

HAMMER OF LIGHT, OMEN OF DARKNESS

by Simon Hawke

A Descent: FreeSpace Story

There was a moment, a brief, incandescent moment, when Creed Harlow could have chosen death.

It would have been so easy.

Instead, he'd hesitated ... just a beat too long ... and now it was too late. By default, he had chosen life. And now he'd have to live with it.

The Vasudan gunner was damn good. In that fateful moment of Harlow's crucial hesitation, the gunner had taken out the Apollo fighter's entire port weapons bank. One shot. The Banshee cannon pulse-blast had sheared the entire bank of secondaries clean off their mounting struts, like a laser scalpel slicing through soft tissue. And now Harlow had nothing left to fight with. The starboard weapons bank had already been destroyed, along with the primary disruptor pods. The Vasudans knew that; they could easily see where the GTF Apollo fighter had been crippled, shot to pieces as if some gigantic sledge hammer had knocked huge chunks right off it.

The amazing thing was that the cabin still maintained integrity. The life support systems were still functioning, even with the shields gone and over half the ship reduced to slag. And they wanted to mothball these puppies, Harlow thought. The Apollo was one goddam terrific piece of hardware. He had been lucky. If anyone could call this luck.

The Vasudan squadron got in close under the pretext of providing escort, which was always welcome in this sector ever since the Shivans had appeared in the Ikeya system, coming through the node with some kind of huge, Cruiser-class vessel rumored to be about the size of Rhode Island, capable of launching somewhere between several hundred and over a thousand fighters. Intelligence was a little wonky on that score. The reports were mostly secondary sources, panicked subspace frequency transmissions that sounded hysterical and incoherent ... until they were cut off abruptly. No one who had actually seen the Shivan Cruiser was ever left alive to tell the tale. So when the Vasudan squadron had shown up and offered to help fly escort duty for the heavy freighter to the Tombaugh station, Harlow could almost hear the collective sigh of relief over his com. And that, in itself, felt weird.

For fourteen years, fully half his life, the Galactic Terran Alliance had been at war with the Vasudan Empire. Harlow had grown up hating the Vasudans. Long before he had ever laid eyes on one, he hated them with a passion bordering on the pathologic. Among his boyhood friends, there had been no worse insult than being called Vasudan. Epithets such as "Vasudan slimeball" or "Vasudan scumbucket" were not just fighting words, they were invitations to mayhem. He had grown up with the daily newscasts reporting distant space battles, body counts and numbers of ships lost, and colonies destroyed and bases decimated, and then, when he was seventeen, his older brother's ship vaporized in an attack upon his squadron. Harlow had enlisted the very next year, on his eighteenth birthday.

His mother had cried.

His father had been proud. "Go get 'em, son," he'd said. "Go get those Vasudan bastards."

You spend half of your goddamn life hating the sonsabitches, Harlow thought, and suddenly, one day, they're your allies. And not because they wanted to make peace, but because they had no freakin' choice.

For years, humanity had wondered what would happen if they ever encountered another intelligent race. As far back as the late 20th century, probes had been sent out with little plaques upon them

showing Earth's position on a stellar map – not too smart, perhaps – with a little arrow pointing, as if to say, "We are here." Then one day, after all those years of wondering, the discovery of FreeSpace, followed by ... contact.

No one could ever seem to agree on what, exactly, started the Terran-Vasudan War. Mutual distrust was about as good an answer as any. But it went on for fourteen years, with neither side managing to gain an upper hand ... until the Shivans came.

So far as Harlow knew, no one had ever even seen a Shivan. They just saw their ships. Black and red fighters, shaped like some kind of space-going arachnids, deadly fast and lethal ... and now the SuperCruiser, as someone had christened it, which no one could describe, because no one who had actually seen it had been left alive to give a complete report. What little was known about it was that it was BIG. Really big. And it was out there ... somewhere.

Fourteen years of warfare with the Vasudan Empire had ended in a treaty and an alliance that could, at best, be called uneasy, yet rendered necessary by the simple imperative of survival, because the Shivans didn't come to conquer. They came to annihilate. Pure and simple. If it lived, and it wasn't Shivan, it was slated for extinction. It became apparent, very quickly, that the only chance of survival the Terrans and the Vasudans had was if they made peace and joined forces against this new, implacably destructive foe that seemed far stronger than either of them ... but maybe, just maybe, not stronger than both of them together.

