

FULL FATHOM FIVE

THE BATTLE OF RYUKYU TRENCH

In March of 2041, The UEO Navy's subfighter corps suffered one of its worst defeats in the entire Alliance War. Three carrier taskforces operating on the border of the Chaodai confederation were engaged by superior enemy forces and were forced in to a fighting withdrawal. The engagement would cost the lives of over 200 UEO navy subfighter pilots, and dozens of squadrons were annihilated within the space of an hour. Central to this battle was the subfighter carrier *Ticonderoga*, commanded by Captain Mitchell Morgan; a state of the art *Reverence* class battlecruiser which would earn much renown in the years to come. This marks first major chronicle of its career...

...Off the coast of Japan, February 17th, 2041

Commander Gavin Mackenzie, CO of the One Hundred Eleventh Fighter Squadron – the 'Rangers' – smiled peacefully as he hovered his SF-37/E *Raptor* subfighter just thirty feet below the surface of the Pacific Ocean. The craft swayed heavily in the seas which were rolling in waves 20 to 30 feet high just over his head. Beside him, another subfighter hovered; its decorations that of the 116th – VF-116 – the 'Peacemakers' squadron. Inside the cockpit sat Gavin's brother in law, Commander Steven Patrick, the husband of Gavin's younger sister Selene for nearly a year, and the father of a child due in just a few months.

Gavin smiled again as the comms buzzed softly. "*Big storm coming in,*" Steven said quietly as the seas around the two small fighters darkened, a cloud coming between the sun and the sea's surface.

Gavin nodded and smiled across at his friend. "So they say. The entire southern coast of Japan is buttoned up tight."

"*Wasn't quite what I was meaning, bro,*" Steven laughed.

Gavin smiled ruefully. "I know."

Nothing more needed to be said. Tired of the surface suddenly, and ready to head back to the *Trident*; the UEO Poseidon-class carrier called home, currently assigned to Task Force-23, along with the Reverence-class Fleet Carrier *Ticonderoga*. The '*Tico*' was brand new – having been completed and commissioned in only January. She was state of the art – with the latest and greatest systems that the UEO had to offer. Gavin turned his subfighter and noted Steven following him closely. He spun the fighter, dived, and headed down to the calmer depths. Speeding among the rock outcroppings in the shallows, Gavin tripped his comms again. "*Trident, please confirm position. This is Ranger One inbound from patrol with Peacemaker One, over.*"

"*Copy that Ranger One, this is Trident. Vector two-three-nine for visual contact, depth is currently 7000. We have you on sonar – you are 20 miles out.*"

"*Roger Trident. We'll be with you shortly.*"

Punching his throttles to their stops, Gavin sped ahead of Steven, swerving in and out of the rock canyons in the shallows, testing his reflexes before the edge of the continental shelf off the south coast of Japan.

The two carriers they returned to were the command ships of Task Force 23 – one of three such carrier task groups stretched across the East China Sea out of the

UEO's submerged base of Fort Stillwell; located about half way between the island of Okinawa, and the mainland of Japan. For the past month, the UEO had radically stepped up its presence in the region following fears of a potential Chaodai invasion of the UEO's Japanese waters. Nearly a quarter of the UEO's Pacific fleet was committed to the operations – the flagship *Royal Oak* being assigned to Task Force 21, nearly 200 miles away.

Mackenzie's sonar pinged as a pod of large whales swam by ahead of him. Reacting quickly in an attempt to not disturb them, (Or worse yet, hit them) he changed course, slowed down and headed down another blind canyon.

He didn't see the wreck until it was too late.

Instinct kicked in and he reacted blindingly fast, throwing his throttles into full much faster than the Raptor could handle, and throwing his control stick sideways in a desperate attempt to spin away from the ghost-like shipwreck, but it was far too late.

"Oh fuck," was all he had time to think before he hit.

The Raptor, displacing 80 tonnes, and comprised externally of a double layer of lightweight titanium alloy and kevlar, over a composite (and classified) frame, almost missed the bridge of the large wreck. The spinning manoeuvre Gavin had attempted threw the contact point from the nose to the wing, and it caused major damage in the wing root of the Raptor, but totally ripped open the bridge of the wreck, which belched stale air in a sudden protest.

Combined with his roll, the sudden change in Gs was enough to make Gavin Mackenzie grey out for several seconds – long enough for the Raptor to slam into the main deck, cockpit-first, and bounce heavily. This time, it was the Raptor that came off second best, a massive, ragged gash in the side of the cockpit testament to this. The impact violently rented the cockpit, and inside, the flexible, aluminium inner hull that surrounded the cockpit buckling and slamming in to Mackenzie's leg – jamming it hard against the center console. A fin sheared off on contact with the hull of the sunken ship, and Gavin's mind slowed time long enough for him to think quickly *"This is it..."*

The stricken Raptor raced down the deck of the vessel and launched itself off the front, still travelling at a reasonable speed – with one engine left upon the deck near the bridge and the other engine housing punctured and spewing oxygenated water quickly – the damage worsening as the turbine belted itself to death.

Gavin Mackenzie had blacked out from pain well before his badly damaged subfighter slowly settled to the shallow seafloor over 150 yards from the sunken whaling vessel.

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Two weeks later... UEO *Ticonderoga* CVBN-107. February 28th, 2041...

Gavin Mackenzie woke up with a hell of a headache. He groaned loudly and tried to sit up, vaguely recalling better hangovers which he'd experienced throughout his life. A nurse was at his side in seconds. "Good morning, Commander," she said. Gavin recognised her – it was Janice Thomas, wife of one Lieutenant Kieran Thomas; also a member of the Rangers.

But while Kieran was based on the *Trident* with Gavin, Janice was onboard the *Ticonderoga* in their more advanced medical facilities... Coincidentally, where Gavin now lay. “Good morning Janice...” Mackenzie slurred.

“You took a nasty blow to your head in that prang of yours.” Janice was an Aussie, having left the New Australian Confederation during Bourne’s would-be coup and never returning, and she never really minced words. “Smashed yourself up really well... *Oh*, and you won’t be using that leg for about four weeks.”

Gavin looked down and was surprised briefly to see his right leg in a heavy cast. He quickly remembered he’d broken it when the Raptor had hit the massive winch lying on the deck of the whaler before it sent him flying again. The cockpit wall had slammed inwards against his leg with enough force to snap it instantly – it was that which had caused him to black out. He smiled and was thankful that a broken leg and a sore head was all he had, because in all likelihood; he was extremely fortunate to survive the accident at all - a fact which he was all too well aware of.

“Four *weeks*?” he asked.

“You’ve already been healing for nearly two – you’ve been out for nearly 12 days, Commander.”

“Why? What was wrong?”

“They were worried about subdural bleeding and/or swelling...”

“*And?*” Gavin asked, immediately worried about his fitness to fly.

“You’re fine; just a very nasty concussion. Probably no lasting effects. You’ll be flying as soon as your leg comes right, Commander.”

“Lucky... me...” Gavin slurred again. “I... think I’d like to... sleep again.”

“No problem, Commander. Here, let me give you something to help.”

Gavin was too tired and sore suddenly to object.

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Near the Chaodai Border... UEO Task Force 23. March 2nd, 2041...

“*Rangers-light and Sirens; this is Ticonderoga.*”

“Ranger Two copies.”

“*Siren One copies.*”

“*Be advised we are nearing Chaodai territorial waters. Reduce combat patrols to tight formation, and keep within visual contact of the battlegroup at all times. Do not, I repeat, do NOT cross the border.*”

“Copy that *Ticonderoga*,” Ranger Two, Ed Richards said; a slight grimace on his face. Ever since Commander Mackenzie’s accident, the communications officers on the *Trident* and *Ticonderoga* had been referring to the Rangers as “Rangers-light” – that is, down some members. Usually, the term was used as a gesture of respect, but because of the “fishy” circumstances surrounding the Commander’s accident (the current rumour went something along the lines that the Macs were training whales to get in the way of the UEO’s subfighters – laughable in the circumstances, sure, but still not exactly funny), the comm. officers had been using it as a running joke.

Richards; a Texas native, wasn’t exactly known for his sense of humour, and had barely smiled the first time, and now he just gritted his teeth. Leading his wing of Raptor subfighters back towards the battlegroup, and setting up a new patrol route, they stayed close to the protection offered by the large fleet subs.

Richards swung underneath the bows of the massive Reverence-class *Ticonderoga*, which was holding station about ten miles from the border.

Ticonderoga's battlegroup consisted of eight warships – *Ticonderoga* herself, the carrier *Trident*, two *Defiance* class cruisers, and four *Defender* class Attack Submarines. He waggled his wings as he flew by Siren squadron, who were heading the opposite way.

He heard several laughs come through the channel as the ungainly looking Spectre in the lead copied the manoeuvre. The pilot of the Spectre, Siren One, keyed his mic and tiredly laughed. “*I know we look ugly, Ranger Two, but we’re still good at what we do.*”

“I don’t doubt it for a second. Just teasing you Siren-” Richards was unable to finish his sentence as a familiar voice suddenly interrupted.

“*Be advised, Ranger squadron, we have unknown contacts approaching, 40 nautical miles out... They read as unknown, assuming Macronesian vessels. Prepare for visual confirmation,*” the voice said.

“Commander Mackenzie, is that you?” Richards asked with a certain measure of surprise.

“...Roger that, Ranger Two. Captain was nice enough to give me a seat up here.” Gavin Mackenzie grinned and looked at the Captain of the *Ticonderoga*, Mitchell Morgan.

“*Say ‘Hi’ to the Captain for me. Where do you want us?*”

“Sector Zero-Three-Alpha. That’s where the contacts are approaching from. Distance... three-five miles. They’re coming directly from Chaodai waters, and they’re coming in fast.”

“Just proves what we’ve been thinking all along,” Mitchell Morgan mused from the command deck of the *Ticonderoga*. “The Macs are probably in bed with the Chaodai. They’d have to be to pull off a stunt like this.”

Mackenzie nodded grimly, and turned back to the console. “Prepare to take on Marauders, Rangers... and be careful.”

...Richards nodded and spun his Raptor around, and was pleased as the rest of the Raptors followed in a perfectly aligned formation – minus one Raptor, of course. “Siren squadron, hang back and prepare for combat. *Trident*, request you launch another wing of Spectres for backup,” Mackenzie said, glad to be able to help in some way. He grinned as the VF-87 *Striders* launched quickly to join the fleet.

“*Commander; Peacemaker squadron are on the rails, launching now.*”

“*Trident here – Strider’s are in the water.*”

“*Siren copies, Commander. Awaiting further orders.*”

“*Peacemaker, take up station between the Rangers and Siren squadron, Strider squadron, stick close to the Ticonderoga – it’ll make your sonar signature harder to detect.*”

“*Ticonderoga is launching another squadron of Spectres.*”

“*Omicron One reporting, Commander; ready to engage.*”

“Roger that, Omicron One. Stand by for-” Gavin Mackenzie cut off as alerts suddenly rang out all across the bridge.

“-Torpedoes in the water! From... *directly below us!*” shouted the *Ticonderoga's* sonar officer. He looked up suddenly. “Subfighters coming out of the trenches!”

“Damn!” Morgan said. “Should have thought of that. Launch countermeasures and brace for impact.”

“Peacemaker – engage those Marauders,” Gavin ordered. “Omicron, try to take down those torpedoes, quickly.”

“*Peacemaker copies.*”

“*Omicron copies.*”

It was too late, however. The lasers of the Spectres hit a few torpedoes, and the *Ticonderoga*'s intercepts distracted or destroyed a few, but the rest kept coming with alarming alacrity. The torpedoes impacted all across the lower section of hull of the massive Reverence carrier, and cratered the third-generation Bioskin that covered the heavily armoured hull plating underneath.

The bridge shook, and Gavin's heart leapt into his throat. He'd always thought that fleet officers were too far away from the battle to ever really have any mettle, but they were proving him wrong as they reacted coolly and smoothly. “Damage?” Morgan asked quickly.

“Minimal. The torpedoes were small – almost too small to be Macronesian torpedoes,” the tactical officer replied.

“*Ticonderoga, this is Peacemaker One – we are not facing Chaodai Marauders, repeat, these are not Marauders. Suspect some new class of Chaodai fighter, and goddamn they're good!*” Peacemaker One, Steven Patrick reported.

Morgan looked over at Gavin Mackenzie, then at the approaching vessels as plotted on the large hypersonar display. They simultaneously realised their position: alone, without any support whatsoever, against what was now revealed to be a Chaodai force – a massive unknown quantity – that, in sheer terms of vessels, was nearly twice their size.

“Mother of God.” Morgan whispered. He suddenly felt a surge of dread run through him, and instinctively pointed at the operations console. “Ensign Saunders. Raise the *Royal Oak* on the battle net, ask them for a status report and apprise Admiral Flinders of our situation.”

Saunders was ashen. He already had the reply. “Sir... *Royal Oak* reports being under attack by superior *Chaodai* forces. Admiral Flinders is dead, and Captain Roberts is in the infirmary.”

Mitchell cursed under his breath and had already reached for the fleet communications controls. “All vessels, this is Captain Morgan. We are under attack by Chaodai ships. Enter combat formations. The *Ticonderoga* will move to the front of the Battlegroup. *Trident* will stay to the rear. Engage at your discretion.” He turned to Gavin Mackenzie. “Got any smart ideas, Commander?”

“Run like hell for the Shikoku Basin?” Mackenzie asked seriously.

“Too late,” the tactical officer said looking up. “They're preparing to fire... distance five miles. Wait... multiple torpedoes in the water from the Chaodai vessels. Distance: Four point five miles and closing *real* fast.”

“Commander McKay, release a comms buoy detailing our position and situation.”

“There are no reinforcements, nearby, Captain. The nearest battlegroup is four hours away at top speed...” the *Ticonderoga*'s XO replied. “And the *Aquarius* is near the Marshalls, cleaning up after their little scrap,” he added.

“Just do it, Commander. Command will have something. And hail the *Royal Oak* and inform them that I am assuming temporary command of the task groups until we receive further orders from command. Instruct them to consolidate on a defensive perimeter on the border and attempt to regroup for a counter assault.”

