

Episode One:

Disaster

“We solemnly swear to uphold the principles of freedom and liberty and to protect with our lives the Earth and its people, and all mankind, from all aggression and oppression, from within and without.”

-Robotech Expeditionary Force Oath.

*No, not all these, thrice gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestic,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with body filled and vacant mind
Gets him to rest. . .*

-Henry V, IV, i.

12 September 2042

“Commander Austin,” cried the alternate defense controller of the battlecruiser *Valiant* with all the dulcet tonality of a red-alert siren. “Am I blind, or does the flight plan you filed really say that Lieutenant Ducasse is piloting your ship?”

Michael awoke from his nap. Casually, his eyes wandered over the vidcom screen to the plane’s pilot, who was handling herself admirably, considering her relative inexperience.

“You’re not blind. She’s certified with a Class A trainee’s rating, which authorizes her to fly an Alpha in all non-combat situations. I certified her myself; it’s all on record. And she’s also off-duty for the next 15 hours, and her departure has been cleared with Command Duty Officer Luo,” Michael replied, somewhat annoyed at the sudden intrusion. The dream he’d been enjoying was just getting good.

“Then may I ask why you’re flying a trainer? If you really just require transit to the *De Ruyter*, then why not take a shuttlecraft?” she demanded, even more impatient than usual. “This is rather unorthodox! I’m not really sure it’s permissible under flight regulations.”

“Yeah, and I’m not really the ship’s CAG officer; I’m really Tarzan, lord of the jungle,” he intoned sarcastically. “I decide what is and is not against regulations when it

comes to the combat aircraft stationed aboard this vessel, and until someone else occupies my post, I'll thank you to remember that, Lieutenant. Austin out!"

Michael slouched back and reflected for a moment. At twenty-seven he'd already reached the rank of full Commander in the REF Navy, an achievement almost unparalleled amongst his colleagues. With the promotion that had given him that rank eighteen months ago had also come his current billeting. Michael was the Commander Air Group of the two-hundred and sixteen Navy fighters assigned to *Valiant*, as well as commanding a number of recon vessels and Horizont troop drop-shuttles, effectively putting him on equal footing with the ship's captain, Commodore Alan Buxley. When he was being considered for this job, it didn't hurt that he'd almost single-handedly carried the day during the Battle of Pontis 4 and saved the badly-damaged cruiser from the Invid attack force that had caught *Valiant* unawares; for that action he'd received the Titanium Medal of Valor, the highest award given by the Robotech Expeditionary Force to its soldiers. He was rightfully proud of that accomplishment, especially under the personal circumstances under which it was achieved.

Of course, though his position came with a fair amount of power and prestige, it was not without its price. Firstly, he found himself in ever more frequent conflict with the Air Force fighter pilots and the Army Destroid drivers and their superiors over everything from hangar space to who did and did not go on Combat Air Patrols. He'd nurtured good relations with the Planetary Forces in the past, but things were getting strained, especially with the mission ahead. Everyone wanted to be the first to see some action on the upcoming mission, and it was Michael's job to see that their enthusiasm didn't reduce their effectiveness in battle.

Secondly, being the Commander Air Group pretty much ended his career as a fighter pilot, which was his only true joy in life. He was just too important to join the other pilots in combat.

Commander Austin was tall, just a shade over six feet, a trait he'd inherited from his father. In keeping with the fashion of fighter jocks dating more than a decade before, he wore his hair long in back, with long bangs over his ears, and the whole mop was dyed a dark blue. The effect was to make him appear taller at first glance, and the choice of colored dye alluded to that used by the ace pilot of the previous generation, Michael's godfather of sorts, Maximillian Sterling.

"How am I doing, Michael?" asked the flame-red haired girl in the student seat.

"Any worse, and the Invid will promote you," Michael replied teasingly. In reality, she was almost as good as he had been with the same number of logged flight hours.

Jeanne laughed at the taunt, craned her head around, stuck out her tongue, and bestowed upon her superior officer a loud, decidedly un-feminine, and definitely un-military raspberry.

Michael chuckled and shook his head. “We’re out of *Valiant’s* sensor range, and we’re an hour’s flight until we get into the range of *De Ruyter’s* sensors. Convert to Battloid while I punch up the simulation on the plane’s computer,” Austin said cheerfully. *And good luck, Jeanne.*

The fighter plane stirred and, like some dormant creature prodded into action, creaked with annoyance at the strain. Then came into play the hybrid genius of human know-how and the assimilated Tirolian technology called *zorrev’dri*, known to humankind by the somewhat misleading name ‘Robotech’. Without further delay, a multitude of servos and motors neatly reconfigured the VAF-6T Alpha Trainer into a nine-meter tall battlesuit. It bristled with sixty Hammerhead short range missiles and carried an 80mm EP-13 tri-barreled beam-gun pod in its monstrous metal-ceramic alloyed hand.

Jeanne guided the Battloid to a landing on a small moon of the near-by gas giant while the simulation came on line. Michael programmed a small garrison of Invid troopers in the scenario, and unleashed the images onto Jeanne’s cockpit scanners and visual screens. The Enhanced Video Emulator computer system installed in this trainer was perhaps as good as the simulators on the mainframe hook-ups on the large ships with regard to the sheer accuracy of the simulated combat environment. But this one was superior in that the pilot actually got the feel of the Battloid’s response time to its pilot’s commands.

“Here goes,” she cried as she proceeded to beat everything the simulator pitted against her. The performance was exceptional; Michael had barely done better **his** third time in the actual plane.

There’s hope for her yet! Michael conceded to himself. “Better, Jeanne, but you’re still reacting slowly to multiple threats, and that’ll get you killed in real combat. You’ve got to learn to take care of one, and then move on to the next without hesitation. But other than that, you did great. I look forward to our next session. Take her in, Lieutenant.”

Jeanne glowed noticeably as she eased the plane away from the moon’s surface. Converting back to fighter mode, she veered toward the *De Ruyter* and her escorts.

Lieutenant Jeanette Ducasse was the Chief Defense Controller on the *Valiant* and third in command of the Situation Room, answering only to the Commander of Military Operations, General Anthony Richardson, and the ship’s Commander Air Group, namely

Michael. The *Xerxes*-class cruisers, of which *Valiant* was the third to be commissioned, not only served as a heavily-armed ship-of-the-line and as a command carrier for three Naval Air wings, but also as a transport vessel for six Air Force groups and an Army division. Jeanne's responsibility was to direct the planes in defending *Valiant*, while coordinating the *Valiant's* Naval fighter planes with the vast complement of Richardson's Planetary Forces stationed onboard the ship and those dozens more assigned to the other ships in *Valiant's* battle-group. It also fell to her to assist in any number of the details of battle, from directing intelligence fly-bys to assigning close air support for ground units to advising *Valiant's* and her escorts' gunners how best to suppress enemy craft and installations. All of these were jobs for which her innate tactical genius was perfectly suited. She was so talented in her performance thus far that on her twentieth birthday there was already talk of soon promoting her to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and sending her to Ship's Operations School.

But this was not the life she wanted. Her dream was to live like those whose lives were lost or saved on her every decision. The responsibility of those men and women's lives was too much for her to handle; she longed to fight in their battles with them, to live and die with these people she had come to respect and revere.

The difficult part of this was the fact that her father was the Commandant of the REF Military Academy, and the last thing he wanted to see was his only child in the thick of battle. So he had denied her application to pilot's school, and she didn't dare go over his head by formally accusing him of a conflict of interest; he was still her father. Since she got her commission, her requests for a transfer were always rejected; she was just too valuable where she was. That's where Michael came in. As the ship's Commander Air Group, he could train and certify new pilots at his discretion, and could pull a lot of strings with command to get her the transfer, if that's what she decided she still wanted. As for Michael, it was a chance to get back some of what he'd lost since he stopped flying combat missions and started piloting a desk. And it was a chance to smooth things out between himself and Jeanne. He had cut her off two years ago, and had only renewed contact well after Jeanne was transferred back from the destroyer *Glaive-guisarme* to assume her post here just over six months ago. It would have been just too difficult to continue dealing with her only on a professional basis, especially with all the past they had between them. Besides, the way things had been going, Michael needed someone to talk to, and Jeanne had at least sensed that much.