So when the Vasudan squadron had shown up on their scanners and made contact, Harlow had swallowed his natural antipathy, nurtured for over half his life, and accepted their offer to join the freighter escort conducting the Orion Maru to Tombaugh Station. He had met Vasudans before and though he couldn't say he liked the ugly brutes, he was able to put up with them. Just barely. The common good of the alliance and all that.

He still recalled the first time he had heard about the treaty. It was in the officer's club back at the station. "So we're supposed to trust the bastards now?" he'd said. And he had vowed he never would. He hadn't been alone, either. Not by a long shot. But to his surprise, and just about everybody else's, the Vasudans had lived up to their end of the treaty. They had shared their resources and technology and, at least so far as any of the experts could tell, had not held anything back. The results of combined Terran/Vasudan research and technology had been better ships, better weapons and significant spinoff from defense-based R&D. Regardless of his personal prejudices, Harlow had been forced to admit that the alliance was working and the Vasudans were living up to their end of the bargain. So, when the Vasudans had shown up and offered to join the escort, Harlow had done the one thing he had sworn he'd never do. He trusted them.

And now he was the only one left.

He didn't especially want to live. Not now. The entire squadron had been blown apart. At least half of them were rookies. Kids. They hadn't stood a chance against the veteran Vasudan fighter pilots. What was left of their ships drifted in space around him like so much scrap metal. The Orion Maru had been gutted. Several of the larger Vasudan fighters had made fast to it and sent boarding parties in to loot.

And it was all his responsibility. His blame. He was in command. And after his fighter had been crippled, and he was drifting, without any ability to navigate at all, there had been that one moment, when he still had function in his port secondaries, when he could have fired a final shot at the Vasudan fighters that surrounded him and demanded his surrender. One shot. And then, of course, they would have finished him. But he had hesitated, and given them the chance to take out those port secondaries before he could change his mind. With that hesitation, he had chosen. He chose to live.

God help me, he thought.

As the fighters encircled him, he sat there helpless, impotent. "What do you want?" he said through gritted teeth, inside his helmet. "What the hell do you double-crossing bastards want? Finish it, goddamn you!" And then he spotted the Vasudan squadron's mothership coming in.

It was a Scorpio-class vessel, to use the human name for them, about the size of a GTA Destroyer, well over 2 kilometers in length. And as the message came in through his com, identifying the ship as the IVS Hammer and informing him he was a prisoner of war, he suddenly realized who his captors really were. Vasudans, yes ... but renegades who did not recognize the treaty. Branded traitors by their own kind, they were members of the Imperial Vasudan Fleet who had followed some psychotic admiral in a mutiny against their government, religious fanatics who saw the Shivan invasion as some kind of "cleansing" foretold in some obscure Vasudan prophecy. Deathheads, as the Terrans called them. They called themselves "The Hammer of Light."

According to the scuttlebutt, they had been the "Praetorian Guard" of the Imperial Vasudan Fleet, the top guns, the elite of the elite. And after seeing what they had done to his squadron, Harlow could believe it. It had happened so fast, so goddamn fast... they took apart the squadron like a school of spacegoing piranha ... saving him for last.

"We have been monitoring your transmissions, Commander Harlow," the translated voice came over his com. His name, incongruously, came through as 'hollow.' Which was exactly how he felt. "Prepare to be taken aboard," the Vasudan said. "Further resistance would be pointless. You have fought well and you shall be treated with all due deference to your rank, according to your own long-standing tradition of the Geneva Conventions. Do you accept these terms?"

Harlow grimaced. "Have I got a choice?"

"No, Commander, you do not. Death, however honorable, is no longer an option. We prefer to have you alive. But out of respect, we would like to at least observe the formalities."

Harlow snorted. "Well, that's mighty goddam human of you," he replied.

"Sarcasm," came the reply, followed by a peculiar, grunting sound that might have been a chuckle. "Derision. Irony. The use of words meant to convey the opposite of meaning. A uniquely human concept. I have studied this. I shall hope to have the opportunity to learn more from you. It will be interesting to make your acquaintance, Commander. I look forward to it. Tallanis out."

Son of a bitch, thought Harlow. Admiral Tallanis! The old death-lover himself. The most decorated Vasudan officer of the T-V War. And the leader of the mutiny. What the hell does he want with me?