Gavin turned back to his console. “Peacemaker, I need to know for sure... are these Marauder-class fighters?”

“Negative, Gavin. These are something different. They’re a lot sleeker and a hell of a lot more agile too. They’re almost as good as the Raptor, but they’re not quite as fast as us.”

“Not that that matters in a hairball,” Gavin muttered.

“Exactly... and Gavin? They’ve got some new kind of pulse laser - whatever it is it does heavy kinetic damage, and then some residual energy damage to the hull.”

The Chaodai torpedoes slowly broke up as they neared the battlegroup, settling on individual targets. By that stage, the Raptors of the Rangers had already taken down several with their “Hades” cannons, but most were conserving ammunition for later. Peacemaker squadron were engaged with several Chaodai fighters, and were slowly but surely driving the engagement away from the *Ticonderoga*.

Just as suddenly as they’d appeared, the Chaodai fighters split off and headed back towards their battle fleet.

“Do not pursue! Peacemaker, do *not* pursue,” Gavin ordered. “Reform and prepare for further engagement.”

“Copy, Commander.”

“All vessels; launch countermeasures,” Captain Morgan ordered.

All around the *Ticonderoga*, the sea came alive with noise as the battlegroup opened up with a barrage of countermeasure torpedoes and assorted noisemakers. The two Defiance-class Cruisers, *Invincible* and *Courageous* moved forwards to the sides of the *Ticonderoga*, and the four Defender SSN’s accompanying the vessel added their noise to the general confusion in front of the battlegroup.

Obscured from view, several torpedoes set their sights on the much closer and more attractive targets of the noisemakers, and several were destroyed by intercept torpedoes, but the rest came on, through the cloud of debris.

“Brace for Impact!” Captain Morgan shouted as the heavy Chaodai capital torpedoes homed in on the UEO vessels. Several slammed directly in to the bow of the *Ticonderoga*, shaking Gavin in his seat and throwing several other officers around. The *Invincible* took the brunt of the attack however, with nearly a dozen torpedoes hitting and exploding; consuming the vessel in a cloud of plasma fire.

“Report!” Captain Morgan ordered again.

“The *Invincible* is hit hard – but she’s intact. She can still fight, but I don’t know if she can take another hit like that. I’m getting reports that she’s lost at least three torpedo tubes, plus four of her pulse lasers.”

Morgan looked up at the screen and at the closing Chaodai vessels. “Comms, give me an open channel,” Morgan ordered, deathly quiet.

“Channel open, sir,” Comms reported.

“Attention, Chaodai fleet. This is Captain Mitchell Morgan of the UEO carrier *Ticonderoga*. You have attacked UEO vessels in UEO waters. Unless you surrender your ships *immediately* then I strongly suggest you make peace with whatever god or heaven you believe in, ‘cause that’s exactly where I’m going to be sending your sorry hides in about thirty seconds.”

Gavin looked over at the Captain. Morgan’s face was grim, well aware he was quite possibly antagonising a much larger force into an even deadlier position than it

already was. However, his fury that the Chaodai had broken their semi-neutrality, and fully engaged a UEO task force won over his general sense of self-preservation.

“You’ve picked the *wrong* UEO captain to mess with today,” Morgan said into the still-open channel. “You still have...oh... *fifteen* seconds to reconsider your position...”

He waved a hand across his throat, and the comms officer cut the channel. He then waited precisely ten seconds. “All vessels; all tubes: *Fire*,” he ordered coldly.

The UEO vessels stirred again, with the undamaged Defiance cruiser, the *Courageous*, ripple firing sixteen torpedoes in a single salvo, the *Invincible* adding a dozen more, and the *Trident* added another eight, while all four Defenders fired with everything they had. The *Ticonderoga* herself was a spectacle to behold, adding her own weapons to the fray, her 16 RAFIT (Rapid Firing Independently Targeting) tubes firing three each in just under two seconds; the screech of burning rocket motors echoing throughout the deep.

In seconds, the tables were turned, and over one hundred Mk-91 and Mk-92 variable charge Plasma-warhead torpedoes were streaking in towards the Chaodai fleet. Gavin could only stare and grin stupidly as he realised just how much firepower really was onboard the UEO vessels. He grinned at Captain Morgan and turned back to his station. “Peacemakers, Rangers, close to firing range and prepare for close-combat. Omicron, Siren, and Strider... prepare to engage.” Gavin said the last order with reluctance, knowing that he was virtually consigning the Spectre pilots to slaughter.

If Peacemaker was having trouble with them, then the Spectres would be unlikely to match them at all. He worried about that for a second, and then the replies of the squadrons cheered him slightly.

“*Omicron copies that. We’ll be careful, Commander.*”

“*Siren copies. Preparing to engage.*”

“*Strider acknowledged. Ready.*”

Almost as if they seemed surprised by the sudden ferocity of the UEO ship’s return volley, the Chaodai’s heavier vessels moved in to an apparently disorganised spread in an attempt to put distance between each other. All the vessels launched intercepts and decoys of their own, but the UEO torpedoes ignored virtually all the decoys, and sped in towards their targets. A few intercepts took their toll, but with that many warheads bearing down on them, it made little difference.

Gavin Mackenzie looked on in morbid fascination. The rest of the bridge crew was merely pensive. The water around the Chaodai vessels glowed in bright, white novae as torpedo after torpedo slammed home fully charged. Gavin saw one medium SSN-sized vessel take at least a dozen hits, and imploded, sinking quickly downwards out of the battle. The largest of the Chaodai vessels took at least a dozen as well, and immediately began limping away from the angry UEO warships. But powerful as their counter-attack had been, the UEO ships were still outnumbered, and the commander of the Chaodai force had recognised that.

The enemy ships opened up with another salvo, and the sea of calm faded on the *Ticonderoga*’s bridge.

“Sir! They’re targeting the *Invincible*.” the tactical officer shouted. “She won’t take another salvo like this.”

“All Spectres, engage those torpedoes,” Mackenzie ordered, as Morgan ordered all vessels to launch more countermeasures.

“*Roger that*,” was the reply from the Spectre squadrons.

“They’re not gonna be able to take them all down...” Morgan whispered as he made up his mind. “Helm! Take us between the *Invincible* and the incoming torpedoes and *hold position*. All hands, brace for multiple torpedo impacts. Dispatch all emergency repair crews.”

Commander McKay looked over at Morgan, with a raised eyebrow that bordered on asking ‘*Are you mad?*’ Morgan merely grimaced. “I’m not losing that cruiser, Commander.”

Gavin smiled. Morgan was a rare breed of commander. He wasn’t afraid to put himself or his ship on the line if he felt good could result from it, and he braced himself in his seat.

The *Ticonderoga* rocked again as the torpedoes impacted in a ripple across the surface of the massive carrier. Several Spectres, game to the last, swooped in the last seconds and destroyed several more. In all, sixteen torpedoes buried themselves in to the Reverence’s hull and the power flickered sharply twice, and then returned to normal.

“Damage report!”

“Port side bioskin is broken in at least a dozen places. Hull breaches in several sections, three major, six minor. We’ve lost two of the main power transfer systems. We also have casualties on decks six and seven, sections 13 through 17.”

Morgan swore. The six main power transfer systems basically powered every single system forwards of the reactor core – losing two was bad, but not critical. Lose another two; and the carrier would barely perform at 50% efficiency. But that’s not what he was most angry with – he should have evacuated the outer sections of the *Ticonderoga*.

“Seal off the worst of it, and send repair crews to attempt to seal the minor hull breaches, Lieutenant. Helm, bring us around to face the Chaodai fleet. Gavin...? I need you to engage the Spectres. We can’t *really* take this kind of a beating. We need them to harry those subs.” Mitchell did not make it an order. It was a suggestion, and the manner in which he had asked it told Mackenzie that the elder Captain was more than aware of what the request entailed.

Mackenzie nodded numbly. He knew what was at stake, but he knew the price the Spectres would pay. He closed his eyes and whispered a prayer, then opened a channel. “Bombing runs; Spectre wings. Raptors; on wing duty. Launch all available fighters – Peacemakers, take out as many fighters as possible on your first pass, Rangers, likewise. Siren, Omicron, Strider, target enemy vessels at will... and try to avoid the bandits.”

Morgan turned back to his bridge. “Close to medium firing range – and power up the pulse cannon batteries.”

“Aye, aye sir!”

“And somebody shut off those stupid alarms! If anyone here says they weren’t aware we were under attack, I think I’ll *scream!*”

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Steven Patrick smiled exultantly. Finally: a chance to prove just how good the Peacemakers and Rangers really were. “Yes sir! Peacemaker; beginning run. Rangers, you with us?” he asked, almost mockingly.

“You had to ask?” Richards replied, the hint of a smile leaking through the radio.

The COs of the Spectre squadrons smiled warily. Omicron One voiced the unspoken thought. “Pity the Chaodai fighter jock that stands in *their* way this time round.”

“Roger that, Omicron,” Strider One replied, and smiled grimly. “Beginning bombing run.”

“Right behind you, Strider,” Siren One commented.

“*Once more unto the breach...*” Omicron One muttered whimsically, then turned his fighter into a downward dive, aiming to come up from slightly under the Chaodai vessels. “Omicron is engaging,” he said, and the last of the forty or so engaged Spectres began their runs at the opposing fleet.

Steven Patrick locked onto his first target at 2,000 yards and spitted him with his crosshairs. He heard the tone that signified he had a lock, and fired one of his Mk-95 ASM-7 “Fox Hound” anti-fighter Torpedoes. “Fox one! Peacemaker Lead has first kill.”

The torpedo he fired slammed straight into the Chaodai fighter, despite its best attempts to roll away towards one of the larger capital vessels, and the sub-munitions it scattered formed a cloud of rapidly expanding shrapnel that caused a large rent in another nearby fighter, which jerked away instinctively – straight into a large capital ship, destroying the fighter and leaving a large, ugly scar on the submarine’s hull. Patrick laughed openly.

“Does that count as my kill?” he asked nobody in particular. The reply was almost perfectly timed as another Raptor swooped up in front of him and fired two torpedoes at two targets almost simultaneously. He didn’t have to look hard to know who it was.

The two bracketed Chaodai fighters attempted to evade – only one managed to shake his torpedo. Streaking high above the battle, the fighter began a slow turn to head back in, only to be slammed by the torpedo, which had come round and tracked a lone target above the main battle. “No, but those two definitely count as mine,” Ed Richards drawled.

Patrick let fly with a burst from his Hades cannon, perfectly leading a Chaodai fighter that disintegrated under the barrage of explosive shells. “Sounds like a *challenge*, Ranger Two.”

He swooped up slightly, enough to see an identical manoeuvre being performed by Ed Richards’ Raptor. “I never said a thing, sir,” Richards replied dryly.

“*Richards, Patrick, cut the chatter. Focus on the damned Chaodai,*” said the disgruntled voice of Gavin Mackenzie.

Patrick smiled. “Hey, don’t take it out on us, the fact you crashed into a *wreck* and ruined your fighter.” Even Richards, in the middle of toasting another Chaodai fighter, laughed – until a burst of fire from another target lanced across his fuselage.

“Shit,” he said. “I’ve got a bandit on my six,” he reported, calm as ever.

“Roger, Ranger Two,” Patrick replied, thoughts of competition gone. “Break right.”

The Raptor feinted left then broke away to the right, and Patrick swooped down on the Chaodai bandit as it moved to follow. A quick burst of Hades fire, and the brief skirmish was over: the enemy fighter settled slowly to the floor, thousands of feet below.

“Thanks Peacemaker One, I owe you,” Richards said, sounding genuinely grateful.

“Any time, Ranger Two. I might collect later on today,” Patrick said, as he turned to engage another pair of fighters, who split up in an obvious attempt to get on

to his six. Obliging neither, he shot through the middle of them and then reversed the port engine to shove the fighter into a vicious lateral spin. The two Chaodai fighters, taken by surprise at the speed of the spin, were smoking hulks in seconds. It was a maneuver that was rapidly becoming a hallmark of Ace UEO Raptor pilots, and had resulted in the deaths of all-too-many Alliance pilots in the past. Shooting forwards, again, Patrick pulled out slightly from the battle which was quickly becoming a very ugly fur-ball; one of the largest he'd ever seen outside of a training simulation.

By his count, he'd just made five – maybe six kills in under ten minutes – he'd officially become an ace pilot.

That was his last thought, as a Chaodai cruiser, with a burst from its forward pulse lasers, obliterated every living trace of Steven Patrick.

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Gavin Mackenzie was dazed with shock. One second, his brother-in-law's fighter was there, the next it was gone in a hazy blue flash. He choked back a lump in his throat, and then slammed his fist on the control panel in front of him.

“Rangers; Peacemakers, *kill that cruiser!*” he whispered hoarsely, his mind spinning and any objectivity long since obliterated along with the name Steven Patrick.

He needn't have bothered. Every Raptor in the battle had seen it and had just as suddenly broken clean, and fired their single GSM-8 “Rattlesnake” torpedoes at the cruiser. Nearly twenty small Torpedoes slammed into the cruiser, several directly into the engines. Slowed, the vessel began a turn away from the main UEO fleet – *definitely* a mistake.

In the end, it was the crippled *Invincible* that made them pay; a swift, double act of revenge for the fallen ace and its own vicious wounds. A salvo of seven torpedoes from the damaged cruiser slammed home into the exposed broadside of the Chaodai vessel, creating massive rents in the hull – which were exploited viciously by the Peacemaker Raptors, who fired round after round of their Hades cannons into the holes. Something eventually gave way, and the sub let out a low, bass-heavy groan that reverberated for mile. Somewhere from within, the slow spiral of self destruction continued, and then the great warship imploded just as suddenly causing a spectacular double nova that illuminated the entire battlefield for a just few moments.

Avenged, the *Invincible* turned and fired another salvo at a new target, while the Raptors of Peacemaker returned to combating the countless divisions of Chaodai fighters that ran rampant throughout the battle. Against his better judgement, Gavin Mackenzie ordered the rest of the Spectres in reserve to engage.