The Alpha came on approach to the second of Mars Fleet's three battle-groups, and Michael took the opportunity to marvel at this impressive arsenal. Leading the forces was the *Xerxes*-class heavy cruiser *De Ruyter*, constructed in the Yirrbist system at the

Karbarran Shipyards. The massive rectangular-shaped ship was seven hundred meters long, and her flanks boasted six quick-launch bays. Each bay was capable of launching around twenty-five Battloid Alphas in mere seconds, in addition to the main bay that was hidden by an armored door. In front of these raised launchers were four torpedo tubes for use against other capital ships. The dorsal and ventral surfaces were adorned with a total of fourteen mammoth ship-to-ship guns, each capable of inflicting tremendous damage on any target in its beam's path. A large command citadel was placed off-center on the topside, the bridge and command decks sitting atop the summit of this structure.

Alongside *De Ruyter* gracefully cruised several *Katana*-class destroyers. The vessel was shaped not unlike a hundred and eighty meter-long anaconda, its belly distended by some gargantuan meal, on whose underside was attached a three-barreled heavy cannon in front of a large hangar bay. The score of remaining craft were the Horizont dropships, essentially huge transatmospheric airplanes with a wingspan of some seventy meters, carrying two troop bunkers, each capable of carrying an infantry company or a two armor platoons, like giant ordinance pods, in addition to a squad of Marines in the aircraft's neck. *Valiant*, and the third ship in the group, *Grant*, both boasted a similar escort, and though the three battle-groups together made the smallest independent fleet in the REF, they were more than capable of handling themselves in nearly any situation.

The trainer assumed the half-robot, half-fighter plane Guardian mode and landed in the cruiser's lower bay on a VTOL pad. The canopy opened, and Michael escorted his *protégé* from the plane to the Supply Officer's desk, where Chief Petty Officer Flannagan had already begun to prepare the requisition papers needed to fill the reaction-mass tanks on Jeanne's plane for the trip home.

"You're doing much better. I'll prepare the usual report for you to read by, say, 1200 hours tomorrow. Hey, here's a thought! Since we'll both still be off-duty when I get done here, let's go do something. Dinner at 'Windows' around 2100 or so for that birthday dinner I promised you?"

"Sounds good. I'll meet you back at *Valiant*?"

"I'll pick you up at your quarters. See you then."

* * *

"Commander Michael Austin, reporting as ordered, sir!" Michael said with a smile as he marched into the General's office. His eyes met upon a female figure in the uniform of a REF Air Force Lieutenant General, seated behind a desk with her back to

him. Michael had caught her gazing out a porthole on the far wall.

“And late, as usual. Playing flight instructor with Ducasse’s daughter again, I assume.”

Michael approached her desk, and replied, “Better late than never, sir. And as always, you assume correctly.”

Mary turned to face him and laughed. General Vandenberg was an attractive, slim woman in her late forties, with flowing blonde hair and deep brown eyes. “Come here, you insubordinate bastard,” she said warmly, catching Michael in a strong embrace. He kissed her on the cheek, and she released him from the hug, indicating for him to sit with her on a couch in the corner of the office.

“Jesus, Michael, every time I see you, you look more and more like your father. If you’d just lose the hair, you’d be the spitting image.”

“And you’re looking as fantastic as ever, Mary. So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“What, no small talk? Michael, we haven’t seen much of each other since Chrysid-2, and that’s not from my want of trying. I want to know how you’ve been, what you’ve been up to. For starters, how are things with Vikki? Are you still engaged?”

“No, *mother*,” Michael groaned sarcastically. “Not anymore.”

“What happened? You two looked so committed.”

“It’s, um. . .” Michael hesitated, and cast his eyes to the porthole into the emptiness of interplanetary space. “. . . a long story. I’ll explain what happened as soon as I figure it out for myself. Suffice it to say she walked out on me. What about you?”

“Same as ever. It’s hard to pick up guys at the usual hang-outs when you’re a three-star General. Not that anyone’s managed to capture my interest anyway,” Mary replied, a smirk across her lips. “So, how are you enjoying your new job?”

“It’s an important responsibility,” Michael responded emotionlessly. “I’m honored to have been picked for the position, and I hope to discharge my duties to the extent of my ability.”

“You hate it,” Mary asserted.

“With a passion,” Michael groaned. “I haven’t flown my own ship in combat once since I got promoted. What I wouldn’t give for the days of the SDF-1 or the old wet Navy. . .”

“Funny, but I thought you’d feel like that. What would you say if I told you that you could get to fly your own ship again? Only this one would have a crew of more than just one. . .”

“Go on.”

“Commodore Hasan is due for a promotion in eighteen months, and he plans to retire on his Admiral’s pension to his wife’s estate on Tirol. His XO, Commander Dylan, has already been promised the *Yamato*, as soon as she’s made space-worthy and commissioned, so you’re next for the job. I can see to it that *De Ruyter* is your ship.”

“Come on! There’s got to be twenty destroyer captains bucking for the job!”

“You’d be surprised. Over half of those to whom we’ve offered the command of a cruiser have refused because they were too attached to their destroyers and their crews; and frankly, having served on the *Claymore* and having seen the kind of close-knit team one gets on a destroyer, I can understand why. Besides, you have friends upstairs. And I’m one of them. The Commander Planetary Detachment gets a lot of say as to who gets picked when his or her ship gets a new captain; the fact that the I’m Air Force and the captain Navy isn’t particularly important. Both Sterlings have recommended you, and even Fleet Admiral Hayes-Hunter is pulling for you.”

“I don’t want the job if the reason I’ve been offered it is because you people have played favorites and politics.”

“You know that’s not it. You’re being considered because you lead people well and command their loyalty and respect. You have a quick mind, and never underestimate the enemy. You’re being chosen for your ability - politics and favorites just got your foot in the door. Mind you, you’re still very young, so don’t expect to go around leading fleets or anything. But if you want it, the command will be yours.”

“My own command,” Michael mused. “I admit, it’s attractive. It’s not quite like being a fighter pilot-”

“Face it, Michael,” Mary admonished. “You’ll never do that again, not like before. Hell, I’m surprised Richardson is letting you lead the recon mission and the preliminary assault on Earth. What did you do to get that? Threaten to resign?”

“That, and take half the Mars Fleet’s squadron leaders with me. But you’re right about my flying. After this mission, I might as well forget it.” Michael stroked his chin, and turned to thought for a few moments. “I get to pick my own first officer?”

“Yes. And after her promotion comes through in a few weeks, Jeanne can then spend eighteen months as a Lieutenant Commander on *Valiant*, and then you can get her promoted again, if she’s who you’re thinking of.”

Michael nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

Mary took Michael’s hands in hers and squeezed gently. “It’ll also be good to work with you again. I’ve really missed having you around as much as when you were in Phoenix squadron on the *Claymore*.”

“Mary, you know I. . .” Michael began.

“For once in your life, Michael, keep quiet. I’ve worried about you. Ever since Dahlori-4, you haven’t quite been the same.”

“I really had to grow up after that.”

“I know. I was fifteen years old when the Zentraedi bombarded Earth, and I still have nightmares about it. If it weren’t for your father, God bless his soul, I wouldn’t have made it. And you haven’t had that kind of support around here, except for Vikki.”

“I get by. Though it’s not easy, sometimes.”