They did not take any chances. As soon as they brought the blasted hulk of his fighter aboard through one of the launch bays, they threw up a cordon of security around it, Vasudan Elites armed with lightweight energy weapons. A low setting would merely stun. Full setting would disintegrate. They had their weapons leveled at the cockpit as they waited for him to retract the canopy, just in case he had a sidearm and decided to try committing suicide by coming out fighting. He'd never have had a chance. They'd simply sweep the cockpit with stun blasts and he'd wake up in a day or so, nursing the mother of all headaches.

As it happened, they had no cause no concern. He was not wearing a sidearm ... and he couldn't even get the cockpit open. The canopy would not retract. They had to call their engineers to cut him out of there.

Once they had him freed, they helped him out and then the senior officer of the Elites approached him and snapped off a passable imitation of a Terran salute. It stuck in his craw, but Harlow returned it. If they were going to show him proper military courtesy, he'd be damned if he wasn't going to respond in kind.

"Follow me, you should, sir," the Vasudan officer addressed him. Harlow nodded curtly. No restraints. No rough stuff. There was no need for it. He was hopelessly outnumbered. They formed up on either side of him and marched him through the corridors of the Vasudan ship.

Physically, the Vasudans were imposing. They were larger than humans, though not significantly stronger. Their armored uniforms tended to make them seem bigger than they were. Harlow knew that, superficially, they possessed many similarities to humans. They breathed the same air, had similar metabolisms and similar modes of communication, though their vocal cords could not reproduce the necessary sounds for Terran Standard. They needed to wear translators to make themselves understood. Beyond that, appearances started to diverge.

Vasudans had brown, mottled, leathery-looking skin, with longer, bonier limbs and broader shoulders. They looked, to Harlow's eyes, like exaggerated skeletons with a little bit of skin and muscle layered over them. And there was something peculiar about the way they moved. They looked like effects from those old 20th century stop-motion animation films, as if their brains were sending their muscles hundreds of little messages a second, each designed to translate into a single millimeter of movement, resulting in motions that had a vaguely jerky flow.

Alien, thought Harlow. No matter how liberal you wanted to be about it, you just couldn't think of them in human terms, because, when it came right down to it, they weren't.

He was escorted to the bridge, where he was brought into the presence of the old death-lover himself. Admiral Tallanis swiveled around in his command chair to face him as Harlow was brought aboard the bridge. Their gazes locked. What Harlow wanted to do was spit right in his eye. What he did, however, was salute a superior officer. "Permission to come aboard, sir," he said, with a strong hint of irony in his tone.

Tallanis returned the salute, Terran-style, with textbook precision. His shoulders shook slightly as he gave that peculiar, grunting chuckle. "Permission granted, Commander," he replied, using a mini, throat-mounted translator. "Welcome aboard the Imperial Vasudan Starship Hammer. I am Admiral Gar Tallanis."

The name, Harlow knew, was merely a translator approximation of the actual Vasudan name. To Harlow, untranslated Vasudan sounded like a cross between a camel grunting and Chinese that had been recorded and then played backwards.

"Commander Creed Harlow, 101st GTA Fighter Wing, Black Eagle Squadron," he replied.

Tallanis made a pigeon-headed movement that passed for a nod among Vasudans. "I am familiar with the reputation of the 101st Fighter Wing," he said. "The Black Eagles distinguished themselves during the war."

"A war you're apparently still fighting," Harlow said.

"No, Commander, not the same war," Tallanis replied. "A different one. A holy war. As you Terrans might call it... a jihad."

"That's Arabic, not Terran Standard," Harlow corrected him. "There may still be some Terrans who

believe in the idea of a holy war, but most of us regard it as an outmoded concept...a contradiction in terms. There's nothing holy about war, Admiral. Killing is just killing."

"I beg to disagree, Commander. There are many different types of killing. There is the killing that one does for self-defense, and the killing that one does for conquest or suppression. There is the killing done out of personal necessity, and the killing done out of duty. There is the killing which can produce personal satisfaction ... and the killing which produces only regret and a sense of loss, as in the case of your squadron. Their deaths were necessary, but I took no satisfaction in them."

Harlow snorted with derision. "They were just a bunch of young rookies. Not counting myself, there were only two pilots in the whole squadron who had ever flown a combat mission. You never even gave 'em a chance. Your fighters came in like a bunch of common sneak thieves, offering to assist in flying escort, and like a fool, I agreed. You wiped them out before they even knew what hit 'em."