The Spectres gallantly charged in, and several made their unsuspecting targets pay with blood. As the fighters levelled the playing field between the two sides in numbers, the Spectres quickly began paying a terrible price as the Chaodai once again proved their manoeuvrability and speed completely outclassed the Spectres. Subfighters started exploding, imploding, or simply falling to the ocean floor, damaged beyond control everywhere Mackenzie looked. He could only watch in sadness as the UEO's fighter pilots died, not due to any mistake on their part, but just sheer technological and pilot superiority on the side of the Chaodai. The Raptors continued to spew deadly fire from their Hades cannons, and the Spectres pulse lasers lit up the sea with a light blue-green tint, but the battle was just barely a stalemate again.

He could barely comprehend it, however, when the waves of Chaodai vessels broke away, for no apparent reasons.

Ed Richards watched them go, his head ringing from a concussive explosion he'd only barely avoided. He watched as another salvo from the UEO fleet effectively crippled the last of the major Chaodai capital vessels. The remaining ships in the squadron turned to retreat, firing a final salvo of torpedoes as they turned – all but a large cruiser that remained distinctly obstinate and proud, even as the other vessels around it desperately fought to withdraw.

The big Texan, strapped tight in to his fighter swore. His heart pumped, hammered in his ears. And then he did the unthinkable. He thrust his throttles to the stops, and sped towards the Chaodai cruiser.

“Ed, *no!*” Mackenzie cried as the Raptor sped towards the Chaodai cruiser's bridge, but Mackenzie mistook his intention – and as the Raptor closed into firing range, it spun upwards, and then downwards again, and the pulse lasers from the cruiser missed the spinning Raptor. Still careering towards the huge vessel, Ed Richards' blood rage suddenly died as he realised just how incredibly stupid he was being. A single Raptor taking down a Chaodai cruiser? Impossible, or so went the well-taught Academy doctrines.

Common thought needed to be corrected, Richards mused, as everything seemed to slow down. He spun a final time, and suddenly he found the distance was barely 200 meters. Close enough to see the bridge. He opened fire with his Hades cannons, and watched it rake along the armoured dome that concealed the command deck below. He gritted his teeth and released the safeties on the trigger, then fired his last two torpedoes at the rising bulk of the Chaodai hull.

Unable to do anything, the Captain of the cruiser looked on in horror as the Raptor screamed over the top of the ship, barely missing it by just five meters as the two torpedoes slammed into the control center. The Captain didn't even have time to register what had befallen him as the missiles annihilated the bridge - wiping out the crew instantly. The Raptor turned, and just as quickly as it'd started, stopped behind the massive engines of the cruiser. He aimed almost lazily, and fired into the main coolant lines, open to the sea due to previous damage; probably caused by a UEO torpedo.

The gunfire ripped the lines to pieces, and Richards was already rolling away as the cruiser's engines – already pushed to their limit in an effort to pull back from the UEO line – spiralled in to an uncontrollable overload. The resulting explosion was spectacular, to say the least. The chain reaction was rapid – spreading from the engines to the ship's reactor cores, and the whole submarine expanded like a balloon before collapsing in on itself; total containment failure. The concussive force of the blast spread through the water and knocked the tiny Raptor around like a leaf in a tornado. Ed Richards gritted his teeth and screamed as he pushed his throttles forward and the Raptor rode free of the explosion to an exultant roar of cheering support from the fighter pilots and capital ships crew alike.

Gavin Mackenzie merely collapsed in shock. He'd braced himself for losing both his brother-in-law and XO in one engagement, but the relief he felt was more profound than he'd ever expected. And then instantly, the overpowering guilt of still being alive took him as the memories of Steven Patrick flooded in.

He barely heard Captain Morgan order the UEO Battlegroup to move into a protective formation around the damaged *Invincible*.

Steven Patrick; as the man he'd come to count among his best friends - the man his sister Selene had first brought home four years ago. An uncertain young

Lieutenant with a big future in the Navy as he had stepped forward to accept his promotion and navy cross...

...Then a Lieutenant Commander proposing in front of Gavin, to Selene Mackenzie, and then the quiet, steady gaze as he looked her in the eyes and said "I do."

He recalled the fierce conviction in his eyes as he had looked Gavin in the eye and said "yes," again, in response to the question of if he would give everything he was, and everything he had to save his wife. He remembered again when Leanne Evans – previous commander of the Peacemakers - had been killed while on a shuttle from Japan to Pearl Harbor and his promotion to take her place. The steel in his voice, as he'd told the pilots of her loss, and his solemn vow not to fail them again.

Mackenzie's eyes watered. He stood, looked at Captain Morgan, and fled from the bridge, as fast as his cast would allow him.

~

Two hours later...

"This is Royal Oak. We have flooding on all lower decks; flight operations are closed-"

"-Cruiser Albany. We've been flanked. Request immed-"

"Sonofabitch! This is Maceman Three. I can't shake him! Someone get him-"

"No! Echo six – wave off, wave off! You're too low!"

"-Mayday! Heavy casualties across all decks. Abandoning sh-"

"Negative, negative! I have no vis-"

...Ed Richards grimaced as he listened to the radio chatter over the battle net of the other task groups, further up the Ryukyu trench. The day had turned in to a massacre. He could take little more of the demoralizing reports, and he switched his radio back local frequencies.

The Recon wing of Raptors was about 30 clicks distant from the *Ticonderoga*, and a long way inside Chaodai borders. Flying along at little more than fifty feet above the sea floor, Richards grimaced and shifted around in his seat again. He'd been in the seat for nearly three hours straight now, and the day was finally getting to him.

"Ranger Two, when the hell are we gonna get relieved?" asked Kate Stephenson, XO - *and probably the new CO* - Richards thought - of the Peacemakers.

Richards smiled as the voice of the Lieutenant Commander flooded the channel – there was no real sign of fatigue in her voice, only a longing to find a quiet place and grieve for the loss of her Commander and friend; a loss that all the fighter pilots; Ranger or Peacemaker felt. The squadrons shared a relationship that was rare in the subfighter corps. They were more than rivals, and far more than friends. They had served in more battles together than any other squadrons in the task force, and a mutual respect and sense of brotherhood had come from it.

The death of Steven Patrick would be felt for a long time, but now, there was no time to grieve, and no time for remorse.

'Yet that's the price we pay,' he thought. *'When all we want is to grieve, there is still the mission. And so we become adept at ignoring the pain – at least for as long as possible.'*

"I don't know, Peacemaker Two. I don't even know why the Commander has us out here. I don't know much besides the fact that my ass is starting to get extremely," Richards said, venting a little of his frustration.

It worked though. Stephenson laughed, and Richards flashed his teeth at her – forgetting he was wearing a mask - through the cockpit canopy as her Raptor slid alongside his. He barged on. “Actually, there’s one other thing I know. When this is all over, and we get back to Pearl, I’m going to buy an extremely extravagant meal for two.”

“Oh?” Stephenson asked. “*And who’s going to be the lucky person who gets the honour of your fine conversation and the meal?*” she asked, with the barest trace of sarcasm.

“I was rather hoping a certain, attractive Lieutenant Commander would join me,” Richards said. “...If she felt up to it.”

Stephenson smiled wearily, the stress showing through still. “*It’s a deal, Commander. You owe me dinner in Pearl.*”

~

“The *Invincible* isn’t going anywhere in a hurry, sir. She’s going to need a hell of a lot of work to even consider getting *anywhere* near what you’re asking. There is no way she’ll do forty knots, let alone seventy or eighty. The damage to her drives is just too severe,” the *Ticonderoga*’s chief engineer, Peter Simmons, implored. “In fact, it’s a miracle she hasn’t sunk already.” He rubbed a hand across his chin.

“What about the Defenders?” Captain Morgan asked.

“Well,” Simmons said. “The *Warhawk* has suffered minor damage. She only took two torpedoes during the battle. The *Greenville* wasn’t so lucky; she took nearly a dozen – totally hulled. A few of her crew managed to get out. The *Morningstar* is untouched, and the *Titan* has a few rents in her hull, took about six... of course, these are all from fighter torpedoes. Had they been hit with capital ship munitions, we would have lost every last one.”

“And the *Trident*?”

“-Is also virtually untouched. Putting her to the rear was definitely a smart move. Poseidons can take a battering, but I’d still not like them anywhere near the head of the column, what with their light weaponry.”

Morgan nodded. His decision had been a measured one, mostly for the reasons just outlined by the chief engineer, who’d served on a Poseidon for two years before transferring to the chief engineer’s post on the *Ticonderoga*, and knew what he was talking about.

“So what do we do?” Morgan asked.

“UEO command will have someone on their way, but the nearest reinforcements are still probably two hours away at best. We can’t make a break for it, the Chaodai could send another battlefleet after us with no hesitation whatsoever, and we’re still close enough for the Macs to make a thrust towards us.” He sighed. “So we’re screwed.”

Morgan rubbed a hand over his face thoughtfully as Commander McKay spoke up. “We’re still in the Ryukyu Trench, aren’t we?” the XO asked. “We could use it. Hide in the trench, there has to be some places to hide a battlefleet. The damned thing *is* big enough. Hell, we could almost pull the same trick that the Chaodai did.”

Simmons nodded. “It makes a hell of a lot of sense, sir. We could reinforce the *Invincible*’s interior bulkheads a little in the damaged sections. We won’t know how

deep she'll go, but she'll probably get deep enough just to avoid patrols. I just wouldn't recommend letting a torpedo go off anywhere near her at that depth."

Morgan grimaced. "I don't like how it limits our options once we're in there, but it makes the most tactical sense from here." He shrugged. "Do it."

The XO smiled. "Yessir."

Morgan stood, and looked at the plot which displayed the position of the three UEO task forces throughout the trench. *Ticonderoga* had by far made the deepest ingress in to Chaodai waters, but the battle was still far from over. To the north, two of her sisterships - the *Royal Oak* and *Archangel* - were still heavily engaged, and were taking severe losses. The few blue triangles that marked the locations of the battlegroups on the holographic plot were surrounded by a sea of red.

"Commander McKay... Raise the *Royal Oak*."

"Aye sir," replied his XO dutifully. A few moments later, and the Commander nodded at Morgan assuredly, and the Captain straightened.

"*Royal Oak*, this is *Ticonderoga*. Am I speaking to Captain Staffert?"

The channel was broken by static, which Morgan knew was bad. Submarine radio communications relied on a vast network of laser relays dotted throughout the Pacific, and a breakdown was indicative that the Chaodai had begun targeting them. "*Ticonderoga; Royal Oak. This is Captain Staffert. It's good to hear your voice, Mitch.*"

"Likewise, John." replied Morgan grimly. "What's your status?"

"*We're under heavy attack by Chaodai subfighter forces. The task force has lost nearly half its sea wing and we've had to close the flight deck because of flooding. I'm afraid the situation isn't good.*"

Morgan could hear the turmoil of the *Royal Oak's* bridge in the background, and gritted his teeth. "We've radioed Command and let them know what's going on out here, but it's going to be at least two hours before we get relief. Can you hold out that long?"

"...*I doubt it,*" Staffert said after a moment's hesitation. "*We could withdraw to Stillwell, but if we did that there would be nothing to stop the Chaodai overrunning us completely.*"

Morgan swore as he got another idea. It was far from his first choice, but it was about the only thing he had left. "Can you draw them further south? We're not the most mobile battlegroup under the waves right now - half my ships aren't even moving. But if we can meet up, we can combine what we have, and maybe force the Chaodai in to a defensive posture."

"*We'll try,*" assured Staffert, "*But I can give you no guarantees.*"

"...Good luck, Captain," added Morgan completely unnecessarily.

"*Same to you, Ticonderoga. Royal Oak; out.*"

Morgan paused for a moment, and then looked at his XO. "You have the Bridge, Commander. There's a fighter pilot I need to check in on."

He walked out of the clamshell doors at the rear of the bridge, and headed for the Medical bay.

~

Gavin Mackenzie's eyes were dry. There were no more tears to cry for his brother-in-law, not now and not here. He sat on the edge of the bunk that was his in the infirmary, and felt all the nausea and turmoil flee his mind. He stood up, fully

intending to return to the bridge, but at that exact moment, Captain Morgan walked in the door. Mackenzie almost jumped in surprise.

Morgan waited for a second, gathering his thoughts. "I'm sorry, Commander," he said. "Steven Patrick was a friend, and excellent pilot... and one hell of a poker player," he finished with a tight smile.

"He was one of the most popular people on this boat," he added a moment later. "I would give anything to be half as popular as he is."

Gavin looked up. "I think you're under-representing yourself, Captain," he said with a tight smile. "I'm not being disrespectful... But it's all just... too sudden. One minute he's there, and the next, some Chaodai bastard blows him from existence."

Morgan put a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I'm not so sure about that," the Captain mused. "This war is going to drag itself on for a long time, and you will find yourself – *we* will find *ourselves* – more and more reflecting on what's already happened... and who we've already lost. He won't really be gone unless you let that happen." Morgan couldn't help but feel that somehow, those words were too clichéd and hollow for a situation that deserved something more... *meaningful*.

"How am I supposed to explain that to his son or daughter? How am I supposed to explain that to my *sister*?" he asked quietly. "They're not going to understand that."

"Of course they won't. Not if you try and explain it to them in words, Gavin. But Steven was a fighter pilot to the core... Your sister Selene knew that, and she knew the risks. It'll take time, but she'll work out her thoughts sooner or later." Morgan paused. "You know he talked about Selene alot, you know, on the odd occasion we shared a drink. He said she was the best thing that had ever happened in his life, and he had you to thank for it."

Mackenzie's head lifted slightly as the Captain continued. "He also said that if it weren't for you... he'd never have made it this far."

Gavin frowned. "That's bullshit. Steven's one of the best natural pilots I'd se... *I've* seen..." He broke off, the sudden realisation that he was already talking in the past tense about his brother-in-law. He looked up at Morgan, and shook his head. "Christ, Mitch, he was my fucking brother. Sure, I'd have helped him if he ever needed it, but he was twice the man I am. He's never needed my help."

"It's not what he told me. Just because he never *asked* for help, doesn't mean you didn't give it. You set an example that every fighter pilot in the fleet wants to follow. You led by example, saved countless lives through risking your own, and your brother used that guidance to live his life by."