“I know, Michael. And I’ve felt guilty for not having been able to be around more than I was. I mean, I owe you that much - I owe your father that much. And a lot of the time I end up wishing things had ended up differently between myself and Thomas, because I would have been proud of a son like you. I know he would have been.”

* * *

Michael sauntered up to the gray plastisteel sliding door to Jeanne’s quarters, wearing some of his most comfortable jeans and a short-sleeved pullover, his hair wet from the shower he’d taken only a few minutes before. He’d stayed on *De Ruyter* longer than he’d planned, and was hoping Jeanne wouldn’t be overly upset by his delay.

Jeanne’s door opened, and to his surprise, she was wearing a stunning strapless evening dress and high heels, and even the normally indifferent Austin took notice. “Happy two-zero,” Michael said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Nice visit?” she asked.

“Yeah. It was. I have the feeling the both of us are going to be spending a lot more time on that ship. . .” Michael smiled. “I’ll explain later.”

“While you’re at it, you can explain why you didn’t bother to dress up for me,” she teased.

Michael led her up to the observation deck atop the citadel, which served as a privately run restaurant for officers only, called ‘Windows’. The observation deck afforded its visitors an excellent view of the spectacular starscape, and the ceiling faced the swirling gas giant called Jupiter, its prominent red storm clearly in view as the ship passed in low orbit.

“We’re here,” he announced.

The pair gawked at the planetary marvel for a moment. Seeing it again caused Michael to reflect upon why his mother had left Earth in the first place, taking him with her. Twenty years ago, it had been the mission of the REF to locate the homeworld of the Robotech Masters and to prevent a second Robotech war by peaceful negotiations. But

the race they had encountered on the Masters' homeworld, Tirol, was not the Tirolians; but rather an occupying force left by the Masters' ancient enemies, a race called the Invid. The Masters themselves had already left for Earth, hoping to recover the last reserves of the protoculture hidden aboard Zor's ship, which had crashed there in 1999. Stranded on Tirol, the REF had not counted on the arrival of the Sentinels' ship *Farrago* and the request of its crew of six alien races - a request originally meant for their Tirolian governors - for aid in liberating their worlds from the oppressive hand of the Invid Regent. In a gesture of goodwill, the REF gave the assistance to these worlds. This began a war that lasted for five years before the Sentinels' worlds were freed, the Invid homeworld taken, and its despot killed, bringing this vast conquered realm, born out of the ashes of the Tirolian Mercantile Empire, to an early end. Yet the fight continued, at first due to a traitor's ambition and lust for power, and then after the human armies discovered that several hundred Invid outposts remained in the Galaxy, still doing the bidding of their dead king. Furthermore, nine years ago, the *Marcus Antonius* returned from her mission to assist Earth's defense, her crew telling the REF of how humanity had fought the Robotech Masters over the protoculture reserves until both civilizations had toppled, and how Earth's shattered governments feared that the Invid would somehow find the protoculture and its progenitor, the plant from the Invid's homeworld known as the Flower of Life. If the flower was found, Earth feared, the Invid would send an occupying force to take Earth, and the weakened Armies of the Southern Cross couldn't hold out long. But there was no longer a fleet with which to fight. So over the next decade, as the Karbarran shipyards produced a vast armada for the humans, the Robotech Expeditionary Force mopped up the Invid outposts amidst the stars, realizing that their world was now likely to be an Invid slave colony, processing protoculture energy cells for the surviving contingents of this formidable foe. With the energy, the Invid could rebuild and become a threat again. And there was the minor issue of reclaiming humanity's birth-world. So Admiral Hunter assembled the First Fleet, named after Mars, and dispatched it to try the Invid outpost's strength. That was why *Valiant*, *Grant*, and *De Ruyter* were here.

Inside the restaurant, Michael and Jeanne were met by one of the younger pilots under Michael's command, Lieutenant (JG) Yatsumoto, who was employed here as a waiter during his off-hours.

The place was filled to capacity on this night, as most of the lower-ranking officers had been paid today, and they were intent on blowing off some steam before the upcoming offensive. Besides, the whole fleet would go on yellow-alert the next morning because of its proximity to Earth, and that would leave no time for leisure. So in this lull

before battle, many were in the mood to indulge themselves with the stronger drinks this place had to offer. The bar stools were all taken, and most of the tables were likewise occupied. A round of raucous laughter burst out from a group of Beta fighter pilots to the left of the trio.

Let them have their fun, Michael thought. They'll need it on recon tomorrow.

"How's your evening been, boss?" Yatsumoto said to Michael, procuring their menus. "And a good evening to you, Miss Ducasse."

I remember being on his sort of pay, Michael reminisced. No wonder he's doing a little extra. "I'm doing fine, Shoji. Table for two."

"Done, Sir."

Yatsumoto led the pair to a table in the corner of this thirteen hundred square meter deck, one that looked right out to one of Jupiter's multitude of moons, the name of which Michael couldn't remember. A sulfurous plume was rising from a volcano on the pocked orange surface, and the ship was just close enough for the spectacular sight to be visible.

"Someone will be with you shortly," Yatsumoto informed them before leaving.

Jeanne sat down while Michael stood by the window looking out.

"What's on your mind, Michael?" Jeanne asked. "You're too quiet. Usually you're as loud and obnoxious as you can be."

"I've never been on Earth," Michael said. "My mother moved to the Robotech Factory just before I was born, and then we went with the REF. In my seven years in the military, of all the planets I've visited or fought on, I've never seen my homeworld. Strange, isn't it?"

"We're almost all in the same boat. I wasn't even born until a week after the *Farrago* appeared in Tirol-space."

"I wonder what it's like. . ."

"You'll see soon enough. Now sit down and let's order ourselves something to eat."

Michael complied with Jeanne's request and took a seat.

A few moments of strained silence ensued before a waitress appeared. During her duty hours Stacey worked the engineering deck as an Engineer's Mate, maintaining the massive sublight drives of this seven million ton craft. "Can I get you and the birthday girl - I mean, 'the Lieutenant', something to drink?" the young woman asked him fondly.

"I'll go with an ale, Stacey. Jeanne?"

"Bring me a hot tea - Earl Gray. I'm working the Sit room tomorrow, and regulations are regulations. And thanks, Stacey."

“I’ll be back with your drinks in a moment. Excuse me, sirs,” the waitress said before slipping away.

“I’m curious, Michael,” Jeanne began. “Why is it that you are on a first-name basis with every attractive woman on this ship, regardless of rank or department?”

“Lucky, I guess. Hey, I didn’t expect an inquisition tonight.”

Jeanne chuckled lightly, and commented, “Never mind. Tonight, you’re mine and mine alone.”

“I live but to serve,” Michael teased, bowing slightly. “However, I think that ‘mine’ may be a little strong of a word.”

“A girl can hope, can’t she?” Jeanne shifted in her chair slightly. “It’s been really great working with you; almost a dream come true. You can’t believe how ecstatic I was when you made CAG officer. I couldn’t wait to see you again. All I had left of you were the birthday presents you had sent me over the years.”

“Those first couple of months were pretty awkward, huh?” Michael commented. “It was definitely more awkward than working with a total stranger; I do that all the time. It’s pretty hard to avoid someone when she’s your immediate subordinate.”

“Well, I tried my best to be in the way-” Jeanne demurred.

“And you succeeded!” Michael laughed. “I still can’t get you out of my hair!”

“You could if you’d cut that rat’s nest once in a while!” Jeanne jested. “Besides, I got what I wanted; you let down your guard and let me in again. May I ask why?”

“Other than your persistence?” Michael asked.

“You still came to me, all on your own.”

Michael leaned back and stroked his chin. “I really can’t say. I kept sending you birthday-presents to let you know I was still thinking of you, despite the. . . disagreements we’ve had. Things also got a lot more complicated for me recently, and I’ve just wanted someone to be around. I’m just sorry it took me two whole months to admit it.”