"Yes, no doubt it would have been more honorable to offer combat properly rather than employing stealth and deceit to gain the advantage of surprise," Tallanis said, with what sounded like regret, "but it would not have been nearly as efficient. You see, Commander, I have only this one vessel, and the complement of fighters that it carries. As a renegade who has been declared traitor by my own misguided government, I do not have the luxury of pulling into base for resupply, refitting or refurbishment. And while it would be difficult, though not necessarily impossible, to pick up new recruits to replace personnel that had been killed in action, there would be no way to replace their fighters. Efficiency, therefore, must be my constant watchword. I can afford to take no chances. So I took none with your squadron. And despite my advantage of surprise, you almost managed to mount an effective counter-offensive. Quite impressive, under the circumstances. I was ruthless, Commander, because I had to be. I had no choice."

"Why spare me, then?" Harlow asked. "You had your fighters double and triple team me, so that you could cripple my weapons and navigation systems without blowing me apart. What makes me so goddamn special that you wanted me alive?"

"Essentially, your rank, Commander," Tallanis said. "Although you seem to possess some qualities that I find admirable and worthy of respect, the simple fact of the matter is that you are an officer of the Galactic Terran Alliance, specifically, a combat officer... and I need one."

"Then I'm afraid you wasted your time," said Harlow. "I'm just a fighter jock, Admiral. We don't have a lot of 'Need to Know' when it comes to highly classified intelligence. We're just point and shoot. You ought to know that."

"You mistake my meaning, Harlow, if I may permit myself the familiarity of addressing you by name," Tallanis said, rising from his command chair. He approached Harlow and looked down at him. Harlow was six feet tall, and Tallanis had at least another foot and a half on him. "I did not bring you aboard my ship so that I could interrogate you, but so that you could, in a manner of speaking, interrogate me and my crew."

Harlow blinked. "You want to run that one by me again?"

"All the Galactic Terran Alliance knows about the Hammer of Light is what the Foreign Ministry of the Vasudan Empire tells them," said Tallanis. "And that is not only secondhand information, it is also very biased and utterly self-serving. I want the Terrans to know the truth ... from someone who has experienced it firsthand."

"Then why not tell them yourself?" asked Harlow. "Your knowledge of Terran Standard is excellent. Translators do not usually compensate for syntactical patterns so smoothly. You may not be able to speak the language, Admiral, but I'm betting you can read and write it fluently."

"Indeed, I can," Tallanis replied. "I am something of a student of your human culture. Enough to know that your innate distrust of your own various races was overwhelmed only by your xenophobia towards extraterrestrials. Your alliance with the Vasudan Empire exists only out of a perceived necessity, and is based less on trust than on a mutual fear of extinction. I can easily discern your true feelings for my people, Commander Harlow. My words to humanity would only be the words of yet another detestable Vasudan. And a renegade, at that. They would listen far more readily to one of their own, to a veteran combat officer of the Galactic Terran Alliance Starfleet."

Harlow frowned and narrowed his eyes, uncertain he had heard correctly. "You saying you want me to be your PR man?"

Tallanis hesitated, apparently not familiar with the term and waiting for the translator headpiece to sort through all the acronymic possibilities and choose the proper one from the context. "Ah, a public relations representative," he said, a moment later, then nodded. "Excellent. In essence, yes. That is exactly what I want."

"Then you've gotta be out of your bloody, goddamn mind.... sir."

Tallanis chuckled with that strange, deep, grunting sound. "I have been accused of that before. I ask nothing more than that you speak the truth, as you perceive it. We will speak more of this. In the meantime, I have taken the liberty of having quarters prepared for you. There will be no enforced confinement unless your actions should make that necessary. You may have the run of the ship -- save for certain secure areas such as the armoury, of course. For reasons of security, you understand, you will be kept under constant guard. You may be a prisoner of war, Commander, but we shall attempt to make your stay with us as comfortable as possible. I want you to know us, Harlow. And to understand us. You must understand if you are to communicate our purpose. Now, if you will excuse me, I must see to it that the prize crew have completed the task of requisitioning the necessary supplies from the freighter."

"And what about the freighter's crew?" asked Harlow, tensely.

"I am told that they did not put up a struggle."

"So you killed them all?" asked Harlow, with a sinking feeling.

"I am a soldier, Harlow, not a murderer. I do not kill people who surrender. That is not my purpose. There were some injuries, but no fatalities. They have functional life support in the sealed off sections of their vessel which have maintained structural integrity. They had already sent out a distress signal, so they should survive until a rescue ship arrives."