Gavin smiled suddenly. "You know, I think he's probably one of the best things that happened to me. I mean, I always looked out for Selene... she's always been my kid sister. You know how it is... It's almost a duty. When Steven came along, I realised that I didn't have to any more. He said he'd take care of her. He said... he said he'd *always* be there for her... and he always was." He choked slightly, lost for words.

"And now I have to tell her that her husband, the father of a kid who's never going to know, isn't coming home, *will* never come home and not even in a steel *box*," he eventually whispered. He shook his head. "It's not fair, Mitch," he whispered. "It's not *fucking* fair."

"It never is, Gav. You know that just as well as I do. And I don't pretend to know Steven as well as you do, nor do I pretend that I was as close to him as you

were... but I do know one thing. He sure as hell wouldn't want you, or anyone else - *especially* Selene - moping over him, even after he's gone."

Morgan locked eyes with Gavin Mackenzie. There was a coldness to be found there; something which Mackenzie wanted to run away from as fast as he could, but at the same time it was familiar... and he knew there was something here that the Captain and he had in common. "How the hell do you expect to take care of Selene if you can't even take care of yourself?" Morgan asked cynically. A small inferno burned behind those dark blue eyes of his, and Gavin knew instantly that Mitchell Morgan was possibly the best amateur psychologist in the fleet, and he laughed, slowly at first before letting it overwhelm him.

The Captain saw the glint in Mackenzie's eye and laughed out loud. "Comes with being a Captain," he said, catching the pilot by surprise.

"I beg your pardon?" Mackenzie asked, his eyes questioning as he tried to suppress his euphoria.

"Don't worry," said the Captain, still chuckling. "I'm afraid, when you see loss on the scale I've seen, for the number of years I've seen it, you start realising that sometimes, you've got to be the hardest, coldest bastard in the world, to make people realise that their sorrow and pain isn't anything in the big picture. I've seen men destroyed through grief, and it's not pretty. I didn't think you'd go that way. I think you're a lot stronger than that, but I had to make sure." Morgan grinned at him. "And you're the first person who's ever laughed at me," he added, a feinted look of disappointment crossing his face.

Gavin smiled back. "Oh, somehow, I doubt that," he replied with a hint of jest.

"Oh, I'll get you back for that, Commander, you just wait and see," Morgan said, but Gavin saw completely through his façade, knew that Morgan was barely containing his laughter.

That all ended when the 1MC barked over the intercom. "*Captain Morgan, report to the bridge immediately!*"

Morgan stood quickly, as did Mackenzie. "Go," he said to the Captain. "I've gotta get to the EVA deck, I heard Ed was there. I'll get to the Bridge as soon as I can."

Morgan nodded, and patted him on the back, before running out the door.

Mackenzie, already annoyed with the weight of the cast, commandeered a wheelchair, and started wheeling it down the corridors of the Reverence carrier, an idea that seemed vaguely hilarious when he considered it. *What point was there even having wheelchairs on submarines?* he wondered.

~

Morgan reached the bridge and stepped through the clamshell doors, to be immediately presented with a situation that most definitely did not make him happy.

Morgan looked over at his XO. "And they're back," he said simply.

"It's worse sir; we launched a comm. buoy just before they got here, and I still haven't gotten anything from either UEO command, or a relief fleet."

Morgan frowned and then looked again at the deadly shadows present on the view screen. A Chaodai fleet was passing almost directly over them through the Ryukyu Trench, and Morgan had to be almost certain that they'd seen the damaged UEO fleet, lying hidden on the sea floor below.

"Out of the frying pan, and into the fire," he muttered. "Just wonderful."

~

Ed Richards had ordered the Raptors to turn around the instant he'd seen the Chaodai fleet on his sonar, nearly 70 nautical miles out. They'd ducked from position to position, sprinting to and from cover each time while keeping far enough away from the Chaodai to avoid detection, or so Richards had hoped. He was counting on the assumption that as a rule, UEO sonar and sensor technology was far superior to anything the Alliance or Chaodai maintained, and had thus far kept them one or two steps ahead. Very quickly, it became obvious where the new fleet was heading.

...Straight for the *Ticonderoga*.

They sped across open water of the upper trench at top speed, searching for the UEO fleet. Richards was starting to get worried when there was still no sign of them. Then a voice had burst in his ear, and he'd gotten the surprise of his life.

"Look down, *Ranger Two*," the voice said. Richards had inverted his Raptor, and looked down, into the depths of the Ryukyu trench – and made out a Reverence-class carrier hovering near the edge. The *Ticonderoga*.

"Neat trick, *Tico*, but you'll have to do better than that, and quickly. We've got an incoming Chaodai fleet hot on our tails – larger than the last one, too, and they definitely didn't look happy. They were headed this way fast."

Richards dove and headed down into the significantly darker waters inside the trench.

"Copy that, *Ranger Two*. Recon flight is cleared to land on the *Ticonderoga*, you have priority clearance. Captain thinks it might be an idea to give you guys a little cover when the shooting starts."

"Tell the Captain we'll get out there as soon as it does start, but the idea's a nice one. We still need to resupply, so I guess we'll be docking now."

"Port bay is all yours. Good work, *Ranger Two*."

"Copy *Ticonderoga*. I have the beam."

~

Fifteen minutes later, Richards was on the deck as the last of the stores were loaded into his Raptor. All around him were the sounds of technicians turning machines around, making them as ready as possible to dive into hell once again. He couldn't help but notice the amount of bays that were conspicuously empty. As usual, the ground crews scurried about in a state of organized chaos; preparing what little remained of the ship's fighter group for combat against what everyone knew was now a vastly superior enemy. He shuddered at the thought of how many pilots had already been lost, and how many more were likely to be dead by the time the Chaodai finished with them. He turned around as he heard footsteps coming across the EVA deck. Kate Stephenson stood in her flight suit with her helmet tucked under one arm, and returned his smile – albeit a forced one. Richards saw through it.

"...Ed," she began, and then faltered.

"I know, Kate. Save me the water works." He shrugged helplessly. "I feel more sorry for the Commander..." he said, referring to Mackenzie.

Stephenson nodded. “Yeah. Brother-in-law.” She choked up again. Richards, was a stone, and felt little. The loss had hit him hard, but he knew this wasn’t the time to grieve. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and felt her lean into his chest, and the tears that she had been holding back for several hours flowed. Richards just held her. He looked up as the sound of something rumbling across the gratings reached his ears. He smiled weakly as Commander Gavin Mackenzie rolled to a stop next to him and Stephenson.

“Sir,” he said simply.

“Ed...” Mackenzie said, looking round, like Richards had, at the empty bays of the hangar. “Good work out there. Thanks for staying alive.”

Richards nodded. “Seemed to be the popular idea.”

Mackenzie stood up from his wheelchair, and in the light, Richards realised just how gaunt his CO’s face looked. He looked at Stephenson, still in his arms, but leaning against him only lightly now and saw the same look in her face. *Goddamn this fucking war, he thought suddenly. Too high a price to pay. Too high a price for anyone, ever. We don’t deserve this. Nobody deserves this. Damn Bourne, damn him to all the hells on this god-forsaken earth.*

He didn’t voice a thing, but Mackenzie could read his mind. “It’s okay, Ed,” he said. “We’ll get through this.”

There was a grim silence amongst these pilots for long moments. Mackenzie continued to stare about the hangar; the mangled ruins of so many fighters still piled in to unused holding bays like so much useless junk. Of nearly sixty subfighters that had once occupied this area, barely half still operated.

“*Crew of the Ticonderoga, this is the Captain,*” announced Mitchell Morgan sharply over the IMC. Every crewman on the flight deck stopped what they were doing and looked up, listening intently to their Commander. “*We have detected a substantial force of Chaodai warships closing on our position. There can be no doubt that their intentions are hostile. The reason for their attacks over these last few hours remains unclear – we have received no communication from their commander, and UEO command has not received any formal declarations of intentions nor warning.*”

There was a pause, and Mackenzie could imagine Captain Morgan gathering his thoughts pensively on the command deck. “*I realise many of us have lost friends today, and we would like to believe that even one such loss is too much to bear... And mark my words, for every member of this crew – this fleet – who has given everything in defence of whatever ideal, belief or cause they chose, there is not one of us that does not grieve. But know assuredly, that despite the differences which defined them – the differences we both uphold and defend - they stood united on a common ground.*”

Mackenzie sensed Richards beside him nodding slightly in agreement, and the Captain’s speech went on. “*Realise now that there can be no avoiding this confrontation. We leave a day behind us that has already gone down in history as one of the bloodiest that the UEO has seen in this war, and we now face the night. We are not alone. North of us, our brothers- in-arms are already engaged in the fight of their lives. And should we take this plunge – **when** we take this plunge in to the darkness, all I shall ask is that you do so with the loudest, staunchest scream of defiance that the enemy could ever know. This is more than a fight for our ideals; it is more than just a fight for who we are... It is a fight for every man and woman standing beside you at this moment. Should these be our final hours – let’s make them our finest, and make sure that history never be allowed to forsake the name Ticonderoga.*”

There was not a dry eye on the entire hangar, and those that were hid choked emotions. Mackenzie smiled and exchanged a confident nod with Ed Richards beside

him. Captain Morgan finished his speech. “*Look around you... at the faces of every one you know, and even those you don't. Already those lost are felt heavily, and the enemy will surely look to exploit this. Remember that those who stand beside you now hold your life in their hands... and theirs in yours... All hands, all decks... Stand-to: Battle stations.*”

The lighting in the hangar changed from its usual bright, sapphire blue to blood red in an instant, and the familiar drone of a general quarters alarm echoed throughout the hangar. The XO repeated sharply;

“*General quarters, all hands stand to battle stations. All pilots scramble for immediate launch. Commander Mackenzie, please report to the bridge.*”

As Mackenzie looked at the pilots standing in front of him, his demeanour changed visibly.

“Show them *hell*,” he said stiffly.

~

Mitchell Morgan was frustrated. He'd realised the conundrum they were in almost as soon as the Chaodai fleet had passed overhead. There were only three possible outcomes to this situation... One was that there were reinforcements bearing down on the Chaodai fleet beyond the harbouring walls of the trench. Two; the reinforcements had been wiped out, and three... the reinforcements weren't even there.

Realistically, as they weren't here already, he doubted his luck would improve any time in the immediate future, and knew that one way or the other... he was facing combat with a battle-hardened Chaodai fleet.

Still, this was not the problem which really bothered Mitchell Morgan; more than anything else, he simply hated being blind. What he wanted – or rather, *needed*, was more information. “Order the *Invincible*, *Morningstar*, and the *Titan* to stay down here with the *Trident*. Tell the *Courageous* and the *Warhawk* to move up with us. We're going to have a bit of a peek over that rise.”

“That's a little risky, sir,” Commander McKay said questioningly. The XO shook his head slowly. “We're outnumbered, outmanoeuvred, and out-matched,” he concluded with a sigh.

“Commander, that's a dangerous attitude to take.” Morgan had raised an eyebrow initially at his XO, and it had turned into a full frown. “The minute we start thinking we've lost this, then we *have* lost.”

“With all due respect sir – we've lost nearly a half of our task force – the *Invincible*, to borrow Chief Simmons assessment: is a floating miracle. How she's still intact is beyond me, and to be frank, I doubt we'd survive another engagement like we did before. They know what sort of firepower we have now, so we're likely to be their first real target.” He sighed. “I think we got lucky last time – they didn't expect a carrier to have such a heavy armament.”

“Commander, I wasn't aware I left my orders open to debate.” Morgan said, dropping a small edge of sarcasm into his voice. “Now... Take us over that rise; all ahead one-third. And then, if needs be, we will engage them again. And if things go sour, then we will fight them again and demonstrate an application of Queensberry rules.”

The look of pained indecision that crossed the XO's face made Morgan feel sorry for him. “I'm sorry sir... Queen's what?”

Morgan smiled slightly. “Nevermind, Commander. All ahead one-third.”

McKay nodded nervously. "Aye, sir. Helm: Ten degrees up-bubble, engines ahead one-third."

The helmsman cocked his head. "Aye, aye. Helm answering ten degrees up-bubble. All ahead on-third."

Gavin Mackenzie - who had just arrived on the bridge - realised immediately what Morgan was planning. He grimaced uncomfortably as he recognised that the Captain was counting on the intervention of UEO reinforcements. Namely, something that was capable of overwhelming the Chaodai before the *Ticonderoga* herself was overwhelmed... Something, perhaps, like a DSV.

"Captain," he asked. "The Ryukyu Trench is more than wide enough to navigate at slow speed. If I recall, it splits just south of Kyushu. You could order the rest of the task force to head up there and escape to Japan, almost completely out of sight."

Morgan considered the idea, and then called up a detailed seafloor chart on the holographic plot. Mackenzie was slightly surprised by the level of detail shown on the map; it far exceeded anything else the UEO had access to in this region, and then he realised why - this trench had been run by hundreds, if not thousands of UEO pilots over the last decade who used it as cover to break through Chaodai lines for deep-investigating reconnaissance missions. It was, in fact, probably the most accurately plotted trench beneath the Pacific. "You're right, Commander..." he mused. "I don't like the idea of leaving them unescorted... *but*... If we were to draw their fire long enough, it would be a few less things to worry about later on."

McKay stiffened beside him. "Sir, if we pull those ships, we'll be drastically outgunned. I'm not sure if our fighters can handle this by themselves."

Mackenzie's jaw clenched in anger; he knew McKay didn't mean offence by it, but after everything his pilots had given that day, he almost felt it a personal affront to their dignity to suggest they couldn't take it. "With respect, Commander McKay, my pilots will hold the line... By whatever it takes."

McKay shook his head. "Sir, if we do this-"

"I'm *not* losing those ships," Captain Morgan glowered as he paced impatiently. Morgan was made aware of this subconscious act by the two commanders, who were apparently watching a game of Tennis. He stopped pacing for a second, and then turned. "Okay, we're doing it Commander Mackenzie's way. Order the *Invincible*, *Titan* and *Trident* to move out up the trench, and tell them to make best speed for Osaka naval base."

