall!*" Dunn was almost incoherent in his rage.

"What're you gonna do, Johnny?" Denise asked breathlessly. "My god, he gave you an order!"

"Tell me you want me to obey it," Johnny replied.

"Jesus! You can't disobey an order! Oh my god!"

"Tell me, Denise! You outrank me, and my radio is out!"

"Oh, fuck!" She swallowed hard. "I can't just —"

"They're getting away..."

"Oh, shit, *do it!*"

"Input:" Johnny said, "Execute!"

\* \* \*

The GalaxyFighter fired its engines and ar-rowed toward the atmosphere on an intercept course for the Vegan ships leaving the scene of the devastation below. Stovall and the other two ships in the section followed, leaving the rest of 213 orbiting behind Major Dunn. Dunn's voice screamed after them but Johnny ignored it.

More than a hundred Sirian-built ships, all with Vegan markings, were heading for outer space, strung out in small groups over three thousand miles, some trailing smoke from anti-spacecraft hits over their targets. Johnny's section had a perfect setup as it vectored down to meet them.

The GalaxyFighter trailed a mile of flame as it pierced the atmosphere, its skin glowing red from heat friction. Johnny hardly noticed the sickening ride as his ship bucked and rolled drunkenly. All communications were dead for the three minutes it took to penetrate, and it was the longest three minutes of his life. To his dismay he found that he was just as scared as he'd been in his previous combats; he'd

hoped it would be different now that he was trained.

But he wouldn't run this time, even if it killed him.

He broke into normal atmosphere and all his screens came to life again.

"Attent: four enemy spacecraft bearing three two three relative, altitude one zero five zero, range seven zero miles."

Johnny blinked and identified the flight on his Heads Up Holo. His mouth felt suddenly dry.

"You ready back there, lady?" he asked.

"I was born ready," Denise said breathlessly, but he heard the tremor in her voice.

"Flight of four at eleven o'clock."

"I've got 'em."

"Section Two, sound off," he transmitted.

"Blowtorch."

"Polo."

"Vintage Red."

"Okay, people, the targets are real this time. You know the drill, so do it by the book. It's payback time, and we all know about payback, right?"

The other three answered at roughly the same time.

"Payback ..."

"... is a ..."

"*BITCH!*"

Johnny grinned in spite of his fear, and as he banked lightly to port and angled down-

ward he kicked his rockets. The four enemy ships were only ten miles distant now, and before he could get a visual on them the 29mm above his head hammered into action. The GalaxyFighter shuddered hard under the recoil, but Johnny held it steady as the dual cannon poured rapid-fire death from all twenty-four cylinders.

None of the enemy ships returned fire; as the GalaxyFighter streaked by them one was already in flames, a second had lost a wing and was starting to spin. Two seconds later Stovall's gunner smashed another, then the last two ships in the section shared a fourth kill between them.

The fighter bucked against the turbulence from the enemy ships, and Johnny released his breath, unaware he'd been holding it. In the back, Denise was ecstatic.

"*I got one!*" she shrieked. "*I nailed the motherfucker!*"

"You got *two* of 'em!" Johnny corrected. "Settle down, now, we're not finished."

"Fuck *no*, we're not finished! Find me some more of the bastards!"

Ninety-eight thousand feet, screaming through the stratosphere at Mach 6.4 — Johnny called roll again and everyone was there. His HH showed the flight in ragged but acceptable formation. He killed his rockets and the others did likewise.

"Input: locate nearest enemy formation. Execute."

"Nearest enemy formation bearing zero one seven, altitude eight four zero, range two four seven miles. Two ships, rate of climb one zero zero."

"Input: compute intercept point and lock in."

"Intercept point computed and locked."

"Execute."

The AI took control of the fighter and turned; the nose tilted slightly upward and they began a gentle climb. In the back, Denise monitored everything via her own holos, and picked up the bogeys on high magnification.

"We've got a cripple, Johnny!" she reported. "One of them is throwing a lot of smoke."

"Okay, get the healthy one."

Less than a minute later Johnny took back control of the ship as they closed on the two Vegans.

"Input: report ranges continuous. Execute."

"Range fifty-four miles. Range forty-two miles. Range thirty miles. Range eighteen miles..."

"Holy shit! *Break left, break left!*"

Denise opened fire even as she shouted the warning, and Johnny instinctively rolled left and down. Streaks of fire smoked past his cockpit windows, and he felt his fighter jerk as cannon shells ripped through it. On the Spec-

traWav, his section all seemed to be talking at once.

"Railsplitter's hit! I'm going in, you two get the other one!"

"Watch it! Watch it! The fucker's reversing course! Breaking right!"

"Jesus Christ! I'm hit!"

"Break right, get the hell away! *God* damn it, I'm hit, too!"

"I'm on him! I'm on him! You guys, keep bearing right, he's turning inside you! Now, break left. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"Shit! My gunner's hit! Git that fucker off my back!"

"I'm okay! He missed me! He missed me."

"Use your rockets, head for the deck! He won't follow you!"

Johnny executed a spiraling barrel roll and came up into the fray again, still flying but out of position. Denise had her guns trained but dared not shoot for fear of hitting Stovall, who had jockeyed in behind the Vegan and now matched him turn for turn. As Johnny came around in a gut-grinding high-G turn to get back into the battle, Nancy Palmer, in Stovall's turret, got the lead she needed and pumped eighty rounds of 29mm into the Vegan's cockpit. Stovall's rebel yell could have been heard all across Siberia as the enemy ship suddenly stalled and began to tumble, then settled into a nose-dive that would carry it fourteen miles to the earth below.

Marcos, meanwhile, turned to pursue the cripple. Without waiting for his wingman, he overtook it and his gunner brought it down easily. When the section rejoined everyone took stock and discovered that three of them had taken cannon hits, but none appeared to be critical.

"Attent: large enemy formation climbing for low earth orbit, bearing two seven four relative, range one three nine miles, altitude seven six five, rate of climb one five zero. Sixteen ships."

Johnny felt his skin tighten.

"Okay, guys, form up on me. We're not done yet."