And with that, Tallanis nodded to Harlow's escort, and the Elites led him from the bridge, down a short companionway, and to an interior tube shuttle that traversed the length of the ship. The guards did not speak to Harlow as they led him into the shuttle and indicated a seat. His human anatomy did not quite fit properly, but he made do. With a soft hiss, the door slid shut and the clear-walled, egg-shaped shuttle began to slide along the tube, gathering speed as it went.

He glanced at the Elites sitting across from him. One was clearly an officer, the equivalent of a lieutenant of Marines, if Harlow recalled his Vasudan insignia. He met the Elite's gaze. "Are you allowed to talk to the prisoner?" he asked, wryly.

"Speak, you wish?" the Vasudan replied, his syntax clearly not as good as his commanding officer's. The translators could only translate; they couldn't make you sound more erudite than you were.

"Sure, why not?" said Harlow.

"About what, speak?"

"Oh, I dunno. You. The admiral. This ship. This nutso prophecy that you all seem to believe in."

The word "nutso" seemed to hang up the Vasudan's translator for a moment. Harlow grinned.

"Admiral Tallanis great man is," the Elite replied, after a moment. "Spiritual man is. Visionary leader is. The prophecy foretells does truly. Not ... nutso."

"Not nutso, eh?"

"Not."

Harlow snorted. "So we're all supposed to die, is that it? The Shivans are the Hand of God, come to cleanse the universe, something like that? And we're all just supposed to roll over, put our heads between our legs and kiss our butts goodbye? Just because about a thousand years ago, some goofball Vasudan holy man had a few too many belts one night and said so? Is that the deal, more or less?"

Judging by the Elite's reaction, the translator seemed to be having a tough time with that one. Harlow didn't care. He half-hoped the Elite would come up out of that contoured seat and take a swing at him for making fun of his beliefs, but he knew that wasn't going to happen. Tallanis ran a tight ship, and the old deathhead needed him, or thought he did. He had made that clear enough, though why he really give a damn what humans thought about him one way or the other didn't seem to make much sense. He wipes out my entire squadron, Harlow thought, then spares the freighter's crew and asks me to get his terrorist message out to the GTA, so that the Hammer of Light could be properly understood. Tallanis may have been a brilliant soldier once, and perhaps he still is, but he had to be completely certifiable.

Either the translator had made a complete muddle of his slang, or else the Elite had simply chosen not to bother to respond, because the rest of their short ride was spent in silence. Harlow was escorted to his quarters, which had apparently been vacated for his benefit by some Vasudan officer, judging by their size and furnishings. It was a lot nicer than the berth he had back at Tombaugh Station. The Elites took up their post outside the door as it closed automatically.

"Well, here we are," Harlow said to himself out loud, as he glanced around at his surroundings. "Home, sweet, alien home."

"It's not exactly what I would've picked, either."

Harlow started at the familiar and totally unexpected sound of another human voice. A female human voice. She stood in the bedroom doorway, hands braced against the doorframe, watching him with a speculative gaze. Harlow had never seen her before. Her dark hair was cut short and she stood about five-five, slender and leggy. She was young, Harlow guessed in her early to mid-twenties. And she wore the uniform of a lieutenant junior grade in the GTA Merchant Space Fleet -- which could only mean one thing, of course. She was off the freighter they'd been escorting.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, as soon as he'd recovered from his initial surprise.

"I was trying to figure out more or less the same thing," she replied. "But I think now I understand. It all makes a weird, but perfect kind of sense, I guess."

"Well, then maybe you wouldn't mind explaining it to me," said Harlow. "And if you don't mind, Lieutenant, identify yourself?"

With a smirk, she straightened up, approached him, and snapped off a crisp salute. "Lieutenant

Rafferty, C.J., Merchant Space Fleet, late of the MS Orion Maru, reporting for duty, sir!"

"Duty? What the hell are you talking about? What duty? We're both prisoners of war."

She gave a small snort. "A little slow on the uptake, huh, Commander? That chauvinist Vasudan dinosaur up there on the bridge decided you needed some female companionship, so I got 'requisitioned,' along with everything else they needed off my ship. Don't you get it? I'm here for you. So ... 'reporting for duty.' Sir," she added, wryly.

Harlow stared at her. "You've gotta be kiddin' me."

"Hey, figure it out, hot shot," she said. "They didn't even give me time to pack any spare clothes. I guessed they figured I wouldn't be needing them. Much."

"That's insane. They bring anyone else from the Orion Maru aboard?"