Jeanne smiled. “Well, just being my friend again is the best birthday present you’ve gotten me yet.”

* * *

Soon after dinner, an internal turbolift took them to the lowest level on the citadel, and it was a brief walk to the two-room apartment Jeanne had received as part of her position’s privileges. The conversation centered around Michael’s visit to the *De Ruyter*, and General Vandenberg’s offer.

“So you don’t believe her. . .” Jeanne asked Michael, with concern in her voice.

“Mary means well, but I don’t think for a minute that I’m being considered for my ability. I just don’t have the experience. I’ve never served as a bridge officer before. As the CAG, I have to be fully qualified as a bridge command officer, in case of emergency or the loss of the Captain and First and Second Officers. Hell, I even aced the proficiency exam. I know a fair amount about ship’s ops, but not enough to be more qualified than someone who’s done time on a bridge.”

“So why do you think you’re being considered?”

“You’ve been following the Plenipotentiary Council debates?”

“I avoid it; I hate politics. It’s so depressing.”

“Something’s rotten in the REF, and the stench is just beginning to be noticeable. There’s a struggle for power quietly going on under everyone’s noses. The Council and the General Staff are dividing into two camps, on the issue of what to do over all the worlds we liberated from the Regent’s Invid. General Peckenham’s camp wants to keep Tirol and Karbarra under direct REF administration, and set up all the other worlds as dependent satellite territories of Earth - when we finally liberate it. He and his people believe that the only way to ensure our security is to control all the resources in the Galaxy we can get our hands on, and keep total control of the space-lanes, since we’ll be the last major star-faring race left. Admiral Hayes-Hunter and her people favor a decentralized republican confederation, with each world remaining sovereign, and they want to focus the resources on reconstruction. A lot of folks in Peckenham’s camp think the Hunters lost connection to Earth, and have gone native on Tirol. But then, nobody really trusts Peckenham, because he used to be Edwards’ favorite son, until he refused to mutiny with him, back in ‘30.”

“So what does this have to do with anything?” Jeanne asked.

“Well, if you were trying to take over the REF from the inside, or to keep it from being taken over, what positions would you want to have in the hands of people you can count on?”

“Well, I’d pack the Plenipotentiary Council, the General Staff, and the Admiralty.”

“So you’ve got control of the brains. Where do you get the muscle?” Michael asked.

“The Commanders Planetary Detachment. . . and the captains of all the cruisers, battleships, and battlefortresses,” Jeanne said, a glimmer of recognition appearing on her face.

“Bingo. Less than two hundred positions in total. Keep your people in them, and

you control the Expeditionary Force. Lose them to the other side, and you're effectively shut out. The Hayes-Hunter camp knows they can count on my support. There are my personal ties to Max and Miriya Sterling, and to Mary Vandenberg. And there's the fact that I've always kept my distance from Peckenham. I have no love for his hard-line right-wing politics, or his unabashed xenophobia. Finally, there's the history between my parents and Peckenham - that's more than enough to keep us enemies. Mary and the rest know if push comes to shove, they can count on my support against him."

"You think it's coming to that. . . a civil war?"

"Not any time soon. But the seeds have been planted. We only have to wait to see what gets reaped," Michael said, shaking his head. They had just arrived at Jeanne's quarters, and she was beginning to type in the code to unlock the door.

"It was a great evening, Michael," Jeanne said suddenly. The conversation's content had begun to unnerve her.

"If so, it was because my companion was so charming, and she forced me to rise to the occasion," Michael replied coyly.

Jeanne lightly punched him in the gut, laughing. "You old smoothie!" She opened the door, and turned to Michael, saying, "Care to come in? I've got some Rilacian daelred-berry wine - 2021 vintage."

"So, 'regulations are regulations', hunh?" Michael said slyly.

"We can't have people see me merrily drinking in public if I'm to be first officer of the *De Ruyter*, can we? What'll it do to my reputation?"

"Same thing as having people see you invite your future captain to your room for a drink, I suspect. . ." Michael muttered.

Once inside the room, Jeanne watched as Michael cased the place. A lot less sterile than his own quarters, it was filled with paintings, artwork and the like (some of which were originally his; Jeanne was quick to borrow and reluctant to return). One wall had a slide-away panel to reveal a recessed mini-kitchen like the one in his room. There was a fairly plush couch, and two nice chairs sat on either side of a Garudan th'aeg-wood bookcase. This was what caught Michael's attention; indeed, he examined it so intently that he failed to hear Jeanne excuse herself for the bathroom.

One shelf brought back a lot of memories for him. On it rested a sleek Praxian crossbow, given him three years ago by the Praxian Warrior-Queen Gnea, in gratitude and respect for escorting her damaged shuttle from behind Invid lines. Beside it was the giant ruby he'd gotten for a steal from a Spherisian merchant on Haydon IV in the Briz'dziki system. There also lay the diamond-like insect shell he'd come across a year ago on Chrysid-2 during a raid on the Invid outpost there. Even the gold necklace he'd

given Jeanne on her seventeenth birthday was on the shelf. The necklace was displayed on another of his gifts to her: the seventy-five year old leather-bound copy of the Fitzgerald translation of the *Aeneid* his father had loved so much. All of this was arranged like a shrine, all surrounding the photo of Jeanne and himself taken two and a half years ago, the day she got her commission. *This must be her 'Michael Austin' shelf. It's nice to know I'm appreciated.*

Jeanne returned, and upon hearing her footsteps, Michael said softly, without turning to face her, "I remember all this stuff."

Jeanne said nothing, but simply embraced Michael from behind, and then whispered, "Let's go into the bedroom, Michael, for a little captain-to-first officer conference. . ."

Michael turned to face her, and just the instant that his mind registered that she was only wearing a loosely-tied bathrobe, she pulled Michael's head down and kissed him hard.

Michael began to feel his reason dulling, his resolve weakening. *Just like two years ago, and she still hasn't learned. I have to stop this, but. . . she's so beautiful.*

Michael returned the embrace and the kiss as well. How he wanted only to tear the robe off her body, carry her into the adjacent bedroom and make love to her like he'd dreamed of doing hundreds of times in the last four years. He kissed her on the neck once more before pushing her back. "No, Jeanne. It didn't work two years ago, and it won't work now."

"Damn it, Michael, when do I get my chance with you?"

"Since when were people taking numbers? Jeanne, I've been through a lot recently. I'm not ready to dive in again."

"Michael, I love you. I've loved you for seven years now, since I was old enough to be able to love, with almost nothing in return from you."

"You've always had my friendship. . ." Michael retorted.

"And it's meant the world to me. But I want more. Well, if it was my age that was holding you back before, then don't let it now. I think you've given me more than an ample chance to grow up. I know you have a lot of things you need to work through. But I want to go through whatever it is with you. Lord knows, I can take it. Considering how long as I've had feelings for you that you haven't reciprocated, I think I can be called a paragon of patience. And I know you have feelings for me too, beyond the goddamned annoying big-brother act you always put on when you catch yourself starting to get sweet on me. I still remember the park outside Tiresia where we had that picnic. I know you had been drinking. But, as they say, *in vino, veritas.*" Jeanne paused and breathed in

deeply. “Michael, you’re the most important thing in the world to me, and you’re the only person I’ve ever wanted to be with. Don’t turn your back on all that there is and can be between us just because you have second thoughts. Don’t let conscience make a coward out of you.”

“Things have changed a lot for me since the old days. I had to spend a lot of time putting myself back together after Dahlori-4, and a lot of my support has just slipped out from under me recently. Forgive me if I’m not ready to risk leaning on someone else just yet. The answer is ‘no’.”

“‘No, never’?” Jeanne asked.

“Just ‘no’ for now. And don’t push it. It just doesn’t feel right. If it happens between us, it happens. But I guarantee it won’t be now. If you try, you’ll just push me away again.”