\* \* \*

Two of the sixteen raiders were trailing thick smoke as they climbed toward low earth orbit; the fighters of 213 approached from above and behind, flying through locally heavy cloud. Alerted by radar, three Vegans broke away from the larger formation and turned to intercept.

"Section Two, Railsplitter. I'm gonna decoy these fuckers and try to draw them away. Rest of you, go for the kill. Hit 'em with salvo and try to get 'em all. Ready: three, two, one, *break!*"

Johnny punched his rockets and the GF surged forward in a shallow climb, burning toward the three interceptors; the others turned away as if to abort the attack. Two of

the Vegans homed on the lone GalaxyFighter for an easy kill while the third turned to track Stovall and company. Johnny twisted right and began to dive; the Vegans followed, opening fire at extreme range.

"Input: deploy countermeasures!" Denise panted. "Execute!"

Small pods along the skin of the Lincoln fighter opened and sprayed tiny electronic devices in all directions. The cloud of micro-transmitters instantly blinded enemy radar with dozens of echoes that looked like GalaxyFighters, leaving Johnny time to streak into the clouds and disappear. He emerged from the weather several miles from his pursuers. Still under rocket power, he arrowed straight for the Vegan that was tracking his wingmen.

"I've got him!" Denise said a moment later. "Steady!"

Johnny watched the Vegan on his HH as he closed the range, and at six miles Denise opened fire with the 29mm. Seconds later the Vegan began to disintegrate, lost a wing, and tumbled crazily down the sky.

Johnny killed his rockets.

"You guys are clear!" he called. "Go get 'em!"

The other three GFs were miles ahead, and now kicked rockets to close on the main body of enemy fighters. Johnny followed, watching for any threat to his friends, and flew high

cover until they made their run. Each fighter released four missiles, then broke left and retreated while they did their job. Vegan ships began to scatter in panic, but several warheads had already locked onto their targets, and in less than a minute seven of the enemy ships had been obliterated. At least two more were damaged by near-hits. What remained of the enemy was now scattered all over the sky.

Johnny checked his screens — his mates were clear, the enemy was disorganized.

"Your turn, Denise!" he said.

"I thought you'd never ask," she laughed.

He punched rockets again and the GF slammed forward, homing on a ragged group of three. But before he could pick them up on visual, Johnny was suddenly stunned by an explosion of VR graphics on his Heads-Up.

"Shit!"

"What the fuck —" Denise saw it, too.

"Countermeasures," he said. "Bastards did the same thing back to us."

"Gotta get closer!" she said. "Got to have a visual; I can't use the radar."

"Input: magnify and eliminate decoy radar returns. Execute."

"Auto-elim already active," the AI replied. "Warning — further reduction of radar returns may allow error ratio of twelve percent."

"Shit. Input: resume auto-elim at normal params. Execute."

Tense and irritated, Johnny turned off the HH and continued to burn toward the enemy, peering through his canopy for any sight of them. Distracted, he was only dimly aware of conversation among his other pilots.

Until —

"Oh my God! Phiiiiiiiiil!" A scream of agony.

Johnny's heart stopped. "What —"

"Jesus Christ! We're going down! Railsplitt —"

"Polo! Look out!"

"Where the fuck did *they* come from?"

"I can't see a goddamned thing! My holo's all lit up!"

"There he is! He's coming in on your right! Dive out! Dive out!"

Johnny's first instinct was to turn back and help his friends, but at that very moment Denise shouted in his headset.

"Two bogeys at one o'clock! I've got target lock! I'm taking the shot!"

Two missiles dropped out of his wing tubes. Johnny saw them, but his primary attention was still with his friends.

"I got 'im! I got 'im!"

"There's another one! Watch out! Watch out!"

"Where? *Where*, goddammit?"

"Keep turning! Keep —"

"Bingo!" Denise jerked him back to the moment. "That's one! No, that's *two*! Get me some more!"

But Johnny killed rockets and came around hard, turning back to help his friends. Stovall had gone silent, his last transmission a cry of despair. Marcos and Burgundy were in deep trouble. Johnny flipped on his HH, but couldn't see them among all the echoes.

"Input: isolate friendly spacecraft and lock on. Execute."

"Two spacecraft isolated, course locked in."

"Execute."

Thirty seconds later Johnny arrived in the general area of the mêlée. Through his canopy he saw in the distance a GalaxyFighter that looked badly hit. A moment later he saw the other one, keeping a loose formation with the cripple.

"Who's hit?" he transmitted.

"Polo," Burgundy replied. "There were two of 'em; my gunner got one, but the other one keeps dodging into the cloud."

Johnny grimaced, his stomach feeling sour. The hunters had become the hunted.

"Watch our ass, Denise!" he said.

"Don't worry, baby, our ass is *covered!*"

"Polo, Railsplitter. Do you read?"

"That's affirm," Marcos replied. "This thing's about to shut down any minute. My whole cockpit has gone red as a whorehouse."

Johnny reduced power and dropped his drag flaps, pulling into formation alongside the other two. From his vantage point he could see severe damage to the fuselage of

Marcos's fighter, including some of the control surfaces.

"No way you're gonna make orbit," he said. "You've gotta put it down."

"Where the fuck'm I gonna put it down?"

Good question. Where, exactly, were they?

"I dunno. Link in one of the comsats, find the nearest base. Burgundy, you go with him."

"Roger. What about you?"

"We'll cover your getaway. Get going."

Marcos wasted no time arguing. He immediately lowered his nose and began shedding altitude. Burgundy followed a moment later, almost reluctantly. Johnny maintained altitude and orbited above them as they descended, senses alert for the enemy fighter that might still be lurking in the area.

Within a few brief minutes the enemy's countermeasures faded from the radar, and when they did, the sky was clear. No Vegan ships were visible anywhere.

"Input: locate enemy formations within striking range. Execute."

A brief pause. "No enemy formations within striking range."

"Locate enemy formations within extreme range."

"Two enemy formations within extreme range. Nearest enemy formation bearing zero eight eight relative, distance nine zero six miles, altitude one one three zero, rate of climb —"

"Cancel."

Johnny looked around in frustration. Brief minutes earlier the sky had been filled with enemy fighters, and now they were all gone? Christ!

He felt suddenly drained, as if all the adrenaline had bled out of him.