"Nope. Just me. They lined up the whole crew of the freighter, segregated the males from the females, and then one of the Vasudans went down the line, checking us all out up and down. I guess he had a vidlink thru his helmet com to the mothership. So who was watching the monitor on the other end?" She raised her eyebrows. "You?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Lieutenant," Harlow said. He headed for the door. "I'm going to demand that Admiral Tallanis return you to the Orion Maru immediately."

"It's a little late for that," said Rafferty. "We just entered Freespace."

Harlow stopped. "I know. I just felt the shift."

"So it looks as if we're stuck with one another," Rafferty replied. "Besides, if you go telling the admiral that we're a bit more enlightened than the Vasudan culture when it comes to equality between the sexes, and that you're not going to accept the, uh, 'arrangements' that he had in mind, he might decide that I'm just so much unnecessary baggage, if you get my drift. Maybe he won't put me out an airlock, but I'd just as soon not have to find out."

"Good point," said Harlow. "He's not exactly consistent with his logic."

"Oh, and there's only one sleeping cubicle in here."

"Yeh." Harlow grimaced. "Well, that would have to figure, wouldn't it?"

"You're senior officer," she said. "I'll take the floor."

"The hell you will." He glanced around dubiously at the Vasudan furnishings. "I'll sleep in that thing," he said, pointing at what looked like a cross between a contoured lounge and a birthing chair.

Rafferty glanced at it and raised her eyebrows. "Good luck," she said. "By the way, I'm a certified ship's medic and a licensed chiropractor. I think you'll be glad of that come morning."

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Tallanis had promised Harlow free run of the ship, and Harlow took advantage of that, exploring the Hammer to the extent he was allowed, escorted by alert guards every step of the way. Rafferty accompanied him, since there wasn't anything else for her to do. Besides, as a Merchant Space Fleet officer, she was just as curious as he was. What Harlow wanted to see more than anything else was the Flight Deck of the Hammer, and apparently the guards did not have any instructions to prevent him.

A younger officer had replaced the one who had led the detail the first day and this one "spoke" much better Terran Standard, which meant that, like Tallanis, he understood grammar and syntactical structure well enough to sound natural through the translator. He answered all their questions and proudly pointed out the details of his ship. As Harlow and Rafferty stood out on the catwalk overlooking the Hammer's Flight Deck, the young Vasudan pointed out the fighters and the salient points of the launch bays with obvious pride.

"The Hammer boasts a complement of three hundred and fifty Imperial class fighters," the young Vasudan officer said, sweeping his arm out to indicate the sleek vessels below.

"Isn't that more than the standard Vasudan destroyer usually mounts?" asked Harlow, as he stared down at the Flight Deck, where row upon row of the sleek, silver and gold, Imperial class Vasudan fighters stood parked side by side, weapons banks pivoted up and back on their mounting struts, enabling them to be parked close together, with only a few feet separating fuselage from fuselage..

The young officer did that strange, pigeon-headed nod. "We have maximized our fighter capability to carry as many as the Flight Deck can possibly hold. And our highly trained launch crews are capable of deploying the full complement of fighters in less time than the average destroyer in the Imperial Vasudan Fleet can launch all theirs. We are on constant standby, battle-ready mode, and can engage the enemy almost twice as quickly as the average destroyer in the Vasudan Fleet."

"Lucky for you, since they're all out gunning for you, aren't they?" Harlow said. "How does it feel to regard your own people as 'the enemy,' and to have them regarding you as traitors and terrorists?"

"I was warned that you would ask such questions," the young officer replied. "And I was instructed to reply honestly and to the best of my ability. The answer is, it feels sad that so many of our people lack the faith to understand that what must be must be, and that the prophecy of the Omen of Darkness shall come to pass."

"The Omen of Darkness?" Rafferty asked. "What's that?"

"It is an old prophecy among my people," the Vasudan officer replied, with the intensity of the true believer. "Long before our own civilization arose, there lived another race of beings known to us only as 'The Ancients.' Evidence of their culture was discovered in a nearby system and it is believed by many that our own civilization on Vasuda Prime could never have developed as it did without their aid. But The Ancients disappeared without a trace, and Vasudan scientists believe a cataclysm of some sort befell their culture. The prophecy, however, tells us what that cataclysm must have been."

"The Shivans?" Rafferty asked.

"Or some force very much like the Shivans," the young officer replied. "The ruins of the Temple of Altair, one of the few almost completely intact structures left behind by the The Ancients, contain elaborate murals depicting the arrival of a dark and cleansing force, relentless and unstoppable. Some of these illustrations show monsters, creatures, which resemble strongly the design of spacecraft employed by the Shivans."