Jeanne shook her head in silent frustration.

“Now I really ought to go. . .”

“Michael. . . at least stay tonight and keep me company. You’re the only real friend I have on this ship, and I don’t want to end my birthday alone. It would really mean a lot to me.”

“Do you promise no monkey business?”

“I promise, as much as I’d like otherwise.”

“At least we’re honest. All right, I’ll stay. Come on, I’m tired. That pre-offensive recon tomorrow’s going to sap my strength right out. Let’s get some sleep before then.”

Jeanne smiled and dragged his reluctant form into the bedroom by the arm.

* * *

Michael awoke a bit disoriented to the noise of the unfamiliar alarm clock. He put aside the discomfort of having slept half-dressed, and sat up in bed. Jeanne, whose head had been resting on his bare chest, was already going for the ‘snooze’ button when Michael told her, “I’ll hurry with my shower so I can get out of here. I still need to suit up before I go on call, you know.”

Jeanne nodded, and watched Michael get out of bed and head for the bathroom. He shut the door behind him, and the sound of a torrent of water accompanied the steam that drifted out from the crack underneath the door. Jeanne got up and stretched. She had worn Michael’s pull-over during the night, but changed to her bath robe, so he could put it back on before he left for his flightsuit locker. Singing a Beatles song softly to herself, she started brewing coffee for both of them, and placed four breakfast pastries in the

mini-kitchen's microwave.

Michael soon emerged from the bathroom, still dripping, and sat down on the couch. Jeanne brought him his coffee and rolls, kissing him on the cheek as she did so.

"And a good morning to you, kiddo," Michael smiled.

"How long do you have before you've got to go?" Jeanne asked.

"Not long enough to chat. I have to be suited up and in my plane in fifteen minutes."

"Well you better get out of here. Don't want you in trouble on my account."

"Right. By the way, the coffee is superb. Gotta go." Michael stood up, set the cup on a table, and turned to leave.

"When do I get to spend some time with you again?" Jeanne asked.

"I don't know. If they send the Naval Air people planetside with the Air Force planes during the offensive, then it could be a while. I guess it depends on how the attack goes."

"Well, I'll get to talk to you at least when I work my console."

"I look forward to it," Michael said, smiling.

Michael pulled his shirt on, and opened the door. When he was halfway out it, Jeanne said, "Thanks for staying the night, Michael."

Michael turned around. "Thanks for convincing me to stay. Catch ya later."

The door slid shut, and Jeanne started getting herself ready to go work the Situation room during the patrol.

* * *

Jeanne stood silently on the command deck, surrounded by Richardson's staff. General Richardson was not yet himself there. "Any sign of Commander Austin yet?" she asked her communications officer nervously.

"No, Lieutenant Ducasse. He's twenty minutes overdue. In fact, none of his squad has reported since they penetrated this system's asteroid field. And because of the asteroids, we still can't get a sensor fix on them."

Jeanne responded, "Perhaps they have found something and are maintaining radio silence because of this. Continue monitoring, Ensign."

"Yes sir."

At this point, a tall weary-looking man stepped on the command deck, escorted by the ship's captain, Commodore Buxley.

"Update me on the situation, Miss Ducasse," General Richardson, Mars Fleet's

Commander of Military Operations, ordered.

“Sir, we just heard from *Grant*. She and her battle-group arrived safely in Mars-space and have re-established the hyperspace relays on Phobos. Captain Bhattacharya will be joining us in the attack from around the dark side of Earth’s moon. Austin’s recon has gone silent in the asteroid field. We’re waiting on communication from them, sir, and as per regulations, if we do not hear anything, I’m dispatching a recon plane in thirty-eight more minutes.”

“As you were then. I wonder what’s happened to them.”

A tense silence on the Situation room ensued until the awaited call arrived not three seconds after the squad reappeared on radar. “Austin here,” said the familiar voice. “Sorry I’m late, but we just found what was left of the Robotech Factory Satellite. . . Space Station Liberty, that is. The installation had been attacked by Invid. I went to radio silence on the off-hand chance that the attackers were still lurking about. When we went inside, we discovered that the backup computer was still marginally operational, and learned several things from the computer’s files.” Michael paused for a moment, and added, “There were no survivors.”

“Join us in the conference room on Citadel deck two for a debriefing the instant you get out of your flightsuit,” Richardson told Michael. “Commodore,” the General told the ship’s captain, “Let’s get ready for him.”

“Coming home. Jeanne, give us a bay to land in,” Michael said.

“Viking One, you are clear to land in bay three. Decelerate to landing velocity and convert to Guardian mode.”

“Roger, control. Vikings, let’s take ‘em in.”

* * *

Michael didn’t like debriefings, and this one was no better. All too often, he would find his observations dismissed and his recommendations ignored by men who had spent less time in the field than he. Austin had learned a lot with four and a half years and nineteen major offensives under his belt, and he knew that he was not as naive as some of his seniors (especially those not in the Navy) made him out to be. But he never stopped voicing his opinions, feeling that it best served the interests of his men. But Richardson was better than most. Even the personal grudge he held against Austin didn’t seem to stop him from listening to what he had to say. Michael cleared his mind and began:

“Records from the satellite indicated that the crew manning it had space-folded

the factory into the asteroid belt after the REF left in 2022. They also indicate that the Robotech Masters did indeed wage war with the Southern Cross from early 2029 to late 2030, ending with the collapse of the Robotech Masters' civilization due to protoculture depletion and the near-toppling of the Earth's reconstruction governments. The computer files also indicate that the Flower of Life was spread all over Earth during the final battle of this war, and in May of 2033 the Invid arrived, attacking the Factory Satellite and its escort of Zentraedi reserve vessels with a force estimated to be around sixty thousand scout and shock troop mecha. What this information would indicate is that the Invid are here in numbers far greater than we expected. Until now, liberal estimates of the total Invid strength on Earth have been eighty thousand mecha. I doubt they would have risked such a large percentage of that occupation force on the Satellite, no matter how strategic a target it was, **even** if they thought it still belonged to the Robotech Masters. Remember, they still needed to hold and control Earth. Based on their previous deployment patterns, I would estimate that the Invid forces on Earth number in excess of five million."

"But remember that the satellite was capable of constructing both warships and mecha," Colonel Ivanov, one of the General's aides, interrupted. "I think it's likely that they did risk that large a fraction of their troops to destroy it. Besides, Commander, we found only four million troops on their homeworld. Don't tell us that they keep a larger military presence on Earth than they did on Optera. The Regent obviously overextended his empire considering the numbers of his troops. I think we should proceed assuming the original estimate, perhaps as much as fifty percent higher. But no more."

"What about the evidence that the Regent didn't even know the Earth's location?" Michael objected. "We could be dealing with a different Invid faction here. I don't need to remind you of Dr. Eldridge's hypothesis comparing the Invid migration cycles to that of Terran bees and termites - that it is the mature queen that leaves the hive with her entourage, and not the junior one. The Regis we encountered on Optera would be only barely adult. If this is the "true" Regis of Tirolian accounts, then she should be a lot more powerful and experienced than. . ."

"With all due respect to Dr. Eldridge, his theories have not been accepted beyond his own lab. Dr. Lang assures us that the Regis that barely escaped from Optera is **this** Regis. As for the Regent, we never got to interrogate him. How could we make the assumption that he and his queen didn't know about Earth, when you yourself saw the dead hulks of their mecha in the belt? We observed the Regis fleeing Optera with a force estimated at fifty to a hundred thousand troops plus inorganics. It's only safe to assume that they immediately set out for Earth. It was a large enough attack force to overwhelm what was left of the Southern Cross, and to set up shop. In all likelihood, the highest

authority on the planet will be a living computer, and we've learned those things' tactics."

"But I don't believe-" Michael began.