"Looks like it's over, huh?" Denise sounded equally disappointed.

"For now," he admitted. "We still might get lucky."

"I think we were pretty damn lucky already."

"Yeah." He allowed his eyes to close for a moment, just to take a deep breath. He was starting to shake. "How'd we do?" he asked.

"I count five kills," she told him. "I'm not sure about the others..."

"Burgundy said his gunner got one, and..."  
It hit him suddenly.

"God damn it, Denise — we lost Phil."

"I know," she said quietly. "He was a good friend. Nancy was good people, too."

He just nodded, though she couldn't see him. Suddenly he didn't feel like talking any more, or fighting, either. He checked the ship's damage status on the AI, determined that it was spaceworthy, and began to climb toward orbit.

It was time to go home.

## Chapter 15

### **Wednesday, 18 July, 0221 (PCC) — Asteroid Base 131, Solar System**

"ATTENTION! EMERGENCY MEDICAL TEAMS TO THE HANGAR BAY! REPEAT, EMERGENCY MEDICAL TEAMS TO THE HANGAR BAY. STAND BY FOR CASUALTIES!!"

Onja Kvoorik darted out of the Gunnery Pool and raced toward the observation deck overlooking the bay. Major Landon and the other squadron commanders were already there, faces grim. An alarm sounded from somewhere and hospital corpsmen appeared on the level below, coming out of the lift. Onja stared through the Solarglas with a thundering heart — Sylvia had been on the latest patrol.

The hangar bay was huge, a vast airless cavern carved out of one end of the asteroid. It stretched over two hundred yards across and housed not only the fighters, but tugs, rescue ships, and repair facilities. Mechanics and armorers bustled about in pressure suits, their motions appearing clumsy as they slid their feet across the magnetized surface to compensate for low gravity.

Three fighters sat in full view, their skins pitted by cosmic gravel and laser fire. One gun turret was completely smashed; rescue people were helping gunners out of the other two.

"Goddess!" she whispered. "Only three? How many were on patrol?"

Landon glanced grimly at her, as if annoyed to see her there.

"Nine," he replied, then turned away.

"Hope to hell nobody followed them home!" Hinds snarled. He seemed angrier than usual, his face twisted with fury.

"Alert the Triple One," Landon told him quietly. "In the ready room, full flight gear. I'll be along in a few minutes."

Hinds nodded and strode away. Landon dropped down a crew ladder to meet the survivors when they came through the airlock. Onja started to follow, but held back, watching the scene from above. She had no duty here and would only be in the way. But she wanted to do *something!*

\* \* \*

Landon picked up the story in snatches as the survivors, dazed and wounded, struggled through the airlock. It was the same as before — an ambush. The enemy hadn't registered on Ladar, but had appeared suddenly.

"They hit us from behind," Lt. Saulsbury mumbled. "Their EMP took our shields down, and then it was a fucking free-for-all!"

"Anybody still alive out there?" Landon demanded.

"I dunno. We managed to get two of them, I think — they were so close the EMP killed

their shields, too. Sylvia hit one with cannon fire."

Sylvia Gates pulled off her helmet and shook out her long red hair. She stared at Landon, her eyes filled with horror.

"You hit one with *cannon* fire?" he asked incredulously.

She nodded. "They were too close for torpedoes, and my laser went down. It was all I had."

"How'd you get away?" Landon asked Saulsbury.

"We fired rockets on manual. The Sirians had fried their own electronics, so they couldn't follow us. Once we got clear, we managed to get the backup navigational working."

As Landon turned to meet the next crew coming out of the lock, Onja dropped down the crew ladder and stood in front of Sylvia. At sight of the blonde, the redhead burst into tears.

"Onja, it was *h-horrible!* They — they got Christine! She's still out there!"

\* \* \*

It was Onja's first time in a mission briefing. The ready room was small and crowded, like an overflowing classroom. Pilots and gunners listened intently as Landon explained what had happened to the ambushed patrol; that six fighters, damaged or destroyed, were still out there, and there might be survivors. A holo-map displayed the coordinates of the

area, which was only a few thousand miles distant.

"We're going back," Landon said. "We're taking a ResQMed in case of survivors, and your job will be to protect the Med. If we find any enemy survivors, we'll try to rescue them, too. I'd love to get my hands on a few prisoners."

He took questions, then gave his final order.

"Saddle up. Lieutenant Ka-vorik will be my gunner."

\* \* \*

Onja crawled into a real gun turret for the first time since Luna 1. As she powered up her systems and ran diagnostics, she noted the date: 18 July, 0221. She had enlisted almost a year ago, and was only now getting her chance.

Today's ambush had taken six GalaxyFighters out of action. Only twenty-four were left, and Landon led a force of twelve. His was the first one out of the hangar, drifting slowly away from the asteroid under minimal power, adjusting course with steering jets, anti-collision shields up to avoid damage by debris. Onja watched the asteroid fall behind on her screens, her blood surging. On one level she was more excited than ever before in her life, but at another she was deadly calm. This was what she'd trained for, what her whole life was about. Even if she should die and

never come back, this would be her defining moment.

Landon spoke quietly to his AI as he drifted farther from the base, giving his fighters time to exit the hangar and form up behind him. They would fly in three wedge formations; it would take an hour or more to reach the scene of the ambush, and by the time they got there, Landon would have a formation on each wing, several hundred miles apart. Any threat to the rescue operation would be detected and engaged before it could close — at least in theory. The ResQMed, a box-like medical ship manufactured by Lincoln Enterprises, would fly with the center formation.

"You alert back there, Lieutenant?" Landon asked over the intercom.

"Alert, Major. I just hope they saved a few of the bastards for us."

"Be careful what you hope for," he replied grimly. "You just might get it."

She didn't reply, but she hoped so. Goddess Sophia, she *hoped* so!

\* \* \*

The asteroid field was distracting as hell. Billions of pieces of rock — from gravel to boulders to rocks the size of a house — floated lazily in all directions, occluding Ladar and creating an obstacle to speed. The Lincoln fighters proceeded at a steady pace in spite of that, their AC shields protecting them from damage. Occasionally the AI fired a steering

jet to avoid a larger object. The shields sparked lightly each time something touched them, and Onja found it almost hypnotic as she watched on her screens.