Mackenzie added another suggestion. "You may want to transfer wounded and some medical staff to those ships - the *Trident* could easily take our wounded on. And are you sure you want to pull the *entire* fighter escort?"

Morgan nodded. "No. Transfer Deuce back to *Trident's* EVA command. And yes, transfer all non-essential personnel and wounded from the *Ticonderoga*, *Courageous*, *Warhawk* and *Morningstar*, to the *Trident*."

Mackenzie nodded sadly. He hoped that this desperate gamble of splitting their forces would pay off. This was no longer about winning, it was about surviving. If parts of the trench were too shallow, or had collapsed, the UEO vessels would have to go upwards, above the precipice of the canyon - exposing them to the hypersonic sweeps of the Chaodai vessels leaving them totally vulnerable to the enemy's attention, and weapons fire.

Never a very religious person, Mackenzie found himself wondering if there really was such a thing as God, and if there was... whether or not he favoured the bold. He couldn't help but utter a silent prayer as he took his station at Ops.

I'd take luck, too, if there is no superior being, he thought to himself. *But whatever it is, we're going to need a lot of help from it.*

The comms crackled, interrupting his brief reverie. Some time had passed, and most of the transfers had been completed with minimal fuss. *"This is Trident, moving out now. Good luck and Godspeed, Ticonderoga. We'll see you in Osaka."*

Morgan nodded with approval. "Roger that *Trident*. You too. We'll see you at the bar," he said, forcing an amount of cheerfulness he most certainly didn't feel into his tone. He turned to Mackenzie. "I hope we didn't just make a very grave mistake," he whispered.

"So do I," Mackenzie whispered back. "It was the right thing to do. Don't second-guess yourself now."

"If we make it out of this, you can tell the tribunal that at my court martial," Morgan said. Mackenzie only smiled, but did not feel much like laughing. Morgan moved forward to stand directly behind the helm officers' chairs. "Tactical, arm all weapons, flood all batteries, and start work on those shooting solutions. Helm; where are we?"

"Nearing the rise, sir," said the Ensign directly in front of him.

"Aye, aye. Tubes loaded and armed. Energy cannons at 30 percent and climbing..."

The battlecruiser slowly moved upwards in the dark trench, and the light outside the ship began to increase. Beside it, the Defiance-class *Courageous* mirrored their movements closely, and slightly below and to the rear, the two Defender class SSNs followed suit. As the *Ticonderoga* neared the edge of the trench, she slowed to a crawl of barely ten knots, and then finally; stopped entirely, allowing the currents to carry it through the trench.

"Tactical, report," Morgan said.

"Nothing on hypersonar, but I'll bet you anything they're still out there."

"Indeed... Where are our WSKRS?"

"I've got them spread at intervals of 1000 meters up the trench."

"Good. Keep them that way."

"Captain, should I order a wing of Raptors to make a quick pass above the top of the trench? We can patch into their hypersonar, and use them almost like a WSKR," asked Mackenzie.

"It's a nice idea, but if there's anything out there, the Chaodai are going to get a free shot at them virtually without warning."

"-A risk that my pilots would be more than willing to take, sir."

Morgan sighed. "Very well, do it."

Mackenzie smiled, and turned to the comms.

~

"You want us to *what*?" Richards asked over the secure channel, with a hint of irritation slipping into his voice. "Sir, with all due respect, that's crazy! We won't last three seconds before some fucker blows us to pieces."

He was unprepared for the laughter that replied. “*What!?*” He spat incredulously, failing to see the humour.

“*The Captain said the same thing,*” Mackenzie laughed. “*...And I told him it would be a risk my pilots would take.*”

Ed Richards growled. “I don’t recall voting on this issue at our last committee meeting.”

The smile on Mackenzie’s face only widened. “*Sorry, Ed, but I don’t want to turn this into an order or anything that would go against your delicate sense of ‘life’s justice.’*”

The thinly veiled, sarcastic shot at Ed Richards’ well-known disdain of ‘justice in life’ worked perfectly.

“*Fine! I’ll do it! But mark my words I’m going to break your other leg for this.*”

“*Ed. See the edge of the trench?*” Mackenzie asked; a dangerous edge in his voice.

“Yes..?” Richards asked, almost meekly.

“*Go see what it looks like from the top, would you?*”

Richards, sensing that there was no way out of this, simply lost his taste for the argument and clicked his comms twice in acknowledgement. The Raptor emerged from the shadow of the carrier he so bitterly hated at that moment, and headed for the edge of the trench. A quick check on his rear sonar showed that the other Raptors of Ranger squadron – those that were left, at least - were following him. *Thanks for the backup, guys,* he whispered mentally, as the fighters approached the rim of the trench...

~

Mackenzie and Morgan watched together as the Raptors approached the lip of the submarine canyon. The main view screen switched to a tactical plot of the surrounding area, which was illuminated by a green area – indicating the range of their hypersonar. Everything around it was a fuzzy grey; the real-life ‘fog of war,’ where the remnants of the task force couldn’t see anything.

Just as Ranger squadron were about to clear the lip of the trench, an alarm rang out on the *Ticonderoga*’s bridge. Morgan turned quickly just as the tactical officer shot around in his seat. “*Incoming!*”

“Brace, Brace, Brace!” Morgan ordered.

The shockwave rolled over the carrier, slamming it sideways by just inches – inches that were so sudden that it was sufficient to violently rattle every deck on the ship. There was no real, but doing no real damage, but within seconds, the rest of the taskforce had reported their situations.

“What the *hell* was that?” Morgan demanded, with more curiosity than annoyance.

“Shockwave, sir,” reported the tactical officer. “No weapons impact. Seems it came from further down the trench. It seems the Chaodai are dropping plasma mines to try and smoke us out.”

“*Smoke us out?*” repeated Morgan incredibly. “Nevermind ‘smoking’; had they hit us, we’d be driftwood.”

“WSKRS has contact; they’re dropping more mines!”

“Ranger Lead; *Ticonderoga*; brace for incoming,” Mackenzie radioed.

“Understood,” Richards replied, turning his Raptor into the oncoming wave. “Rangers, spread out. We have incoming – do not get blindsided by that shockwave. I don’t want to be picking pieces of you out of the canyon walls.”

Again, the shockwave rattled the fleet, but did no damage, and this time, it was harder.

“That felt closer. Lieutenant?” Morgan asked, looking concerned.

“Two shockwaves, sir: one weaker than the other. Ranges: two and six kilometres, respectively. They are getting closer.”

Morgan swore under his breath. He couldn’t remember the last time he heard about ‘depth charges’ being used in submarine warfare. Modern subs were strong enough and large enough that conventional depth charge devices lacked the impact to cause serious damage. At the same time, he recognised that his fighters would not be so unfazed. “All right. I’ve had enough of this... Radio - inform the fleet, we’re breaking from the trench, and we intend to run for abyssal plain. We won’t evade them for long, but at least we’ll get their attention away from *Trident* and *Invincible*.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Conn; helm. Heading?”

Morgan relayed a series of orders through his command console, and then smiled grimly. “The ridges here look like an interesting playground,” he said. “At top speed, we’ll beat the Chaodai there by fifteen minutes. They’ll know exactly where we are, but it’ll take them a while to cut us off.”

“Ranger lead; *Ticonderoga*’s mobile; head’s up.” Mackenzie relayed. “As soon as you’ve got that recon data... head back to the nav beacon and rendezvous with the fleet. Engage the Chaodai *only* if they engage you first, and try and keep them off your tails.”

Richards shuddered in his subfighter, thinking back to the destruction of Lieutenant Steve Patrick’s fighter in the ball of blue fire that had burned itself in to the back of his mind. He shook his head, and he reasserted himself. “*Yessir. We’ll watch your ass. It sure would be nice to have some god damned SEWACS support, though.*”

“Ed...” Mackenzie muttered.

“*Yessir. Standing by.*”

Morgan looked at his helm officer, smiling inwardly at the usual banter between Mackenzie and his XO. Quietly, it angered him, as their jovial mood did nothing to reflect the seriousness of the situation. “What are we waiting for?” Morgan asked the helm. “Engage engines, and get us out of this trench.”

The next shockwave that came down the trench caught nothing. The UEO vessels had begun moving out as soon as the order was given. Critically, the Chaodai had taken nearly three minutes to spot the UEO vessels moving slowly mere meters above the sea floor.

The UEO forces held a slight advantage and as the first Chaodai fleet elements turned towards them and begun advancing, the big Reverence-class carrier surged forward at full power. The *Courageous*, *Morningstar* and *Warhawk* following in its suit, their own drives coming up to full speed virtually immediately as they sprinted for the ridge.

“SITREP,” Morgan ordered.

“The Chaodai fleet spotted us about three minutes after we moved out... which is really sloppy, if you ask me,” McKay replied. “They begun vectoring in forces, and we went to top speed. Their nearest forces will arrive at the ridges about nineteen minutes after us.”

Morgan nodded in approval. Four more minutes than what he'd estimated, which surprised him, given the supposedly god-like efficiency for which the Chaodai were known. "Good. Commander? Firing-point procedures on all torpedo batteries. I want them loaded and locked by the time we get to that ridge."

"Sir, they'll be well out of range by that stage."

"I know that, Commander. I want you to take manual control of the torpedoes, and steer them around the ridge, and then kill it. Let them sit there. When the Chaodai come over the ridge, they'll basically walk right in to a minefield. They won't know what hit them."

McKay smiled. The idea was brilliant. "Aye, aye," he said with an approving chuckle. "You'll have to come up for a name for this one," he said.

"If it works, Commander, if it works."

~

"Raptors, stand by to engage more of their fighters," Mackenzie ordered. He grimly looked down at the plot which showed the disposition of both side's fighter forces. The situation was betrayed by the small group of tiny blue deltas below the massive formation of the red counterparts closing with them at high speed. "This is gonna get really ugly... Ed you have *got* to stay on top of them. If they so much as get *one* jump on you..." He didn't have to finish the sentence. He knew that there was a very good chance that not one of his pilots was coming home that day, and he still beat himself over the fact he wasn't there with them.

"Gav, stop telling us things we already know. We'll fly rings around the fuckers," Ed Richards said, trying to encourage his commander. *"Besides, what's the worst that can happen? You simply won't have to put up with me any more."*

Mackenzie wanted to laugh, but he couldn't even manage a smile at the macabre comment. Richards, as if he reading his mind, returned to the job at hand once more, and slightly more serious than usual, which even Mackenzie found odd. *"Another flight incoming, looks like half a dozen fighters. They're nothing more than a recon screen... Jesus... There must be at least eight or nine squadrons there."*

Captain Morgan looked over. "Let them see where we're going."

"Acknowledged. Raptors, hit your throttles. Time to play catch-up. Ticonderoga wants a little foreplay before the lovin'."

Richards smiled inwardly as he heard the exaggerated sigh from Mackenzie on the other end. "Ed, that's enough. Cut the chatter and get to it, ok?"

Richards gritted his teeth as he set several conditions on his sonar's rules of engagement. He programmed it to automatically target any Chaodai fighter that looked like it was straying from its formation; easy kills. *"Don't worry about us, Gavin. Just worry about getting those ships clear... Command will have sent something. We'll just hold them off until they get here."*

"I know, Ed..." managed Mackenzie. He knew that it was a pipedream, but it was all they had left to hang on to. "Good luck... And try not to get yourself killed, okay?"

Ed Richards shrugged. "I just came her to fight and fly... Dying wasn't ever part of my equation."

The Raptors broke formation as they reached the ridges, and started weaving in and around the small spires of rock that ran over the undersea hills. The forward elements of the Chaodai fighter group reached the same area a minute later, and were

wreckage on the sea floor not long after as the Raptors used their superior agility to entrap the Chaodai craft in the outcroppings, doubling back to obliterate them in quick, accurate bursts from their Hades cannons. The Raptors pressed on unhindered... straight towards the waiting Chaodai armada.

Captain Morgan looked around his bridge. "What's the estimated time until the Chaodai reach the ridge?" he asked.

"Another four minutes, sir. They're almost in range of our weapons, now."

"Very well. I want snapshots from batteries one and two at their lead guard... Fly them on a course to the sides of the ridge... give them two clicks separation, then steer them back in around the flanks of the fleet. Hopefully, they won't know where to shoot."

The *Ticonderoga* rumbled as the big torpedoes screamed away from their batteries beneath the keel, and Mackenzie watched in fascination as they curved around the edge of the nearby hills.

"Rangers; follow one of those groups of torpedoes. Head in behind their baffles, and use them to mask an approach on their capital ships. Use your torpedoes and try and get a few hits on your way in, and then get the hell back here."

"*Good call. Rangers; on me,*" Richards said, and Mackenzie's plot showed the subfighters accelerating smoothly and curving around to follow one of the torpedo salvos. They were fortunate that capital ship munitions tended to be a good deal slower than their fighter cousins, otherwise they never would have caught up.

Morgan looked around his bridge again. "That's it..." he said quietly, his face set in stone. "All we can do now is wait."

Mackenzie nodded grimly. The deck was stacked, and all that remained now was to see who had the better hand.

Tense minutes passed as the Chaodai fleet closed with the UEO ships; their back to the wall, with no where to go but further in to Chaodai territory. Beads of sweat had formed on Morgan's brow as he pensively waited for the right moment, and he watched without blinking as the first squadrons of enemy fighters and capital ships cleared the first ridges.

...And all hell broke loose...

"Tighten up the formation, Six," Richards said, and grimaced as Ranger Six's Raptor wobbled. "Six, are you okay?"

The radio was silent, and Richards began to worry. "Six, this is lead: Radio check." There was still no reply, and Richards shook his head as he looked over his shoulder. "Eight, get a visual on Six. What the hell's he doing?"

"Lead, Six is still here... I've got a visual on him now. He just pointed tapped on his helmet. I think his comms are down."

"Fucking great. Just wonderful."

"...ead... do... ou... py? Rep... th... is... hav... ble... comms."

"I have you, Six, but it's all broken up."

"Do you copy now, Lead? I just lost a radio. I think I've sorted it out. I've got a warning light on the starboard engine, although it seems ok... I think I took a hit when we took out those recon units." Timothy Johnson's voice was strained.