"Intelligence will do a follow-up before the attack, Commander. Do you have anything else to report?" Richardson asked.

"No, Sir. That's all the investigating I could do before I had to report back," Michael responded wearily.

"Very good, Commander Austin. You're dismissed."

Michael stepped silently out of the briefing room, his sapphire-blue eyes avoiding the stares of his superiors watching him leave. *Idiots. Idiots all. How can they simply ignore the observations of an officer with my experience when so many lives are at stake?* Michael turned languidly for the turbolift to his room, ordering the elevator to take him to his level, his mind turning deeper inward in thought. *I knew the others wouldn't listen, but the General? Does he really resent me so terribly much, as to let his anger convince him that what went on with me and Vikki mean a damn where my job is concerned? How can he hold me solely responsible for **that** anyway? And what about my men? Like lambs to the slaughter.*

Michael returned to the flight decks for a few hours, going over the planes with the maintenance crews on the finer details of the battle preparations. Many of his pilots were also there, checking out their birds one last time before the battle. He then went to his office, to produce his written report on the mission, a tedious task at best. Michael finished up, and returned to his quarters, only to find Jeanne standing there at the door; apparently she'd been there a while, because she was hanging her head with her eyes closed, and she didn't seem to notice Michael's approach. "How long have been you waiting for me?" he asked emotionlessly.

"Huh. . . what? Oh, you. Around a half an hour. I just finished up from my shift from the Situation Room. I was wondering if you wanted to talk a bit."

"I can't talk for long. You don't look too terribly awake right now, and I could use a bit of rest myself," he snorted, entering the room, and allowing her to follow. "You kept me talking almost to oh-three hundred hours."

"I don't get you all to myself very often," she smiled, taking a seat on the bed in the two-room living quarters. "I try to make the best of it when I get that rare opportunity." Jeanne paused for a moment, and asked softly, "What's wrong, Michael? You're really cold today, and it doesn't sound like fatigue to me."

"The General and his wolves ate me alive earlier." *Should I tell her my anxieties about this mission? No, she'd only worry. Maybe I **am** wrong anyway.*

“Bad debriefing, then?”

“I’ve had worse, but I can’t remember when,” Michael groaned.

“Don’t mind the General. He’s been a bit nasty since his daughter requested a transfer to the Tirol before we made ready to fold to the Sol system.” Jeanne knew Michael used to be involved with Victoria Richardson - she just didn’t know if she wanted to bring it up.

“I’ve noticed,” Michael interjected. “Still, this is an important mission, and I don’t appreciate being ignored.”

“Do you want me to stay to chat?” Jeanne asked.

“Sorry, Jeanne, but I’ve got to get some sleep. I have to fly for real tomorrow, and out there, tired equals dead. You really ought to do the same, you know.”

“If you insist. Good night, then, Michael.”

“Sleep well, Jeanne.”

Jeanne started to turn for the door, and then added, “Come back to me in one piece, flyboy. For my sake.”

Michael smiled. “I’m coming back in one piece. . . for **my** sake!” Jeanne laughed as the door slid shut.

* * *

What seemed to be only a few minutes later, Jeanne awoke to the yellow-alert announcements that rang all over the ship. *The ship must have folded to the rendez-vous point on the dark side of Earth’s moon already.* It had taken her the first fifteen years of her life to learn to sleep through a hyperspace fold and this was one skill she fully appreciated. Wasting no time in bed wishing that the offensive were tomorrow, she leapt up, threw on her duty uniform and made for the command deck. *I’ve got to get the first squadrons out there as a probe force, and since the idiots who designed these ships didn’t grace us with enough AA cannon, the rest of the planes have to go up too.*

The Situation Room was already buzzing with activity when she arrived. Without a word, Jeanne relieved her alternate and took control of the fleet’s offensive prowess. “Lieutenant Reichmann, I want a full status report of the squadrons’ readiness. Lt. Mitchell, contact the rest of the fleet and tell them to execute their pre-designated orders. Make sure *Grant* and her battle-group are in position. Get *De Ruyter* to move in on a course parallel to ours. And tell the *Halberd* to get out of the way of our topside guns, and to join the dropships *Copperhead*, *Hyena*, and *Falcon* to provide fire support for them. Ensign Chaffee, give me a full sensor scan of Earth, highlighting the Invid hive

complexes, especially their Reflex Point. Try to estimate their troop capability and command structure as best you can. And someone tell fire control to work out those damn bugs in the main gun. They didn't upgrade *Valiant* with a Reflex Cannon to go unused because it doesn't work," Jeanne barked in one breath.

"Doing all right?" General Richardson asked of Jeanne, tapping her softly on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir. We're as ready as we'll ever get."

"Good. Get the fighters through pre-flight as soon as we can, because if Austin is right, and he's never been wrong, we'll need all twelve hundred of our planes in the air fast."

"Yes, sir!"

* * *

Michael had been trying to get his squadron members assembled into a group in the ready room for a game of cards before the upcoming offensive. "What's up, Commander," Lieutenant Trent, one of Michael's pilots asked coolly. "You look zonked."

"I've had less than my quota of sleep the last couple of nights," responded Michael. "But I'll be okay when we go up."

"I dropped by your room early yesterday morning, Commander, and you weren't there. If I remember correctly you were with Lieutenant Ducasse the night before," Lieutenant (JG) Yatsumoto declared victoriously.

"So, boss, does this mean another kill marker on your plane?" another asked.

"The CAG scores another kill!" exclaimed a fourth. "Splash one skirt - a heat-seeker right up the tail-pipe!"

Michael's face began to turn red with embarrassment, a truly rare occurrence for him, and he stammered, "Trust me, guys, nothing happened."

Yatsumoto laughed, saying, "We know you too well to believe that, Commander."

Michael's face suddenly changed from the red of shame to the red of anger, as he growled, "Believe it, **Ensign** Yatsumoto."

"Nothing happened, like the Commander said," Yatsumoto conceded.

"Very good, Lieutenant."

* * *

General Richardson surveyed the Situation Room crew. They had, for the most part, been the same crew that had worked the last half-dozen engagements against the Invid, all with a fantastic degree of success. And this offensive wasn't supposed to be any different. *Then, damn it, why does this one bother me so much more.*

The normally comforting hum of the room fell to dead silence for a moment, as the announcement from the bridge, located one level higher than the Sit room on the citadel, came over the intercom: "Entering Earth orbit at thirty thousand kilometers and holding."

"No activity on the radar here," Mitchell announced mechanically. "Furthermore, I'm not receiving any response to our hails on the planet, from Point K or anywhere else.

"Not on my console," Jeanne contradicted. "I've got a fix on two-dozen large craft heading our way. They're not responding to our challenges. Chaffee, get me the results of that sensor scan I ordered. Now!"

"Enemy ships identified, Lieutenant," Reichmann declared. "They're standard Invid troop carriers, code-name Mollusk. Each has an estimated three hundred Invid Scouts equipped with the standard extra-atmospheric boosters. Point of origin is the Great Lakes sector of North America."

Ensign Chaffee cried out, "Sensors identify nearly thirty Invid hives in this hemisphere alone, and - get this - a royal hive at the assault force's point of departure. It's **bigger** than the one we fought on Optera itself; this must be their Reflex Point. Invid occupation force now estimated to be over twenty million world-wide."

"Other ships requesting orders, General," Mitchell said. "*De Ruyter* tells us she's ready to go."

The General silently reviewed the orders Admiral Hunter had given him weeks before, and said, "Attack with first wing, immediately. Tell Commander Gardner to have *Muskrat* take the lead. Have the Horizons drop their Legios escort and have them form the first line of defense. All turrets sight the enemy ships and fire when ready. Pinpoint Barriers up and damage control crews on standby. Ladies and Gentlemen, I fear we have stumbled upon the **original** Invid Regis, and God help us all if so."