As they approached the ambush site, her pulse quickened. She'd been keeping up with events and knew the Sirians had been successful at somehow masking their presence, even in the face of passive Ladar. So the fact that her screens displayed nothing threatening was little comfort.

Then something blinked on her board and she heard a beep. She tuned her equipment and listened intently.

"I'm getting a beacon, Major," she said breathlessly. "Bearing zero one four, offset three five one negative, range one zero four miles." She should have picked it up much farther away, she reflected, but if EMP had fried the damaged fighter's circuits, it would be operating on battery power. Rescue beacons always operated at low power in order to keep broadcasting as long as possible; such emissions could be detected from close range, but at any distance only the sophisticated equipment aboard larger vessels could hear them.

"That's it," Landon said easily. "ETA thirty seconds. Keep alert."

They arrived on station moments later; Landon fired retro power to stop, and the ResQMed headed for the wreck. Onja didn't

see the damaged fighter, but continued scanning space in all directions. Five more wrecks were out here somewhere, though they could have drifted several thousand miles since the ambush. The idea was to find them all, but at the moment she wasn't picking up any more distress beacons. She heard Landon talking to the Med over inter-ship radio, a weak signal that carried only a few miles. She could see the fighters in her section through her optics, but the other sections were too far away. Nothing else was visible either visually or electronically, except millions of pieces of rock.

"Okay," Landon told her a few minutes later, "the ResQMed says no survivors aboard that one. Let's look for the others."

It took a painful two hours to locate the next one, and again no survivors were found. The next two were close together, and this time they struck pay dirt — two men from the Med were able to pull a pilot and two gunners out of the wrecks, all of them injured, but alive. Onja wondered if Christine Liebau was among them. She continued to search the sky....

"*Jesus Christ!* Major, I see Sirians! At least a dozen — no, fifteen, no, *eighteen!* Bearing three four two, offset zero one six! They're heading straight for us! Let's go get 'em!"

Landon sounded at once puzzled and frustrated.

"Nothing there, Lieutenant! I'm not picking up a blessed thing!"

"No, sir, they're not on Ladar! I *see* them! I'm looking at them with optics! I can't tell their speed, but their range is about ten thousand miles. And they're coming fast!"

Landon was silent for a long heartbeat.

"Are you sure, Lieutenant?" She heard the uncertainty in his voice.

"Yes, goddammit! Sorry, sir, but *yes!* It looks like a full squadron!"

She punched buttons on her console, locking the enemy's position into her targeting equipment. Then she issued the first combat order of her life.

"Input: shields up, full EMP block; execute!"

\* \* \*

Robert Landon had a decision to make, and little time in which to make it. The girl in his gun turret might be the hottest student ever to qualify in training, but she was still green as grass. His own threat screens showed nothing, yet she was adamant that the enemy was closing. He didn't have optical equipment, so couldn't judge for himself if what she was seeing was accurate. What he did know was that the enemy had been repeatedly successful in ambushing his fighters without being detected.

For long seconds he sat undecided. Then he realized he had little real choice; he'd cleared

her to fly in the face of Hinds's objections, so did he trust her or didn't he?

"Give me those coordinates again," he said.

She repeated them a little breathlessly. "They're a couple of degrees above the Plane of the Ecliptic, Major," she added, "in clear space."

Well, that was something. If he had to maneuver — and he would — he wouldn't have to worry as much about the garbage floating about in the Belt. The downside was that it gave the enemy a clear shot, with nothing for him to hide behind.

Landon chinned his throat mike. He was still on low-freq inter-ship.

"All sections, Lone Wolf. Enemy squadron sighted on optical ..." He gave coordinates and range. "We're going to engage. Do not fire until ordered. Wing sections, do not converge until you have the enemy flanked. Let's go get 'em."

Landon began a steady acceleration toward the still invisible enemy, his wingmen following suit. He continued to watch for Ladar signatures, but saw nothing. His own Ladar was in passive mode, so maybe they wouldn't pick him up, either — unless they already had.

\* \* \*

Onja watched the Sirians (or Vegans — she had no way to tell) as Landon accelerated to clear the top of the Belt. The section on their left wing was also moving, far enough out of

position to avoid detection, yet close enough to support her. She could see all eighteen enemy ships still on course, as if out for a training exercise. She prayed she could get close enough to fire the first shot.

Her arsenal was loaded. In addition to her twin lasers, her main battery consisted of torpedoes. She carried four pairs of Yin-Yangs and eight standard torps. The Yin-Yangs were a marvel, and the best hope of most fighter crews in open-space combat; they fired in pairs, one falling behind as the other accelerated toward the enemy. They had a habit of changing course several times before reaching their target, confusing enemy gunners as to their intentions. At the last moment, the Yin would drive straight toward the target and explode a few miles short, releasing a powerful, directed electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) that fried the target's shield generators. With shields down, the target was then vulnerable to the Yang, which carried the main warhead.

Onja had never used them, of course, but they worked like magic in the simulator. She'd talked to a few gunners since arriving at 131, but so far none had been able to use them effectively. She hoped to change that.

"Input:" Onja said suddenly. "Shields down, execute."

"What the hell are you doing!" Landon sputtered in surprise.

"They haven't spotted us, Major. Their shields are down, too."

"Well, good for them! You want to give them equal opportunity?"

"No, sir. But shields emit radiation, and they *will* detect us if we leave them up. I recommend you order the wingmen to drop theirs, too. We'll get the first shot, then raise them again. It won't matter then, because once we shoot, they'll know we're here."

Onja's blue eyes were glued to her optics, blood thundered through her veins. It all made perfect sense to her.

"Range six thousand," she reported. "Major, ask our wingmen to drop their shields, please."

"I don't think so, Lieutenant. In fact ..."

"Range fifty-eight hundred," she said, ignoring him. "They'll be detecting us any minute, Major. Sir, please trust me on this!"

He didn't respond immediately.

"Range fifty-six hundred."

The GalaxyFighter's ion drive whined steadily as the Asteroid Belt fell away behind. Onja's tongue traced across her lips. She offered a silent prayer to Sophia.