"So you believe that the Shivans came and wiped out these Ancients?" Rafferty asked.

The Vasudan gave a pigeon-headed nod. "They became too proud, too arrogant, too unmindful of the balance of the universe and their proper place within the scheme of things. They threatened to upset that balance, and so, the Destroyers came. Much as they have now come for my people ... and for yours."

"So why not fight them?" Rafferty asked. "Why simply accept defeat?"

"Because the cleansing force of the Destroyers is the inevitable mechanism through which the Omen of Darkness shall be realized," the young Vasudan said. "They cannot be stopped, because the universe cannot be stopped. The balance must be preserved. Your own human sacred writings also speak of this. Do they not say, 'To every thing, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under Heaven?' Our season has passed, and so we must pass, as well. We must return to the Oneness of the Universe and reunite with it, so that the cosmic balance may once more be restored."

"Except that most Vasudans don't seem as anxious to return to the 'Oneness of the Universe' as you do," said Harlow, wryly.

"If they lack the moral courage to accept their destiny, then they must be shown how to find it."

"By Admiral Tallanis, right?" said Harlow. "The Hammer of Light, himself. Fall in love with death, embrace your Fate. What a load of crap. You realize he's totally psychotic, don't you?"

The look the young Vasudan officer gave him was difficult to read, because Harlow simply did not know enough about Vasudan facial expressions, but his terse words spoke plainly enough. "Admiral Tallanis is my father," the Vasudan said.

"Great," muttered Rafferty, under her breath. "Smooth move, Harlow."

Suddenly, an alarm pealed out across the Flight Deck, igniting an instant flurry of activity below. Harlow did not need to be familiar with the protocol aboard Vasudan military vessels to know what was going on. It was obvious.

"Battle Stations," the young officer said, tensing visibly. "I must go. You may remain here, if you wish, and watch the Flight Deck preparations. These soldiers will attend you." He indicated the guards behind them, then rushed off.

"What's going on?" asked Rafferty.

"Well, when we came out of Freespace," said Harlow, "we were somewhere in the system of Vasuda Prime, according to one of the guards I spoke to. So that means that either Tallanis is about to launch an attack on some of his own people, or else someone is attacking him."

"The Vasudan Fleet?" asked Rafferty.

"Let's hope so," Harlow said. "Because if it's the Shivans, then that fruitcake might just decide to embrace his predestined fate and not fight back. Either way, I don't much feel like sticking around and finding out."

And before Rafferty could react, Harlow turned quickly, grabbed the Vasudan guard behind him, yanked him forward and swung him around, yanking the sidearm out of his holster as he did so and shoving him hard into the other two. Startled and knocked off balance, one of the guards staggered back and almost went over the railing of the catwalk. As the others collided, Harlow hit them both with stun blasts and they collapsed to the catwalk at his feet. Then he caught the arm of the guard that was struggling for balance, half over the railing, and pulled him back onto the catwalk, then promptly stunned him point blank to the chest.

"You're welcome," he said to the unconscious guard, glancing down at the weapon in his hand and checking the power supply. "Let's hear it for shared technology."

"Are you crazy? What are you doing?" Rafferty asked, shocked.

"Getting the hell outta here. You coming?" he relived the unconscious guards of their sidearms and tossed one to Rafferty. "You know how to use one of those?"

"I had the same briefings on Vasudan weapons you did," she replied, catching the weapon and checking it. "That's S.O.P. in Merchant Space Fleet. I even had a chance to qualify with one."

"Yeh?" said Harlow. "You ever qualify with one of those?"

She followed his gaze down to one of the gold and silver Imperial fighters on the Flight Deck and her eyes grew wide. "You're not serious?"

"It's the only chance we've got," he said.

Below them, the cacophany of the call to Battle Stations and the frenzy of activity taking place to get the fighters launched meant that the Vasudans on the Flight Deck were not going to have much time to notice them. At least, Harlow devoutly hoped that was the case.

"C'mon," he said, beckoning Rafferty to follow as he took off running down the catwalk towards the lift tube at the other end. "Move it!"

"I sure hope you know what the hell you're doing," she said, as she followed him. They got into the cage and Harlow stabbed at the unfamiliar controls until he got the thing descending.

"I hope so, too," he said. "But either way, I'm not about to trust my fate to some whacked out fanatic who thinks the Shivans are God's avenging angels or some crazy thing like that."