Reichmann, a young blonde who was being groomed for Jeanne's job suddenly exclaimed, "Several Mollusks have survived our initial salvo. They've opened up and are releasing their mecha. Three minutes to contact."

"This is it, then. Ducasse, tell the fighters to move."

"Yes, Sir!" Jeanne patched into the pilots' ready rooms and announced, "All

Veritech pilots, we are on combat alert! All planes scramble, all planes scramble! Centurion and Mamluk squadrons will remain to cover the *Valiant*. The rest will fly with Austin's Vikings. Repeat: Battle stations, all hands to battle stations! We are on red alert!"

Michael was just zipping up his flight suit, and had already begun to don his armor. Not that it would help him much if his plane took a direct hit, but it might save him from shrapnel and sudden decompression. Some consolation. He hurried his squadron members along to the bay and soon was at his plane. His eyes watched as the plane's technician closed a panel on the bright blue VAF-06C Alpha Fighter. From above, the plane looked somewhat like the old Soviet MiG-29 and was almost the same size, except that the plane had its tails on raised rhombic boxes that made up the arms in Battloid mode. Underneath, the plane was much more angular than conventional airplanes' aerodynamic designs - a necessity to accommodate the transformation capabilities of the Robotech mecha. The plane's two mighty engines made up for this deficit, and as the plane's designers, Dr. Lang and Dr. Burke, so fondly reminded everyone, with a powerful enough engine, a brick could be made to fly. The accommodations to make it operate in space were subtler; auxiliary thrusters under the tails, two VTOL thrusters underneath, and a dozen hidden directional thrust ports made this plane work in a vacuum, and with the help of these, it left the old pre-unification Harriers far behind in maneuverability.

"You finished with the tune-up, Bob?" Michael asked of the technician.

"Yes, Sir! The baby's completely loaded and the engines are roaring like tigers."

"Good job."

Jeanne's voice came over the intercom and announced again, "All Veritechs launch."

"Well, Commander Austin, good luck and good hunting."

"Thanks, and I'll see you on Earth. Now clear this bay," Michael said. The technician took his leave, ordering the other mechanics to leave the fighter bay, while Michael closed the cockpit and announced into the tac-net, "This is Commander Austin of the 8th Naval Air Group, Mars Division. Condition is green and we're go for launch, tower."

The massive plastisteel armored bay doors opened, revealing the vast diamond studded velvety fabric of space, to his lower right floated the blue-green emerald his father had called home. Jeanne announced, "Bay three open, Commander. You're cleared for disembarkment."

"Bring them home safe," Richardson urged over the tac-net. "And Godspeed."

“Roger, control. Okay, boys, our engines are at max. power and the party’s getting started without us, so let’s move out!”

On that command, Michael pushed the engines to full throttle, and the plane lifted free of the artificial gravity of the bay and sped out into space, followed by several dozen others, adjusting their courses to fly alongside the dropships and the capital ships, speeding past the half-mile long *Valiant* in an instant.

“Viking squadron, this isn’t going to be pretty, so keep one eye on the HUD and your finger on the trigger. Pre-arm all warheads on command. . . Now!” Michael barked to his pilots.

“Roger!” they all shouted in unison.

Michael’s squadron formed a loose diamond in front of the fleet, joining up with the planes in the twenty-first under Lieutenant Commander Scott Bernard. Michael pondered after receiving a cold military greeting from his old friend, *Did that prank really pull us so far apart, so that we can’t even speak to each other? A damned shame.*

Michael fixed his mind on the thousand red deaths that raced towards him at increasing velocity: Invid Scouts, twelve foot tall suits of robotic armor that resembled giant quadruped lobsters, armed with two rapid-fire plasma dischargers recessed on the one-eyed monstrosity’s shoulders. The verbal component of the word for this mecha in the Invid language was *Iigaa* - but Michael couldn’t care less. This was his element, and he surrendered himself to the fury inside him and mercilessly slew his foe with every radar lock-on, knowing full well that, given the opportunity, the swarming horde of Invid would do the same to him.

The number of Invid troop carriers increased to over three dozen in the *Valiant*’s sector of the battle. In the first few minutes of the fray, the Veritech formations, in sixty groups consisting of three squadrons of seven planes each, closed in on the Invid forces, opening missile fire as soon as they were in tracking range. The Invid, unfazed by the initial losses on their side, bore down on the planes to make full use of their own superior close-range combat abilities. In seconds, the Invid had closed within five hundred meters or less from the Human mecha, themselves making a valiant stand in Battloid mode, and opened a full barrage, matching the REF planes’ speeds and trajectories. The first few minutes of this tactic wreaked havoc on the Alphas, many of whom were incinerated by plasma globes or were ripped open by the ceramic-metal composite blades on the Invid power armors’ claws. Worse yet, before the Alphas could regroup and make their attack effective, their line had been broken, and while fresh mecha from Earth replenished the Invid that were pinning down the fighters, those that had broken through were now laying deadly siege to the capital ships, which, without any appreciable AA cannon, were now

desperately outmatched. The Horizons tried to break out of the trap by making planet-fall, only to face a new wave of enemy units during atmospheric entry.

In all the offensives Jeanne had ever lived through, ten minutes of battle would seem like but mere seconds, with the flush of victory compressing the events of battle into glorious infinitesimals. But today, Jeanne felt the cosmos move in slow motion. At her console, she saw every evasive action of friendly or hostile craft, every volley of fire exchanged; heard every death-cry in agonizingly vivid horror on the tac-net. And as heavily armed as these giant leviathans were, they could not stop the onslaught of innumerable Invid as every moment brought another mollusk-ship into the battle, helping the deadly swarm of red metallic-armored wasps increase a thousand every fifteen seconds. Despite the big guns from warships, the Invid wreaked havoc with the REF fleet. "General, we've lost seventeen dropships and four destroyers so far. Our barrier systems have just collapsed. We can't hold out much longer," she screamed.

"Damn." General Richardson thought for a moment, then turned to Mitchell at the communications console. "Tell Vandenberg to get some fire support for the dropships. Those Cyclone-armed troops are cannon fodder anywhere but on the ground, and we need to take the fight to the planet."

"I'm trying to reach General Vandenberg, but the *De Ruyter's* Sit-room isn't responding," Mitchell said nervously. "In fact, I can't raise anyone on the *De Ruyter* at all. She looks dead in space, and initial sensor readings show her about to blow."

"Scan for escape pods and reroute *De Ruyter's* fighters to Jeanne's console. And where the hell is *Grant*? Why hasn't she joined the battle?" Richardson paused to examine a status console, and ordered, "Get that main gun ready to fire, and aim it at their royal hive!"

"Incoming Kamikaze run! It's past our barrier, and is on its way for the Citadel!" Reichmann interrupted at the top of her voice.

Jeanne immediately activated the "Clear Citadel" alarm and started to run for the corridor that would lead her to the safety of the lower decks. Mitchell was already ahead of her, and was heading for the corridor, while all the others were hurriedly scrambling after them.

Jeanne knew only one thing: whoever did not escape the command deck before the Invid craft hit - or even worse, God forbid, ripped open the hull with its gigantic claws, climbed in, and self-destructed - would die one of many horrible potential deaths. She desperately tried to run for the door, and in terror, her legs failed her as in a nightmare, causing her to fall on the deck face first. She remembered hearing Mitchell yell, "Give me your hand!", and Reichmann lamenting to the General, "We'll never make

it out, Sir!” Then a tremendous shudder rocked the deck as something massive slammed into the armored hull at incredible velocity, and the concussion from an explosion knocked her and Mitchell into the corridor. Something sharp hit her in the head and leg, and she winced as her hair and thigh began to feel wet, just as the wind from the decompression picked up. Mitchell was holding onto a guard rail with one hand, and Jeanne with another, and cried, “Dear God, they’re all being blown into space!” Jeanne looked back to see the emergency decompression door seal off the small hallway, and then suddenly her world was painted black.