"Range fifty-five hundred. They haven't spotted us yet."

Her fingers began flipping toggles, arming her weapons. She selected two pairs of Yin-Yangs and set them on standby. She watched the tiny numerals spinning in her optics, her

breath coming faster. Her threat board was still clear. Maximum optimal range was five thousand miles, and she was closing on fifty-four hundred. As the numerals spiraled downward she took a deep breath, let half of it out, and gripped her laser control.

\* \* \*

Landon felt a rising sense of alarm, as if things were happening beyond his control. This whole thing felt wrong, somehow; he'd engaged the Sirians twice before, both times at close range with asteroids all around him. This was different, and scary. His gunner sounded very sure of herself, but she'd never done this before, so was he making a mistake by trusting her?

What if Hinds was right?

Landon almost jumped as a laser beam flashed above him, streaking out across space toward the enemy he couldn't see. It flashed again, then again.

"*Goddammit!*" he shouted. "What the fuck're you *doing!*"

The laser flashed a fourth time, then he heard his gunner issuing orders to the AI.

"Input! Shields up, full Ladar sweep, execute! They've seen us, Major! Full power! Let's get the rest of them!"

He heard the turret whining.

For a dumb five seconds he could hardly believe his eyes. His Ladar went to full power and his HH was suddenly alive with enemy

signatures. He counted fourteen, and saw ghosts of four others that looked as if they'd been destroyed.

"Range forty-nine hundred! Let's *go*, Major! Let's *go*, let's *go*, let's *go*!"

"Jesus!" he grunted. "All sections, Lone Wolf — activate full Ladar! Fire at will!"

He went to full thrust, his wingmen following.

\* \* \*

Capt. Nakamichi had been right, all those months ago at Travis. Onja had mastered aerial combat at Travis, but at Luna 1 had learned that none of it mattered when fighting in space. With no atmosphere for the control surfaces, a fighter's mobility was extremely limited, and therefore vulnerable. You didn't turn away easily when the enemy fired at you; turning meant bone-jarring acceleration in another direction, usually ten G's or more, and it took time to get out of the path of incoming ordnance. Speeds were so high you rarely, if ever, saw the enemy at all and, as in the ancient art of jousting, once you passed him he was gone. You usually got one pass, and if anyone was left on either side, it took time to reverse course and re-engage.

Onja had no intention of letting the enemy get past her.

As Landon poured on power and she felt her weight increase, she unlimbered her torpedoes. The first pair of Yin-Yangs rattled out

of her tubes and sped on their way, twisting and winding toward the enemy. Ten seconds later she released the next pair, aiming them at the other side of the enemy formation.

The shield generator whined, and she saw sparks on her screen as enemy lasers bounced off the shields. Torpedoes would be headed in her direction, but she was ready for them.

Range forty-four hundred.

She watched the enemy fighters closely on her optics. According to her training, the Sirians hadn't perfected their shield technology; they had to drop shields briefly when using their lasers. With both hands on her laser controls, she gently worked her crosshairs, keeping half a dozen targets within millimeters of the center. She saw a flash, and with the sensitivity of a surgeon, nudged her crosshairs in time to return fire. The Sirian flashed and blossomed, and a second later she hit another one. That was six for sure.

Only twelve left.

\* \* \*

Landon felt terribly vulnerable. It was twelve against eighteen, but his flight of four was the enemy's primary target. The fighters on his flanks might finish off the enemy, but the odds were good that his section would be smashed before they got within range.

Still, he had cause for hope. Against all logical expectation, his gunner had quickly knocked out six of the enemy, making the

odds exactly even. No matter how it ended, that was more Sirians than the fighters of 131 had killed in a single engagement since the war started. Maybe she really *was* as good as she claimed.

"Incoming, Major. I've got nine torpedoes on my screen, ETA two minutes."

Well, that was no surprise. The Sirians would've launched the minute they detected him. There was nothing he could do about it, of course. You couldn't maneuver away from torpedoes, and even if you tried, it would happen so slowly they could easily adjust and take you out. Landon felt sweat slide down inside the collar of his pressure suit.

Through his cockpit window he saw something flash in the distance. Immediately his radiation sensors began to register, and he realized it was one of the Yins, delivering an EMP strike to the Sirians. Four seconds later a weaker flash followed — the Yang. On his HH, another Sirian fighter turned into a fragmented graphic. Seven down.

The range was just over four thousand miles. His wingmen were launching now. Another brilliant EMP flash, followed by a weaker explosive strike, signaled the death of an eighth Sirian.

"Torpedoes, ETA one minute." Onja sounded deadly calm, as if giving him a weather report. "Stand by for countermeasures."

The shields would hold against a standard torpedo warhead, but each hit would weaken them. Too many hits would bring them down and ruin your whole day. Nine inbound torps against four fighters — depending on how they were targeted, all four ships in his section might survive, but if too many went after the same fighter, someone was going to die.

Thankfully, shields weren't the only defense.

\* \* \*

Onja's body felt electric as adrenaline coursed through her bloodstream. Far from leaving her weak and trembling, it served to steady her nerves, focusing her concentration, sharpening her mind. While waiting for the enemy torpedoes to come within range, she checked the enemy fighters again and saw that most were now operating without shields. The Yins had done their job; the Sirians had been too close together, allowing a single EMP blast to affect several fighters.

She had only seconds to spare before the torpedoes arrived, but quickly pumped out four laser shots, and saw three more Sirians fragment on her screen.

"Attent!" the AI squawked, "enemy torpedoes, ETA thirty seconds!"

Onja released the laser handles and concentrated on her optics again, quickly focusing on the torpedoes under magnification. They were short, stubby weapons, nothing elegant about

them, coming at her in a staggered wave. Several were heading toward her wingmen, but at least three were coming straight in. She hoped they weren't EMPs, but some probably were.

"Input:" she said breathlessly, "activate countermeasures. Execute!"

The GalaxyFighter's AI reacted immediately. From eight different nodes embedded in the wings and fuselage, invisible waves of electromagnetic energy beamed toward the torpedoes. Two erupted almost at once, brilliant but harmless flashes several hundred miles short of their target. The third, apparently shielded, punched through the energy beams until it was within fifty miles of the GF, then it flashed a brilliant nuclear blossom.