"Understood, Six. Break off and head back to the *Ticonderoga*. I'm pulling you off the line."

“No way. I can handle it. I’ve got it locked down, now.”

“Are you sure, Six?” Richards asked, as he turned his Raptor again to follow the torpedoes which were barely a hundred meters in front of him, and gritted his teeth as they suddenly accelerated.

“I’m sure... Wait... Torpedoes have gone active. They’ve acquired,” Johnson said.

“I see it. Maintain formation. Don’t want to get too close to them when they go.”

The Raptors, still travelling at a decent speed of 250 knots, followed the salvo of torpedoes in towards the unsuspecting Chaodai vessels...

The first Chaodai capital vessel over the ridge was presumably a cruiser, and it found itself directly under the nose of the UEO *Courageous*, which opened fired at point blank with a salvo of a dozen torpedoes the moment it appeared. At such a close range, the cruiser didn’t even have time to react as the Mk-91 plasma torpedoes slammed into its hull and detonated. *Courageous*’s lasers screeched as they arced out in bursts of fire that raked up the length of the Chaodai warship, tearing ragged holes in the dorsal plating, and opening vast sections to the sea. The cruiser wrenched and buckled under the weight of the flooding, but was swamped so quickly that it didn’t even have time to implode. Hulled, the remains of the cruiser slowly sank to the sea bed, and churned up a mass of mud and sediment as it hit, sending a dull “whump” through the water for miles.

The fighters which had accompanied the cruiser wheeled away from the devastation like angered birds, and turned en-masse to face the UEO fleet – but they too were beset from two sides with a swarm of anti-fighter torpedoes, launched by Spectres which had been hiding in the small peaks atop the ridge. Half a dozen went down in the first seconds, then another four, and as the Spectres raced out of their protective cover (lined up perfectly on the shocked Chaodai fighters) their pulse lasers made short work of the remnants.

On board the *Ticonderoga*, Gavin Mackenzie nodded grimly. Morgan’s trap had worked perfectly, over a dozen fighters and a cruiser had been taken down without a single loss to the UEO forces – that was the odds they’d have to continue to fight at to win the battle. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t be able to pull that kind of trick again – the Chaodai were better than that, and they wouldn’t make the same mistakes twice. In fact, Mackenzie was surprised that they’d fallen in to the trap at all.

“Order the *Courageous* to fall back a bit from the ridge,” Morgan ordered, eyeing the cruiser suspiciously. “...she’s a little...” He didn’t have time to finish his sentence.

“-Two enemy cruisers and another wing of fighters coming over the ridge, sir! ...I’ve also picked up another SSN right behind them... Sonar’s identified the cruisers as *Myoko* class.”

“Too late,” Morgan said under his breath. “Fire another salvo, order the *Warhawk* and *Morningstar* to take care of that SSN... And concentrate *our* fire upon the two cruisers.”

“Magazines are down to sixty torpedoes,” McKay warned.

“Damn it, they’re going to suck us dry and then finish the *Courageous*.” Morgan muttered.

“*Courageous* is firing again... We’ve got torpedoes in the water, over two dozen; all headed for *Courageous*!”

“Fire all intercepts, all Spectres: engage those torpedoes *and* the fighters!” Morgan looked as if he were about to throw himself over the command deck rail as he yelled his next order. “All pulse cannons – *fire!*”

Streaks of blue fire lanced out from the bow of the *Ticonderoga*; spearing one of the cruisers, and the blue energy dissipated on the hull, doing no apparent damage against the armoured hide. The salvo of torpedoes which followed, however, revealed the chinks which had been created in the armour as they slammed home hard, opening the hull to the sea and allowing subsequent rounds to bury themselves deep within the ship. The pressure hull ruptured, the sounds of groaning metal signalled the submarine’s death as it contorted and buckled under the pressure of the sea around it. In one final, echoing ‘crack’, the hull gave way and the Chaodai warship imploded instantly. Nothing but debris remained.

Unfortunately for the *Courageous*, the intercept torpedoes and countermeasures fired had little effect at such close range. The torpedoes had no time to assert themselves on a line to their targets, and shot straight passed the incoming ordnance. Although the Spectres had managed to destroy several of the rounds while they were still further out, over a dozen still made it through the cruiser’s defences. Already damaged from the previous engagement, the damaged hull of the cruiser’s forward sections collapsed under its own weight, and as Morgan watched, *Courageous* started to rise toward the surface, accelerating quickly as she climbed. Morgan knew that captain had blown his ballast in an attempt to save the ship, and its crew, but in the middle of a battle of such close quarters, the enemy would give no quarter.

The Chaodai were not known for taking prisoners. In their code of honour, there was nothing more shameful than to be taken prisoner or to surrender, and as barbaric as it seemed to Morgan and his command staff, another salvo of torpedoes impacted hard against the cruiser’s belly; a *coup de grâce*. *Courageous* stopped rising; her ballast tanks breached by multiple strikes across the length of her extremities, and slowly sank towards the sea floor.

“Take us up over the ridge,” ordered Morgan harshly. “Get that SSN out of my...” -he broke off as the *Morningstar* and *Warhawk* demolished the SSN between them and launched another half a dozen torpedoes at the cruiser which had destroyed the *Courageous*.

“-Never mind. Take us up and over. Order all subfighters to fall in on our flanks. If these bastards want a fight, then by god I will give them one.”

Captain Morgan’s other plan had worked almost perfectly too. As the Raptors held back, the huge ‘minefield’ of torpedoes that hung lifeless in the water sat rat in the path of the charging Chaodai fleet. By they realised what was happening, several of the largest ships in the formation had been struck from stem to stern and had started to flood. The fleet broke up in confusion, and in the mess, the torpedoes started taking their toll, cratering hulls, buckling plating and opening vessels to the pressure of the water outside.

Into the maelstrom of confusion and explosions, the Raptors of Peacemaker and Ranger squadrons raced, firing off their torpedoes at every target of opportunity that presented itself. Richards watched grimly as two already-crippled SSNs took hits from his squadron. One imploded catastrophically, and the other slowly began sinking to the floor and landed with a resounding thump that again sent up tendrils of murky

sediment that wrapped around the subfighters like long, spindly fingers; masking their retreat. It couldn't have been better timed had Richards planned it that way.

Just as quickly as they'd appeared, the Raptors had started to swoop away. One lucky shot turned the rear end of one fighter in to super-heated shrapnel, and the stricken fighter speared downwards, narrowly missing the slowly sinking hulks of three wrecked cruisers to slam heavily into the mud and sediment on the sea-floor. The rest fighters reached the ridge and the *Ticonderoga* and two Defender-class SSNs rose up before them, firing another large salvo of torpedoes as their fighters came on, dragging a mauled Chaodai fleet in their wake.

Swooping around the sides of the fleet and opening out into a claw formation were the remaining three dozen Spectre fighters of the two UEO carriers, and Richard's squadrons of Raptors swept about and skilfully fit in to the formation. The imposing *Ticonderoga* almost seemed to lower its bow and charge like a raging bull as the SSNs on her flanks spread out to give the powerful battlecruiser room to maneuver. Of the *Courageous*, Commander Richards could see no sign, and he immediately assumed the worst, and buried any thought of the cruiser without a further shred of remorse.

"All right boys and girls, here's the game plan. Fly smart, fly safe. Looks like Morgan wants to shove this down their throats, and right now I can't exactly blame him... Peacemaker: you will handle everything on *Ticonderoga's* right flank. *Ranger*: we'll take left," Richards said firmly. "Am I understood?"

A chorus of enthusiastic responses echoed over the comms, and the subfighters broke and sped in ahead of the larger UEO warships, targeting the unknown ranks of Chaodai fighters surrounding their sleek capital ships.

Richards' HUD locked on to a fighter which had failed to stay close to his leader, and he pulled the trigger smoothly, sending a burst of Hades cannon fire straight through the drives of the craft. It exploded in a nova of bright light. Richards rolled, lined up another, and repeated the performance. All around him, the other Raptors were doing the same and were rapidly limiting the Chaodai fleet's options, but the Spectres were having considerably less luck. Several had gone down already, victims again of the superiority of the Chaodai fighters and their pilots. As he watched, he saw one Spectre break hard to the right, but the enemy fighter pursuing it followed it all the way around.

He triggered his comms. "Siren Nine, he's still on you. Break left on my mark!"

"I just can't deal with him, Ranger Two, I need help!"

"Just do it, Nine! Break now!"

The Spectre feinted a dodge to the right, then rolled up and broke hard to the left, the pilot pulling back on his yolk as hard. Richards watched the pudgy fighter manoeuvre, and saw the agile Chaodai interceptor line up for a deflection shot.

"Oh, no you *don't*," Richards uttered angrily, and flicked his wrist quickly, settling into a perfect line up on the unaware craft. He pulled the trigger again, and the fighter cart-wheeled in to oblivion.

"Thanks for the save, Ranger Tw—" The voice cut off as a burst of light slammed into the Spectre of Siren Nine, which broke up just as violently as the fighter which had been on his tail.

"Fuck!" Richards swore, spinning his fighter to see *another* fighter sliding out from its run. "You cheap, *filthy* mother-fucker!" he swore violently. Richards' blood boiled with rage at the loss, and flicked off the safeties on his torpedoes. A second later, he had a lock. The torpedo raced away and detonated just behind the Chaodai

fighter, sending sub-munitions deep within the drives that then detonated, tearing the turbines to pieces and tossing the fighter aside, out of control. Richards watched it spin slowly, and then grimaced as a Spectre, scars still showing from countless glancing hits and near-misses, swooped in and finished the limping fighter off with a long stream of fire from its pulse lasers.

"That was for my friend, you son-of-a-bitch!" an open comm. crackled. *"Tell your whore of a mother I said hi!"*

"Ranger Lead, watch it, you've got two on your tail," another voice said.

The radio burst in to chaos. Cries of alarm and warning came from everywhere as the battle devolved in to slaughter... It was impossible to tell who held the upper hand.

"They've launched another wing of fighters... where are they coming from?!"

"-can't shake him, he's on me tight."

"Ranger Six, break, break!"

"It's coming unstuck again!" Timothy Johnson shouted. *"This fucking useless..."*

Richards looked over in horror as the Raptor barrelled virtually out of control towards the UEO ships which were still advancing on the Chaodai fleet, firing with their pulse lasers as they moved, unloading the last of their dangerously depleted torpedo magazines. The stricken Ranger pilot shouted, *"Somebody get those bastards off my back!"*

Flying so erratically, its torn up engines spewing slicked-black cavitation trails, the Raptor was an easy target and two Chaodai fighters were lining him up, holding him in an invisible vice as they took their time and lined up the helpless UEO pilot through their sights. That was, unfortunately for them, the last mistake they ever made. A particle beam that erupted from under the bows of the *Ticonderoga* shot through them, and the two fighters were gone.

"Nice shooting, Commander," Captain Morgan observed: having seen the entire, yet brief chase. McKay just nodded and concentrated on the countless targets which were laid out in front of him. *Ticonderoga's* bridge rattled as another Chaodai torpedo slammed in to her hull. Morgan looked around warily at the walls of his command center both in fascination and wonder. He'd been in firefights before, but he could never have imagined a submarine could take as much punishment as this and still fought on. Rapidly, he was beginning to develop a very fond relationship with this most recent command.

"Captain, the Chaodai have launched *another* wing of fighters from their carriers, but they're too far away for us to hit. They might not have been that clever tactically, to charge right over that ridge into what was pretty obviously a trap, but they're still smart enough to be protecting their carriers."

"More torpedoes incoming. Impact in 20 seconds." someone warned.

"Brace for impact," Morgan said tiredly. "If we have any left, fire whatever intercepts we have in the tubes."

The few intercept torpedoes that did remain raced away from the big battlecruiser. Its targeting systems so far damaged, *Ticonderoga* was unable to guide them with any great degree of accuracy, and the intercepts stopped only about half of the weapons short of the ship's defensive line. The remaining torpedoes accelerated for their final charge, and detonated just meters from the hull of the carrier. They were

concussive warheads. Several detonated near the conning tower, and Mackenzie was racked violently in his restraints, despite having braced for the impact.

Shaking his head, he steadied himself, and noticed Captain Mitchell Morgan sprawled across the deck, his head twisted to a horribly unnatural angle. “*Shit*,” he whispered. “Medical team to the bridge immediately!” he said, slapping the emergency intercom.

Unbuckling the four-point restraint, he got up and hobbled over to the Captain, reaching down to place two fingers at his neck. Sighing, he was relieved to find a weak pulse. He was still alive. The medical team arrived in just moments, and they wasted no time in getting Morgan onto a gurney to carry him from the bridge. But before the medics could get far, Morgan raised a weak hand and grabbed Mackenzie’s arm. “Wait...” he rasped.

Mackenzie shot around, looking down at the Captain with a furrowed brow. He said nothing as the Captain struggled to give his final orders and the medics paused in their step, astonished that the man was still conscious. “...Mackenzie... Hol... Hold the line. You... have the bridge...”

Morgan’s arm fell back down, and Mackenzie was left to watch as the medics continued to wheel him from the command deck. He didn’t need to be told twice.

“I have the Conn,” he announced over the confusion of the bridge. “Report!”

McKay nodded at him, recognising his authority, and then read from his monitors. “The Chaodai’s front line is in pieces...” reported the XO. “We dispatched another of their light cruisers with our last salvo, and *Morningstar* managed to take out two of their hunter killers, but not before she was hulled. Captain Harling gave the order to abandon ship, and we’re recovering their crew as we speak. *Warhawk* is still fighting...” McKay’s face turned grim and he shook his head. “...Our Spectres are being cut to shreds, but Peacemaker and Ranger at least are holding their own... *just*... And *another* wing of Chaodai fighters just launched.”

“Our pilots can’t handle this,” decided Mackenzie without a second thought. “Helm, take us around the edge of this basin... Give me everything you’ve got. I want a nice, tight circle. We’ll see if we can get around them.”

“Sir, with all due respect, this is a *Reverence*-class carrier. We can’t turn on a dime, she’s not a subfighter!”