* * *

The Viking squadron had been routed and decimated in the previous minutes, and Michael had been wondering, *What’s wrong with De Ruyter? She’s not supporting our fighters with her cannon. What’s Vandenberg think she’s doing? And where’s the rest of the fleet?*

Michael swallowed the artificial air of his cockpit’s life-support systems and executed a sudden reverse. *Yatsumoto, Trent, Ollmann, all the men I’d served with for half a decade - all dead.* Michael switched on the tac-net and ordered, “This is Group Commander Austin. All Veritechs that are still out there, get back to the nearest capital ship and divert any hostiles from attacking them. I’m going back to *Valiant* - she’s taking too much heavy fire. What’s left of Viking squadron, follow me in!”

The Veritech Alpha fighter adjusted its trajectory, and Austin set his sights on his home ship. *De Ruyter* was beginning to break up now, and, half-way through the process of disintegration, one of the reflex engines in the ship overloaded, setting off a tremendous explosion in the normally silent vacuum. *De Ruyter gone too - I hope Vandenberg made it out all right,* Michael thought. Michael banked the plane off to an angle to intercept the two Iigaa scouts coming on an attack run for the destroyer *Glaive-guisarme* and pumped a salvo of SRMs from his Beta fighter booster into the offending targets. *Out of missiles in the Beta,* he thought. *Better stick to cannon, in case I need the Alpha’s missiles.* He disengaged the Beta booster, telling its pilot to cover him as well as possible, and went on approach for the *Valiant*. Swinging around the Citadel looking for a bay, he observed the gaping hole in the command deck. He could see as well that *Valiant* was losing her orbit fairly rapidly because of the repeated kamikaze collisions, and as he came in on final approach from behind, he could see that two of the four engines were out, with another glowing only faintly.

One of the bays was still open, and Michael decelerated his plane as it entered the

lifeless dock, and instantly set down in Guardian mode. The plane's cockpit opened on his command, and he clumsily plodded in his flightsuit to close the bay doors and put some atmosphere into the hangar.

Michael briefly pondered his next move. Both the situation room and main bridge were total losses, and he wondered if he should assume command in the emergency bridge and try to get the situation under control. As he began to make his way from the hangar, he heard the computer alarm announce, "Reflex engine four will overload in twelve minutes. All hands evacuate!" Without further delay, Michael entered his command code and punched the **ABANDON SHIP** alarm on the first intercom he encountered, and headed for the escape pods, asking any of the fleeing crew that he encountered if they'd seen Lt. Ducasse.

Michael was starting for the citadel when Lt. Mitchell accosted him, yelling, "I tried to get her, but I couldn't manage the weight!" as he showed Michael his shrapnel-mangled arm. "Lt. Ducasse is in the Sit Room entrance corridor."

"Thanks, Joseph. Get to the escape pod," Michael ordered as he made for the tall stairwell that would carry him up the ship's decks to the smashed command tower.

Seconds later, he felt the sudden shudder as another Invid scout loosed strafing fire onto the crippled ship, forcing Michael to grip hard onto the railing, lest he be knocked down a flight of stairs. Michael picked up his pace as the normal lighting failed, and the ship's batteries activated the red emergency lighting. "Reflex Engine four will detonate in ten minutes, thirty seconds," came over the intercom in the computer's emotionless voice, the moment Michael opened the hatch to the command deck's access corridor.

Jeanne was lying unconscious in a heap on the floor, small puddles of blood pooling around her right leg and forehead. Large pieces of debris were strewn all over the hallway, but the emergency decompression door seemed sturdy and intact. "Typical," Michael mused as he heaved the injured girl onto his shoulder.

Nine and a half minutes to get her to my plane and get out. Not much of a margin, Michael thought as he began to run down the stairs back to the flight deck where he'd landed his plane. Things outside were quieter now - no explosions or concussion from fire - and Michael guessed that the Invid had recognized the *Valiant* as dead in space, and were concentrating on the other targets, like the destroyers and dropships that were making a fighting retreat to the Moonbase Luna.

"My dad's *Aeneid*!" Michael exclaimed suddenly as was about to leave the lower decks of the Citadel. He cursed himself for having forgotten the relic, and gently set Jeanne down in the stairwell and ran back up to level three for Jeanne's room. *Plenty of*

time, he assured himself half-heartedly while forcing the door to Jeanne's room open. *No time to look for a bag or anything*, he reasoned as he dashed for the bedroom, yanking a sheet off the bed and heading for Jeanne's bookcase. Michael haphazardly dumped the contents onto the spread-out sheet, along with that of the "Michael Austin" shelf, and tied up the corners, heaving it on his shoulder and returning to the stairwell. *Four minutes still*, he thought as he picked Jeanne up again and hobbled awkwardly down the stairs.

The hangar was completely deserted, and Michael's plane was the only one left, crouching in the aquiline Guardian mode beside the closed bay doors. Michael lifted Jeanne and their bag of memories into the cockpit and then climbed up himself, activating the plane's two monstrous engines. Michael pulled the canopy to, and tried to activate the bay doors by remote, but to no avail. *Damn door's stuck. And me with only four salvos of missiles left.*

He converted the mecha to Battloid mode, clutching Jeanne tighter to him so as to prevent her from being crushed by the rearrangement of the Alpha's cockpit. Michael had the Battloid drop the almost spent EP-13 gun pod it was holding, and grabbed two more from the near-by supply racks and mounted them on the mecha's hardpoints. *I've got to get out before this thing blows*, Michael reasoned. *Just fifty seconds.*

Michael's Battloid stood straight, and two panels on each of his Battloid's arms hinged open, revealing the last twenty of Michael's sixty inboard missiles. *All safeties removed and warheads armed. Hope I can blow this door off its hinges.* Michael snorted, and hit the fire button on his control panel. The missiles sped out of the arms, slamming through the bay door's structural supports and knocking the huge plastisteel panel into space.

Michael guided the Veritech out of the burning wreck, activating the thrusters on the Battloid's feet to propel the mecha out of the doomed ship and into the fray still taking place in orbit. Michael converted back into Fighter mode, clutching Jeanne close to him to keep her from being crushed as the pilot's seat rotated forward from facing a screen inside the mecha to looking out the canopy, which was revealed as the Veritech's nose section swung from behind the Battloid into place.

He kicked the engines to full power, trying to clear the *Valiant's* vicinity before she exploded while they were still too close. In his head, Michael counted down, thinking, *She'll go any second now. . .*

A few moments later, the mirrors on the canopy lit up in a blinding flash as the *Valiant's* aft section disintegrated, shattering the rest of the ship into molten rubble. Michael veered off to intercept a squadron of Invid that were trying to cut him off, firing both cannons simultaneously into their formation.

If I stay up here much longer, I'm dead. I've got to land soon! Michael broke off from the combat and into the atmosphere. Jeanne was stirring now, and mumbled something about her head.

“Welcome back to life,” Michael said, kissing her on the head; clotting blood smeared on his cheek.

“Where am I. . . Michael?” Jeanne groaned.

“We’re headed for the planet’s surface, Jeanne. Invid massacred the fleet. I only saw a couple of fighters make it down.” Thankfully, Bernard’s was one of them.

“You saved me?”

“You’d ‘ve done the same, kid. I brought something for you,” he said, indicating the bag.

“Why did you save this?” Jeanne asked, digging through the books and artifacts she revered. “Why not your own-”

“These things aren’t just yours; they’re **ours**, all we have left of our pasts. Now shut up and let me land,” Michael replied. He was entering the atmosphere too fast, and he had no margin to slow down, with the Invid on his tail. At this speed, he’d cripple the fighter. *No choice. Forced landing it is.*

Michael frowned as the plane began to heat up in the atmosphere.