EMP!

The shields sagged under the overload, but held, generating barely twenty percent of normal. The EMP block had saved the fighter's electronics, but they wouldn't survive another one. The other fighters in her section were also using countermeasures, and in the space of half a minute, premature torpedoes turned the blackness of space into a light show. Then it was over.

Almost.

The Sirians were changing course slightly, spreading out to prevent further damage due to bunching. But it was too late for that; Capt. Washington's section on the extreme right had flanked them and now poured laser and

torpedo fire into their ranks. Only seven Sirians had survived to this point, but they were flanked and naked. They continued to return fire, but in less than a minute the last Sirian was destroyed.

\* \* \*

The ResQMed entered the hangar bay first. A medical team waited to receive the wounded. Only four survivors had been found, three of them injured, and within moments they were all safely inside the asteroid base.

Landon brought his fighters in by sections, waiting until they were all inside before landing himself. He still couldn't grasp what had just happened, though the ramifications could be serious. It was the biggest victory AB-131 had ever scored, and he hadn't lost a single ship. But if the Sirians had already been aware that the Federation had a base in the vicinity, surely they would now double their efforts to find it. He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he needed more ships.

Just minutes after the patrol arrived, another headed out. Watching for the enemy was now more important than ever.

\* \* \*

Onja crawled out of her gun turret and let the ship handler help her to the deck. She was tired but exhilarated; her blood was still pounding, as if she needed more action. It had felt good to, *finally*, strike back at the enemy.

Surely this was what she was born to do, and she already longed for another shot at the bastards.

As the fighter crews passed through the airlock, they were unprepared for what awaited them. The observation deck above the entrance was crowded with cheering people; pilots, gunners, off-duty base personnel; in total more than two hundred people were packed in, cheering afresh each time the airlock opened. Onja tugged off her helmet and stared up at them, her blue eyes incredulous. But the ovation was infectious, and in moments she was smiling and waving along with the rest of the fighter crews.

Ten minutes later, in the ready room, the debriefing took place. Onja sat silently next to Landon as Lt. Cannorsby, the S-2 (intelligence officer), compiled the score. Not everyone knew for sure how many Sirians they'd hit; toward the end of the engagement, torpedoes and lasers had been running wild. The most Cannorsby could account for was seven, but several gunners were making duplicate claims on those kills.

"This doesn't add up," Cannorsby said after a moment. "How many Sirians were there?"

"Eighteen," Landon told him.

"And they were all destroyed?"

"Every one."

"I'm only getting seven, and if I accept all these claims the most I can account for is ten. What about the rest?"

The room sat silent as every eye focused on Landon. He hesitated a moment, then coughed modestly into his fist.

"Some of those have to be shared kills," he said finally. "When we made contact, my gunner was the first to open fire. Lieutenant Kavorik had *eleven* kills."

Onja's eyes widened as she gazed at Landon. She hadn't bothered to count them. She looked back at Cannorsby to see him staring at her in disbelief.

"From all the reports we've monitored," he said quietly, "nobody in the Fighter Service has accumulated eleven kills since the war started. Nobody."

Landon shrugged. "Today, someone did."

## Chapter 16

### Asteroid Base 131, Solar System

Onja had never been a party person; her young life had been too fraught with fear, danger, and desolation. But the party that followed the debrief was one she would never forget. Landon opened the canteen and drinks were on the house. Lights flashed, music thundered, and liquor flowed. Pilots, gunners, and other base personnel drank and danced and shouted to one another. Pilot after pilot dragged Onja onto the dance floor, each one gushing with compliments over her killing spree. Two offered to take her someplace private, but she easily deflected their offers — god knew she had plenty of experience at *that!*

Sylvia found her between dances, giving her a sisterly hug of congratulation.

"I always knew you would do well out there!" she said. "I guess you showed Captain Hinds!"

Onja shook her head. "He wasn't there."

"You showed him anyway. You showed everyone."

But their reunion had a shadow over it. Christine Liebau and Billy Cameron hadn't survived the ambush.

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After a solid hour of dancing, Onja managed to drag herself out of the fray and gulp a

badly needed drink. The party raged around her, bodies bumping in the crowded canteen. She felt a hand on her elbow and looked around.

"May I have the next dance, Lieutenant?" Capt. Hinds looked slightly less formidable, but his green eyes were still challenging.

"Are you sure you want to dance with an enemy agent?" Onja retorted, her blue eyes flashing.

He managed a shrug. "I may have been wrong about you," he said.

She stared at him in disbelief. "You *may* have been wrong about me? Are you kidding me?"

"What do you want? An apology?"

"I'll settle for that, but what I really want are the weeks you stole out of my career. I wish you'd return those to me."

He shrugged again. "No can do. Now, how about that dance?"

The dance was stiff and embarrassing. Onja held herself militarily erect, refusing to give him any pleasure in the event.

"Now that you've proved yourself," Hinds said, "I've decided that I would be willing to make you my gunner."

Onja leaned back and stared into his eyes.

"You already have a gunner!"

"I do, but she's burned out. The stress is getting her down, and she could use a break."

"Thank you for the offer, Captain. But I'll stick with Major Landon."

"The major doesn't go on patrol very often," Hinds replied. "You might not get back out there for several weeks if you wait for him."

"After today," she said, "he'll fly."

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The celebration broke up slowly. Onja drifted back to the Beaver Pond, waving briefly at one or two gunners who'd preceded her. Standing by her rack, she felt suddenly empty, unfulfilled. It wasn't exactly depression, but ...

Strangely, the exhilaration, the need for action, was still there. But the action was over, and now she was looking at the same boring routine that had characterized her entire existence at 131 before today. She shook her head slowly, unable to accept it. There had to be more! There *had* to be!

She turned and strode out of the dormitory, dropped down a level to pilot/crew country, and headed for Landon's quarters. She'd seen him deep in conversation with Hinds and Cannorsby during the celebration, but he hadn't once come near her. She rang his bell and stood waiting.

The door slid open and Landon stood there, surprise on his face. He looked tired, but he always did. Surely his adrenaline was still up, as hers was.