“I know that, Helm, she’ll just be a little fatter, and a little slower.” He smiled almost hopelessly. “She’ll do it.”

“Incoming torpedoes!” McKay warned.

“Left full rudder!” Mackenzie barked. “Whatever countermeasures we have left... launch it... Even if it’s the Captain’s fine China.” Mackenzie scanned the battle plot that was overlaid on the chart table. He punched up a channel to the only person who could do what he needed, and put on the headset...

“Permission to speak frankly sir?” Richards asked.

“*Don’t you know it*,” Mackenzie said, sighing.

“Well sir, if I might just most humbly inquire... which moron decided this was a good idea. I’m outnumbered nearly six to one, and you want me to.... what again?”

“*I would be that moron, Ed. I’m in command up here... unfortunately. Now take out that those fighters and then hit their carriers with everything you’ve got. We need to punch a hole in this line.*”

“That’s the part I’m not so cool with.”

“*Please, Ed?*”

“...Do you want me to the rising sun around my head and scream ‘Banzai’?”

“If it makes you feel better, sure. I’d do it myself... but you know this thing isn’t exactly a Raptor...”

“Arigato, sensei. Hai!” the Texan muttered, turning his fighter around to see a physical wall of Chaodai ahead of him. “Well, fuck me.”

Richards paused as he kicked in his throttles and made sure his wingman still sat on his tail. Of the two, only one remained. “Peacemaker Five; stay with me. The rest of you, try to keep whatever Spectres are left alive.”

“Copy that, Two,” Peacemaker Five acknowledged, remaining tightly on his tail.

“Peacemaker Five, you’re gonna hate me for this...” Richards said, without much elaboration. “Heads up; twelve O’clock. Engage squadron of enemy bandits at your discretion.

“...You’ve got to be kidding,” drawled Peacemaker Five, seeing the wall of enemy subfighters that were bearing down on them.

“Fraid not,” snapped Richards. “Guns, guns, guns. Break and engage!”

The two Raptors broke hard, and in perfect unison as they bore down on the incoming fighters. Richards eyed his target beyond the wall of Marauder fighters and nodded as he switched his radio to an open frequency, unguarded by the UEO’s battle net and free for the entire Chaodai fleet to hear.

“Attention Chaodai Fleet. This is Commander Edward Richards of the One Hundred Eleventh Tactical Fighter squadron.”

Peacemaker Five groaned. “Oh no... What the hell are you doing man? Don’t do this...”

Richards ignored him. “On behalf of the United Earth Oceans Navy, I formally request your immediate and unconditional *surrender*... Failure to comply with this one simple instruction will result in me being unhappy. And you don’t want me to be unhappy, because I swear by God’s great hand that I will blow your ugly-ass Subfighter Carriers right back to the scrap yard from where they came. In two words: *Ban...Zai*.”

Peacemaker Five was still groaning and shaking his head, not being able to believe what he was hearing. “That’s one word, numb nuts...”

Richards smiled as his obscenely insulting message achieved its desired effect. As one, virtually *all* the incoming fighters altered their vector to target him, and more than a few fighters engaged elsewhere tried to bring about to find the impudent UEO pilot only to be mercilessly gunned down by alert Raptor pilots watching for exactly that kind of opening.

He rolled his fighter up on his port wing, and pulled back on the control stick, pulling around neatly in a ninety degree turn, before leveling out and punching his engines to full. He smiled as he watched the Chaodai fighters settle in behind him: *Five* of them.

“Peacemaker Five, break off and head back to the main engagement. I think I got their attention. I can handle this myself.”

“Like hell you can, Ranger Two, I’m not going anywhere...”

Richards looked over his shoulder at the Raptor that was weaving back and forth on his tail, frowning in puzzlement. “Like hell you’re *not*! Bug out, Peacemaker Five!”

The stubborn Raptor refused... and it was too late. The Chaodai torpedo, fired from virtually point-blank range, slammed into his fighter, totally destroying it,

leaving nothing more than a tumbling, burnt out frame which disintegrated as it fell to the seabed.

Richards swore again, and started juking his fighter around as several more torpedoes were launched from the Chaodai fighters on his tail. He juked left, banking steeply around a ridge, and then slowly began a turn which took him back on a course towards the Chaodai carriers. The torpedoes, unable to keep up with the maneuver slammed in to the rock face, and the fighter continued their chase.

His sonar chirped in alarm as *another* set of contacts appeared on his sonar, bearing down on him at extremely high speed... *directly ahead of him*. One contact lingered in the rear, and was so massive that he had to double-check his screens to make sure he'd seen right. Very few submarines had sonar returns that huge, and a puzzled smile of amazement slowly crept on to his face.

The moment's distraction was the one thing he did *not* need, and he fell behind in trying to evade the Chaodai fighters that stuck to his tail. A burst of fire erupted from the lead Chaodai fighter, cutting through his tail and blowing apart two of his fins. The Raptor lurched as alarms told him of the damage, and the cockpit began to rattle slightly as trails of cavitation tore away at the ragged stump of his control planes. Ed Richards could only watch, transfixed, as the UEO *Aquarius* DSV 8200 opened fire with a salvo of what must have been at least a hundred torpedoes. With a considerable mass of the Chaodai fighter fleet in chaos trying to work out what was happening, Richards allowed himself a small smile as his Raptor spiraled deeper and deeper in to the trench below, disappearing in to the abyss...

...The screams and desperate radio cries from the UEO fighter pilots continued for over an hour; the arrival of the *Aquarius* doing little to stop the slaughter. The Chaodai came mercilessly, and without care for their own fates as they continued to chip away at those who remained. But the UEO's fighters wouldn't surrender themselves to this slaughter without a fight, and the Chaodai, too, continued to take losses.

Amidst the chaos, twelve black-hulled Raptors swooped and rolled, gunning down any Chaodai craft that dared to get in their way. They seemed untouchable as they moved, appearing and vanishing at will to ward the Chaodai away; hardly a single fighter could keep up with them, and the few that could were then blown out of the water as one of the Raptors would reappear from no where.

By the time the battle was over... Nothing but a deathly silence filled the deep. Still-drifting hulks would occasionally break this unearthly quiet as something deep inside them strained and groaned under the pressure outside. Hundreds of shattered subfighters littered the sea floor; countless more having disappeared in to the Ryukyu trench never to be seen again.

Sitting amongst this picture of devastation, *Ticonderoga* sat serenely; flanked by the imposing bulk of *Aquarius* and the few survivors of the worst carnage the UEO had ever seen...

~

**Japan Sea.
March 2nd, 2041
Two hours later...**

Gavin Mackenzie surveyed the quiet destruction that littered the hangar decks aboard the *Reverence*-class carrier *Ticonderoga*. Everywhere he looked, there were pilots climbing slowly out of battered fighters, in some case being helped out by medical teams, so exhausted that they could barely walk. Occasional screams of pain and constant whimpers of injured men and women in shock cut the silence. The smell of burnt flesh was rank in the air – pilots were carried on stretchers and gurneys from the flight center, some of them so badly burned that their flight suits had melted in to their skin; now totally unrecognizable.

Over on the third rack, a pilot was being cut out of their cockpit. The Raptor, one of the Peacemakers, had taken a hit to the forward section; the evidence a huge black scar that ran down the nose leaving bubbled, scorched paintwork, and vicious holes throughout its length. The canopy had been twisted and bent completely out of shape; and was lucky to have not totally collapsed, breaching and letting in thousands of pounds of water to crush the pilot. Mackenzie wasn't exactly sure what the transparent canopies were made of... but knew for a fact it wasn't glass. The clang of metal hitting against the deck rang loudly, echoing around the hangar that just two days ago had been full to capacity with the sleek fighters of the Raptor squadron, and their older Spectre cousins. Now, they were lucky if even a quarter of the fighters had come home.

Three whole Spectre squadrons, annihilated, Mackenzie thought. My own squadron, decimated, the Peacemakers decapitated...

The Chaodai had hurt them, badly. In addition to their subfighter losses, the fleet had also lost three of their SSN's, one of their heavy Defiance-class cruisers, and the *Ticonderoga* had been in serious doubt before *Aquarius* had arrived to save the day.

...If it was even worth saving.

Mackenzie's thought for a moment hung on his counterpart in the Chaodai fleet, assuming he was even still alive. The UEO, however horribly they'd suffered, had inflicted untold damage on their enemy. He knew that an entire subfighter wing – over *six squadrons* - had been annihilated in the attempt to sink *Ticonderoga*, and if the rumours about the Chaodai were true, even if their fighter commander had survived... he wouldn't be allowed to live with the shame of this massacre.

Mackenzie, on the other hand, would have to live with the memories of the awful day for the rest of his life.

Walking over to the Raptor being carefully cut open to recover its pilot, Mackenzie recognized the feathered helm that had been carefully painted across the nose, and the number "2" beside it. The Raptor belonged to Kate Stephenson, the XO of the Peacemakers. As the final cut was made, the large chunk of fuselage came away, its fall barely controlled by the ground crew who supported it from below. The medical team that had been waiting, preparing for their moment didn't even give the techs a chance to get clear as they pushed their way through to get to the pilot. Mackenzie watched in silence as they carefully extracted the injured pilot from her seat, her arms hanging limply as they lifted her out of the cockpit and lowered her to

the deck. Mackenzie felt a lump in his throat as he noticed Stephenson's leg; the fabric of the flight suit burned away, and her leg covered in dark, sticky blood. She could barely look at Mackenzie when she noticed him, and was breathing heavily, trying hard to fight the excruciating pain.

"Hey, Gav," she managed weakly. "I guess... I won't be flying again any time soon..."

Mackenzie nodded. "It's good to have you back, Kate..." he whispered.

Stephenson grimaced again as the medical team raised her stretcher.

"Commander... have you seen Ed? His fighter got hit... I don't know what happened to him..."

"We saw him go down. We've had HR probes and WSKRS from both the *Ticonderoga* and *Aquarius* searching the area... but we haven't seen any sign of him."

Stephenson's eyes seemed to glaze over. "...That son of a bitch had better come good on his promise."

Mackenzie shook his head, smiling only weakly. He'd heard the exchange between them earlier, but somehow, he knew things would be ok. "Take it easy, tiger. They're still looking."

Stephenson opened her mouth to say something, but nothing could dull the pain she felt – and it wasn't from her leg. She wanted to be sick as she considered how many hadn't come home. Stephenson could say nothing, and she closed her eyes as the medics continued to carry her away.

Leaving her in the hands of the medical team, Mackenzie looked around the flight decks again, searching for familiar faces. His eyes met the gaze of Lieutenant Timothy Johnson, one of his Rangers, walking slowly across the flight deck. A part of Mackenzie had not expected to see Johnson again. After everything the man had been through, he was angry with himself for being surprised that he was still there.

Johnson saw his CO approaching, and saluted. Mackenzie simply nodded in recognition as he leaned against a Raptor behind him. The craft was ruined; its engines nothing more than an unrecognizable mass of twisted fan blades and blown-out turbine. The entire length of the once-sleek frame was pock-marked and scared with laser blasts... ending squarely in the middle of the cockpit, which was now just a blackened. The Raptor had been so badly damaged that Mackenzie couldn't even tell which squadron it had belonged to. He shook his head and looked at the destruction surrounding them.

"How many left?" he asked simply.

"Three or four, I think," Johnson replied, talking about the Raptors.

"Ed?" Mackenzie asked.

"Don't know, sir. We all saw him take potshots at those fighters, and we all heard his outburst before he went down... fucking idiot."

Mackenzie stiffened, but Johnson was too tired to regret his words.

"...Richards drew away most of the Chaodai from what was left of Siren... But no one knows what happened after that. Peacemaker Five saw it all, but..."

The Commander bowed his head, nodding in confirmation. "I know. Richards was hit, too and went down somewhere in the trench," Mackenzie explained. "We lost contact with him shortly after *Aquarius* rocked up with the Dark Angels."

Johnson smiled weakly at that thought. It had been something unreal for every pilot to see the arrival of the DSV with an entire wing of Raptors in its wake, and just as quickly, the tides had turned. "What about the rest of the squadrons?" Johnson asked.

“The Striders were wiped out,” explained the Commander simply, with not even an edge of remorse. The battle had jaded him so much that he didn’t even care. “They lost everyone. Omicron has two survivors, one of whom probably won’t see it through the night, and Siren’s got only two or three; two of whom are critical in the infirmary.”

Johnson was impassive as the Commander continued to tell the Butcher’s Bill. “I’m going to have to write both squadrons off the roster... We can’t possibly salvage them with that many losses. I just hope command gives the survivors something better than bloody Spectres next time. It wouldn’t be fair... not after this.”

Johnson nodded. “Don’t beat yourself up, sir. I didn’t think they stood a chance either... but they proved me wrong... *twice*.”

Mackenzie heard the 1MC sound over the ship, and before it had even said anything, he knew it would be for him.

“-Commander Mackenzie, please report to the bridge.”

Mackenzie recognised Commander McKay’s voice and shook his head. He looked at Johnson again. “Find anyone from *Trident* who’s left, get them to medical if they need it, or else find them quarters... It shouldn’t be god damned hard considering how many we lost today.”

Johnson nodded, and just stared at the Commander for long moments. He nodded, and then shrugged as he held out his hand. “I know this is odd, sir... but... Thanks... Thanks for not leaving us alone out there.”

Mackenzie looked him in the eye for a moment, and looked at the offered hand. He closed his eyes, and shook his head. He didn’t deserve thanks; not after how many of his own didn’t come back. “...No...” he said. “...I *did*.”

The bridge was a quiet bustle of activity as he reached it. Noting the comforting size of *Aquarius* station keeping a few hundred meters off their port bow, Mackenzie stepped up to Commander McKay.

“What can I do for you, Commander?” he asked.

“Firstly, we’ve got word from medical. Captain Morgan’s gonna be fine. Fairly decent concussion, but he’ll be on his feet again in a few days... provided the Doc clears it.”

Mackenzie merely nodded. Mitchell Morgan was a good man, and the fleet certainly didn’t need such a loss now.

“Secondly,” continued McKay, a little more upbeat. “We’ve found something that might interest you.” He gestured over towards the Hyper-Reality probe console, and smiled as Gavin recognized what was onscreen. “That’s a *Raptor!*” he said excitedly. “Where is this coming from?”