"Permission to speak to the Major, sir?"

Landon smiled slightly, curiosity in his eyes. He nodded and started to step out the door.

"Permission to speak to the Major *inside*, sir?"

He stopped, his smile fading. "What is it, Ka-vorik? Something wrong?"

"No, sir."

He took a step back and she entered his quarters, punching the door control when she was inside. The door slid shut and she looked up at Landon, barely a foot away, and for the first time looked at him as a man. Looked at the lines around his eyes, the close-cropped military cut speckled with grey, the slightly weary way he held his shoulders; looked at the size of him, smelled the faint odor of cologne ...

Adrenaline surged through her, blood pounded in her temples, her face turned suddenly hot. Her lips parted to get oxygen. Her blue eyes locked his gaze and she began to unbutton her blouse.

Landon frowned.

"What's wrong, Ka-vorik? Are you all right?"

Her chest heaved as she sucked air into her lungs. She whipped the blouse open and shrugged out of it, her eyes still glued to his. Without a word she popped the release on her bra and let it drop to the deck at their feet. Landon's eyes automatically dropped to the

spectacle she'd revealed to him, and she saw him swallow hard. His own breathing suddenly sounded labored.

"Ka-vorik ..."

"My name is Onja," she said huskily. "And it's not 'Ka-vorik', it's *Kvoorik*." She moved against him and reached for his head with both hands, started to pull him down for a kiss, but he resisted.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"I think it's obvious, Major. Don't you?" She pulled at him again, but he pushed her back by the shoulders.

"No," he said, "this is all wrong."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Tell me why."

"I told you from the beginning that I didn't expect you to sleep with me."

"You never told me I couldn't."

"I'm telling you now."

"Bullshit!"

"That's insubordination."

"I'm out of uniform."

He tried to suppress a smile, but failed. "Look ..."

"No, Major, *you* look! I just murdered half a squadron of Sirians, so I think I'm entitled to ask you for a favor!"

"You were doing your duty."

"And now it's time to do yours!" Her blue eyes flashed with mounting anger.

But Landon smiled again, crossing his arms. He leaned back against the bulkhead.

"What, exactly, do you think my duty is?"

"They made it very clear to us at Travis that pilots and gunners are expected to take care of each other."

"That's not a service requirement ..."

"But it's recommended. We had to agree to the policy just to get accepted into the gunnery program."

Landon lost the smile and regarded her with a narrow gaze.

"You're not my gunner. That's a temporary assignment."

Onja stared at him in shock.

"Sophia *scorn!* You're playing *games* with me!"

"Put your shirt on."

"No! You take a good look! Tell me you don't like what you see! Tell me you don't want me as much as I want you! Make me believe it and I'll leave."

He bent to retrieve her bra and handed it to her. She batted it away, her frustration boiling over; tears suddenly streamed from her eyes.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you humiliating me?"

"Ka-vorik —"

"*Onja*, goddammit!" She thrust both hands against his chest and drove him back into the bulkhead. Before he could recover she was on him, her lips locked onto his mouth, arms

wrapped around his neck. She dug her feet into the wall to hoist herself above him, then wrapped her thighs around him, pressing her groin into his stomach. He struggled to maintain his balance, was forced to embrace her to keep from falling. His hands slid under her gorgeous bottom, broad and smooth, and Onja squirmed seductively, kissing the top of his head, his ears, his neck.

"I need you, Major!" she panted hoarsely. "Don't turn me down; there isn't another man on this rock I would ask."

"Christ, Onja! I'm twice your age!"

"I don't care! You're my pilot. And I need you. Right now!"

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Landon could hardly believe it was happening. First an overwhelming victory against the enemy, now this totally unexpected windfall. A corner of his mind told him this was crazy, that *he* was crazy. In twenty years of service he'd slept with his share of gunners, but he'd been younger then; for the past few years he'd had less and less sexual contact, since the age gap widened a little more each year. Most gunners served six years and got out; the average gunner was twenty-three years old.

This one was eighteen.

But he'd never seen a female body like this one. He'd heard it said that there was "no such thing as an ugly Vegan", but had never understood it. Now he did. The Vegans had

genetically altered their population for physical perfection, and the results were indescribable. Onja Kvoorik was by far the sexiest woman he'd ever seen.

And it had been a very long time.

So, against his better judgment, he ignored that little corner of his mind, and gave her what she wanted.

What *he* wanted.

And she fucked him blind.

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## **Lunar Base 9, Luna**

Johnny Lincoln stood at attention and stared at the wall above General Osato's head. Osato, a grey-haired man with a sun-wrinkled face and piercing eyes, was seated behind his desk. Major Dunn sat to one side in a straight-backed chair. Denise Jordan stood at attention beside her pilot, looking sharp and sexy in her tight charcoal dress uniform. Both had been under house arrest since landing at Luna 9 the day before, and now the shit was in the jets.

Osato stared at the pair for a long moment and let them sweat.

"Lieutenant Lincoln, Captain Jordan, you've been called here to determine whether charges should be brought against you. Are you aware of the gravity of your circumstance?"

"Yes, sir," they said at the same time.

"Major Dunn has filed a report which states that you disobeyed his direct order and engaged the enemy when it was disadvantageous to do so. How do you respond to that, Lincoln?"

"I'm not aware that I disobeyed a direct order, General," Johnny lied. "My SpectraWav was malfunctioning. I requested the Major's permission to engage, but I couldn't hear his response. I assumed he'd want me to engage, since the enemy was, in my judgment, at a disadvantage."

Dunn snorted, but Osato ignored him.

"In your judgment, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Explain what led you to that judgment."

"Yes, sir. Our radar indicated that enemy fighters were leaving their targets and climbing out over Siberia. They were in heavy atmosphere, disorganized, strung out over hundreds of miles. We were in position to attack them from above; we were fresh and fully armed. I expected they were tired from the strain of their mission and their long flight to get there. I believed that gave us the advantage."

"Even though there were only four of you?"

"Yes, sir. As I said, they were strung out and disorganized."

"You requested Major Dunn's permission to engage. You say you were unaware of his direct order to maintain your position?"

"That's correct, General. I was having trouble with my SpectraWav. I couldn't hear him if that's what he said."

"It seemed to work fine once you were in combat," Osato said. "Your AI log indicates that you chatted freely with your section throughout the engagement."

"Yes, sir."

"So you're telling me that the equipment mysteriously started working again?"

"Yes, sir."

Osato looked at Denise.

"What about it, Captain?"

"Just like the lieutenant said, sir. Every word."

"We had the maint engineers check your communications equipment," Osato said. "It checked out perfectly. There was nothing wrong with it in any way. How do you explain that?"

"Sunspots, sir," Johnny said.

"What?"

"Solar flares, General. Maybe."

"I don't believe there was any unusual solar activity yesterday."

"Just a suggestion, sir. I don't really know."

Dunn snorted again, and Osato turned to him.

"You want to add something, Major?"

"I do, General!" Dunn growled venomously. "I want Lincoln out of my squadron! He has a history of disobeying orders. I warned him the

day he reported that I would not tolerate disobedience. He's a hotdog, sir. He got lucky as a civilian, and now he thinks he knows more about combat than those in command. Yesterday's events should be ample evidence of that."

"He did have an incident last December," Osato acknowledged, "but he hadn't been properly trained then. His record since December is unblemished."

"I don't want him in my squadron, General. I won't tolerate a hotdog, and I told him that from the get-go."

"Lincoln, do you care to defend yourself?"

"May I speak freely, sir?"

"By all means."

Johnny hesitated, then took a deep breath.

"General, I've tried to do a good job in 213, and I think I've succeeded. Captain Walters seems to agree, since he made me a flight leader. Whatever animosity Major Dunn feels toward me is completely unwarranted. I think he feels threatened by me."

Osato's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"And why would he feel threatened?"

"I've met the enemy, sir. Major Dunn hasn't. I think he's afraid to fight."

"You *son of a bitch!*" Dunn leaped to his feet.

"That will do, Major!" Osato warned. He looked at Johnny curiously. "Go on, Lieuten-

ant. Let's see how deep a hole you can dig for yourself."

"Sir, we were assigned to fly a patrol over the Arctic Circle. With respect, there's nothing there to guard. The only reason we were there was to put us in position to intercept a strike from any direction. But Major Dunn ordered us to stay in our patrol sector. Except for my section, the squadron did not engage the enemy."

"Again," Denise added solemnly, glaring at Dunn.

"How do you know what he said, if your SpectraWav was out?"

"You told me so, sir. Just a few minutes ago."

Osato's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

"General, the pilots and gunners of 213 are embarrassed that they've never been in combat. We all want to fight, but the 213 *never* fights, even when the enemy attacks. I took my section down and we killed sixteen fighters."

"And lost your wingman!" Dunn accused.

"Yes, sir, but Stovall wanted to fight. He got some kills before he died. We lost one ship to their sixteen."

"You don't have to notify Stovall's and Palmer's next of kin," Dunn said bitterly.

"No, sir. But a lot of people on Vega have to be notified, too."

"Captain Jordan, do you have anything to add?" Osato asked.

"Yes, sir. Since our radio was out, I gave Lincoln the go-ahead to engage. If you have to star-court anyone, star-court me. But I have to tell you, I'd do it again this afternoon. I've been in the service for fifteen years, and I'd give it all up for another chance like we had yesterday."

Osato stared at her thoughtfully.

"General," Johnny cut in, "Captain Jordan outranks me, but I was the ship commander. As pilot, the final decision was mine, not hers."

Osato's brow furrowed and he glanced at Dunn, who looked like a thundercloud. He turned to Denise.

"Captain, I see no reason for you to remain here. There's no evidence that you did anything other than your duty. You're dismissed."

Denise looked startled; she glanced wide-eyed at Johnny, then composed herself, saluted, and left the room.

Osato peered at Johnny.

"Lincoln, if you were in my shoes, what punishment would you recommend? I don't believe a star-court is indicated, but we still have the matter of the SpectraWav — I don't for a minute believe it was malfunctioning, and neither do you. What would you do?"

"Banish me, sir. Send me to the asteroids."

"Oh, really?" Osato leaned back. "You'd like that, would you? Do you have any idea what conditions are like out there?"

"No, sir, but I do know they're fighting out there. I signed up to fight."

"I told you he was a hotdog, General," Dunn said.

Osato ignored him.

"I'm not going to transfer you, Lincoln," he said. "I could recommend a star-court and you might end up in a military stockade, but that would be counterproductive. So for the time being I'm leaving you in 213."

Johnny stared in disbelief; Dunn was on his feet, furious.

"General, I want this insolent punk out of my squadron!"

Osato held up a hand for silence. Dunn sputtered and sat down.

"Normally, your performance yesterday would warrant you a medal for valor," Osato told Johnny, "but in view of your 'broken' radio, you will not receive one. Captain Jordan, however, will be cited. I'm pushing the reset button, Lieutenant. You're getting a second chance, a fresh start. All things being equal, you'd better not have any trouble obeying orders from now on. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

"Dismissed."

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When Johnny had left, Osato sat back and swiveled his chair to face the major.

"Is something on your mind, Major Dunn?"

Dunn looked genuinely confused.

"General, you just let Lincoln walk out of here without even a reprimand. I don't understand."

"What you don't understand, Major, is our mission here, or our duty. What Lincoln did yesterday is called *defending the planet*. It's what you should have done, but you didn't.

"I've been watching your squadron for some months now, and it's an embarrassment to the entire Fighter Service. It isn't your pilots' fault; as Lincoln said, they want to fight. But they have to follow orders. *Your* orders, Major, have been benign to say the least. So far you've managed to avoid combat every time it came along. It isn't just bad luck, it's bad leadership."

"But — but Lincoln disobeyed a direct order! You can't overlook that!"

"No, I can't. It's going into his service record, and if he ever does it again he'll answer for it. But *you*, Major, are a different story. As of right now, you are relieved of command of the 213. I think we can find a place for you elsewhere, maybe a training slot. Captain Walters will take over as CO."

Dunn's jaw hung open and he sputtered, but nothing came out. Osato didn't wait for him to find his voice.