“Well, she’s perched exactly one thousand and thirty feet below the threshold of the trench, right about... here.” McKay pointed to a map. “We think it’s Richards, because it’s not far from where he dragged those Chaodai in to a goose chase, and unless you know better, I didn’t think anyone else went out that far.”

“No, he was the only one...” confirmed Mackenzie. “Who’s available to salvage it?”

McKay just smiled again. He walked over and sat gingerly in the command chair, and very deliberately pushed a button with his index finger, as if it were the best thing he’d done all day.

“Wing Commander. This is *Ticonderoga*. Commander Mackenzie is with me now. What’s your location?”

“Ah, Commander Mackenzie. I can honestly say under the circumstances, it’s good to hear from yeh’. You have my sympathies.”

Mackenzie smiled. The Irish voice and McKay’s use of the title of a Wing Commander eliminated any doubt in his mind, and he bowed his head and smiled. It was Corinn Roderick; CO of the VF-115 Dark Angels. “Good to hear your voice, Commander Roderick. I suppose you feel I will be buying a few drinks tonight.”

“Only for the dead, Gavin... Hold on, I’ve got something on sonar...”

“You’ve got Richards’ beacon?” Mackenzie asked.

“Negative, it’s radio. Switching to channel...”

“—Where the fuck have you been?! Do you have any idea how long I’ve been sitting down this god-forsaken hole? I swear, if I get my hands on the... uh...”

Richards’ voice trailed off as he noticed the Raptor that was approaching on his sonar screens, and instantly recognized the transponder code; 115-1 “Oh. Hello, Wing Commander,” he meekly added. “Good to see you.”

Roderick muted her microphone as she stifled her laughter, and cleared her throat before opening the channel again. She locked on to the stricken Raptor with the lone grapnel torpedo that sat within her weapons bay, and for a moment, a particularly evil thought crossed her mind as she eyed the one remaining live torpedo on the weapons display. She smiled lopsidedly at the thought as she fired the grapnel, which latched securely onto the main body of Richards fallen fighter. Roderick slowly turned her craft around and increased power, lifting the precariously-positioned Raptor off the ledge. “Save it, Richards. Hold tight... we’ll have you dry in a few minutes.”

“Ed, how are you doing down there?” a concerned voice of Gavin Mackenzie asked.

“Peachy,” he snapped.

Mackenzie gritted his teeth. “I get the picture, Ed. I hope your ego took a few more hits than your fighter this time.”

Momentarily lost for words, Richards spluttered, and then gave up. “Yeah. Right. See you at the barn.”

“Good to have you back, my friend. There’s a certain lady in medical who’ll be kinda happy to see you back, I imagine.”

“Kate? How is she? Is she okay?”

Mackenzie hesitated. “She’s... seen better days, but she’ll be fine. I... wish I could say the same for the rest of us.”

Mackenzie could almost hear Richards swallow in dread. He decided quickly that the bitter point of discussion could wait. “Yes sir... I’m sorry.” Richards said grimly.

“Don’t apologise, Ed. I think there’s a few Spectre pilots up here who you their thanks. I take it you saw the *Aquarius* arrive?”

“Yeah, just caught her before I got jumped...”

“—Are we done?” snapped Roderick impatiently.”

Mackenzie grimaced. He’d forgotten how snappy the Wing Commander could be. “Sorry, Commander. You’re clear on port bay six... Bring him in.”

“Copy. I have the beam. See you in five.”

...Roderick tucked her gloves into her helmet, and finishing powering down the Raptor. She slid down the ladder which the ground crew had put up and landed on the deck of the *Ticonderoga*. Across the hangar, she caught sight of Gavin Mackenzie

waiting patiently next to the landing signals officers. He was in a wheel chair, she noticed, and remembered the incident in the fleet report two weeks previously. Walking over to meet him, he struggled to get up out of the chair and saluted uneasily. Roderick smiled weakly as she waved a casual return dismissively. At any other time or place, Mackenzie might have hugged her, but instead he offered a hand. She took it firmly. "Gaving... I'm so sorry," she said, seeing the anguish in the man's eyes. He'd lost virtually his entire squadron, or so she'd heard... and his gaunt features which made him appear at least ten years older seemed to confirm it.

Mackenzie nodded once in grave recognition of it. "I... keep telling myself there was something I might have been able to do, but... somehow I just think it would have been one more letter that someone would have had to write."

Mackenzie shook his head and gulped. "It was... *pointless*. I've never seen a more *pointless and stupid* loss of life in my entire career."

Roderick smiled sympathetically. It was a comforting smile; one she seldom showed, and it brought warmth to Mackenzie's troubled thoughts. "I know nothing I say is going to help, Gavin... So I'll save the speeches, but if you want to talk about it, you know where to find me. If necessary I'll personally have a shuttle sent to bring you to *Aquarius*."

Mackenzie nodded gratefully again. He knew he wouldn't sleep well; not with the pile of letters to next-of-kin burning holes in his desk drawers. It was any commanding officer's worst duty, and no one envied it. The tension in the air was cut to ribbons by the arrival of Ed Richards, who threw his arms around his Commander and slapped him on the back for good measure. "You look like hell," Richards said shortly, before turning and sharply saluting Roderick. "Wing Commander..."

Roderick smiled wryly, and returned the salute. She was one step ahead of Richards as the other pilot attempted moved in to try and kiss her on the cheek, and she stepped backward with extraordinary measure and timing, simultaneously bringing her helmet up hard into Richards' ribcage. She smiled mischievously at the rush of air that was expelled from his lungs, and leaned in close. "Careful, Commander... Next time I might aim lower. And I do *not* miss..."

Gracefully, Roderick leaned back up again – still smiling - and caught Mackenzie's lopsided grin.

"You'll have more luck with the nurses, Ed. Don't take it *too* personally."

"No sir, of course not..." He cleared his throat. "I... ah... think I'm going to go to the infirmary," he added, casting a weary gaze at the Wing Commander. "Permission to leave the flight deck, ma'am?"

"Granted. You're dismissed, Commander Richards."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Richards spun on a heel and marched out of the flight deck, head held high as he disappeared around the corner, leaving Roderick and Mackenzie to stare at a flight deck that was still recovering from the chaos. "He still hasn't changed, then..." observed the Wing Commander, nodding slowly.

"Hell no," muttered Mackenzie. "You know this was his last tour..." he added quietly.

Roderick frowned, and looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Mackenzie smiled. "Richards... He's had enough. He wouldn't talk about it with anyone else because he's just too damned proud, but... after today, I honestly don't think I can refuse him. I mean, yes, we're at war, and no, you can't just 'quit', but this man put up with ten years of bullshit from this organization without ever *technically* being allowed to fire a shot."

“Command is going to hit the roof if you do this...” said Roderick pointedly, but seeing no reason to argue.

“Maybe. But what’s the worst they can do? Discharge me from the navy? I wouldn’t mind the fucking break. – ‘Scuse the language.”

Roderick smiled again, and turned to face him quizzically. “So what are *you* going to do?” she asked.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, looking at the few fighters that remained of the Rangers and Peacemakers across the hangar. “As long as they’re here... I owe it to them to look after them. Especially after today.”

Roderick looked pained. “Gav... You’ve hardly got a squadron *left*. Responsibility stops somewhere, and commands come and go... You’re not bearing yourself up over this, are you?”

“You know I am,” he smiled. “I’m going to talk to Command. The 111th and 116 were close... If I can have the two units reorganized, I might have enough pilots to make a case for a new squadron.”

Roderick nodded. In his position, she had to admit that she would have done precisely the same, or at least done everything in her power to see that it happened. “What about the other squadrons?”

“Quinn... If there are even *twelve* pilots left on this ship from *all* the squadrons combined, I will be amazed. I’ll make them the same offer... but if they want to quit, then I don’t think Command would say no. The CMO could *easily* make a case for psychological discharge if necessary, and I certainly could *not* blame them.”

Roderick nodded again. “...You know they’re coming,” she said bluntly. “It might not have been today... and it may not be tomorrow. But sooner or later, Bourne is going to come over that border with everything he’s got.”

Mackenzie looked at her grimly, and then at the devastation of the hangar. “We’re not ready for it,” he said bluntly.

“Speak for yourself,” Roderick grimaced angrily, looking at the carnage. “I might not see the end of this damned war, but when they do come... I’m going to be waiting for them, and I am not going to stop until every single last one of them regrets the day they ever crossed that line.”

~

UEO *Ticonderoga* CVBN-107, The Japan Sea. March 4th, 2041

“*Company... Ten-hut!*”

No less than a hundred boots slammed down on the deck grates of *Ticonderoga*’s hangar deck as the quartermaster gave the order. The assembly of dress uniforms before Captain Mitchell Morgan included marines, fleet officers, enlisted men – and to the last man – the few surviving pilots of the ship’s once-proud sea wing. Standing in the front row, the surviving members of the 111th and 116th squadrons – the Rangers and Peacemakers – flanked a lone Commander Gavin Mackenzie; his brother in law one of the many to be committed to memory that day.

Morgan took a step forward and swallowed a difficult lump that had refused to remove itself from his throat. He too was attired in his dress uniform which bore a

considerable number of service ribbons and medals. The dais which had been set up on the deck was flanked by the flags of *Ticonderoga's* combat squadrons; the squadrons of the 7th Carrier Sea Wing. A line of marines stood to one side at attention, their old rifles raised against their shoulders, unmoving.

"At ease," he said firmly, his gravelly voice projecting itself far in to the cavernous hangar. The ship's company did so, dropping their rigid postures slightly and clasping their hands behind their backs. "There are few words which can dull the pain we all feel today. We stand here gathered – united in a common defeat – to commemorate that which every soldier may one day face. They were not the first... They will not be the last... and the will not be forgotten..."

Morgan straightened slightly, and the chaplain beside him began reading his prayers. For several minutes, the gathered company listened, heads bowed and Mackenzie could not help but utter a silent prayer of his own in the back of his mind. At the conclusion of the prayers, Captain Morgan raised his head, and looked at Gavin. "Commander Gavin Mackenzie will now say a few words," he said flatly, stepping aside from the dais.

The pilot limped forward from the line, and gingerly approached the lectern. Turning around, he stared at the gathered crew for long seconds and then cleared his throat. "...Today we bid farewell to our family; those who laid down their lives in a service of something greater than themselves; greater than us..." Mackenzie choked, but couldn't allow himself the luxury of tears. "For ten years, we fought a war without purpose; with no chance of victory, no chance of justice, and no recognition of the sacrifices which hundreds were forced to make. It was the kind of war that mankind has seen twice in its history, as superpowers stared across their borders in fear of annihilation, unwilling to commit to the unthinkable. Just a few short months ago, when we were told that things were now different, and with a decade of bitterness still fresh in our minds; we asked *how?*"

Mackenzie bowed his head. "Here and now, we can make no mistake... this has undisputedly changed. Today we cast back to the sea one hundred and fifty seven members of our family; none having departed in dishonour or shame. We owe them our lives, and perhaps the single greatest tragedy is that it is a debt we can never repay. This war will continue... and all we can vow is that what burdens they laid down will not be in vain."

Mackenzie eyed the quartermaster through glazed, troubled eyes, and the imposing master-at-arms straightened to his full height. "Honor guard; order *arms!* Parade rest," he snapped. Again the ship's company bowed their heads, and Mackenzie began the long task of reading out the list of names before him; each one harder than the previous. For nearly ten minutes, he recited every name, rank and unit before the attentive ship's company. The list was in order of rank, and ended with Steven Sean Patrick, Commander; 116th Fighter Squadron. Mackenzie choked as he said the name, and after a moment of silence, the ship's chaplain bowed his head. "From the sea we came, and to the sea we shall one day return... For the faithful of an Almighty God, we commend the souls of our departed shipmates to your eternal grace, and commit their bodies to the deep."

The silence was shattering, and the quartermaster barked again. "*Honour guard! Attention...! Fire three volleys!*"

The clacking of rifles being brought to bear was met with the ship's company saluting sharply as the Marine bugler began to play *Taps*. The master-at-arms snapped again. "Honor guard; ready; aim... *fire!*"

The first volley of blanks shattered the stillness of the hangar...

“...Aim...Fire!”

The second shot made Mackenzie jump, and the tears he had been hiding could be contained no longer...

“...Aim...Fire!”

The shots continued to echo throughout the hangar as the bugler continued to play taps, finishing, and then bringing his instrument down to his side. The parade remained at attention as the honour guard folded a UEO flag, and a Sergeant marched it to Captain Morgan, saluting sharply. The Captain returned the salute, accepting the flag, and the marine returned to his post. Morgan about-faced, and marched out of the hangar; his command staff close in tow, and once they had left the deck, the master-at-arms barked once more. “Ceremonial! At *ease!*”

The ship’s company once again came to ease, and the burly marine sergeant snapped around and faced the marines. “Honour guard: atteeehn-*shun!*! Right face!”

The marines snapped their heels around, and the Sergeant rendered a salute to the master-at-arms. He returned it, and then firmly ordered, “By the center! Slow *march!*!”

Mackenzie still stood motionless before the ship’s company, and the master-at-arms seemed to take an eternity to give his final orders. “Company! Atteeehn-*shun!*”

Mackenzie snapped his heel down hard as he complied with the order, and being the ranking officer on the field, turned to face the master-at-arms beside him. He was a master sergeant from *Ticonderoga’s* marine contingent, and they’d crossed paths only very occasionally... Sadly, there was the same glimmer of recognition in the Sergeant’s eye; the only times they had *ever* met... was at funerals such as these. “Sir, I relieve you,” said Mackenzie, rendering a salute. The Sergeant nodded, saluting sharply. “I stand relieved.”

Mackenzie turned to face the ship’s company for the last time, his eyes coming to rest on the dozen-odd pilots that remained of what was once one of the best fighter commands in the fleet. They stood alone now; Ghosts of squadrons that no longer existed – homeless, and outcast from . There was not a dry eye among them, and Mackenzie’s lip trembled. “...Company... *Dismissed.*”

To be continued...