The rising and falling, whooping claxon of the Battle Stations call filled the cavernous Flight Deck as launch crews went into their well-rehearsed routines and pilots came rushing out to their assigned fighters. Several fighters were already rising on their platforms to the Launch Bays on the level above.

"Leave that weapon set on stun," said Harlow. "It'll make the charge last longer and if we blow this, it'll go easier on us if we don't kill anyone."

"Let's hope you're right. Can you fly one of those things?" asked Rafferty, as they reached the Flight Deck level and stepped out of the lift cage.

"I'm not sure," said Harlow.

"What the hell do you mean you're not sure? This is a fine time to tell me that!"

"The Vasudan Imperial two-man fighter was the basis of the GTF Ulysses," Harlow said, as they moved along the bulkhead, trying to stay out of sight behind banks of equipment and the fighter lift platforms. "That was the first fighter developed from shared T-V technology. The Ulysses combined the best aspects of our Apollo fighter with their design. I qualified in one of those."

"But it still wasn't the same fighter," said Rafferty. "And the controls were not set up for a Vasudan."

"Well, gee, Rafferty, if you're gonna nitpick"

"Shit," swore Rafferty. "We're gonna die."

"Heads up." He pointed to a couple of helmeted pilots hurrying their way, rushing toward one of the silver and gold fighters parked in front of them. "You take the one on the left...."

Two stun blasts and they were down. They ran out and quickly dragged them back out of the way. "Get their helmets off," said Harlow.

"They'll never fit," said Rafferty. "They're much too big! And we'll never get into their uniforms!"

"We don't have to," Harlow replied, as he tugged a helmet off one of the unconscious pilots. "Once we're in the cockpit, all they'll see is our helmets. And they won't have to fit perfectly. The cockpits have their own life support systems that kick in once the canopies lock down. Now hurry up!"

They donned the helmets and climbed up into the cockpit of the nearest fighter, settling into the seats just as other pilots appeared running towards their craft on the Flight Deck.

"What happens now?" asked Rafferty. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing," Harlow told her. "Just sit tight and look like you belong there. Fighter launch procedures are not handled by the pilot. The launch crews and automated catapults take care of that. Let's just hope they follow the battle drill and get us launched as fast as possible without a whole lot of preliminaries. If we have to do a flight check, we're screwed."

The fighter pivoted on its remote-controlled locking mounts as the launch crews brought it up in line to the next lift platform. Harlow scanned the unfamiliar instruments as diagnostics readouts flashed by automatically in a language he could not make head nor tail of.

"We're never going to get away with this," said Rafferty.

"Shut up and let me think, dammit," Harlow replied, curtly. He could not translate the readouts, but he knew roughly what they'd have to be saying if everything was optimal. In seconds, years of training took over and he started to see certain parallels in the design of the instrumentation with the Ulysses fighter. The control had been designed for larger Vasudan hands, and longer Vasudan arms, but he could work them. It wasn't really all that different from the Ulysses design....

"Harlow...."

"I see them...."

As the fighter was brought up on the track, the launch team was signaling something, clearly waiting for a response. Harlow gambled and made a quick, vague gesture with his arm, then imitated the pigeon-headed nod.

The fighter shuddered slightly as it slid into the launch platform's locking chocks and started to rise toward the Launch Bay. The canopy slid forward with a whine and locked into place.

"Cross your fingers...." Harlow said.

"Oh, boy...." said Rafferty.

The fighter jerked forward and snapped into position in the catapult, then the locking chocks released. "Okay, stand by," said Harlow. "Engines on...."

The engines came on as the weapons banks lowered into place and locked in on their mounting struts.

"Yes!" said Harlow. "Okay. Here goes nothing...."

The Launch Bay doors opened and the catapult hurled the fighter out into space as Harlow slammed

the stick forward as far as it would go and they shot away from the ship, gaining speed rapidly.

"We did it! We made it!" Rafferty cried.

"Not yet we haven't," Harlow said. "In about five seconds, the squadron's leader's going to realize we're deviating from formation and he'll want to know why in one hell of a hurry."

"And then what?"

"Depends how fast it takes them to figure out who we are. And how busy they're going to be with those incoming fighters."

"What incoming fighters? I don't see anything."

"Check your displays."

"Which one?"

"The large square one to the right."

"The one with all the little dots?"

"Yeh," said Harlow. "Those 'little dots' are blips, Lieutenant. And each one is a Ulysses fighter from the Imperial Vasudan Fleet. They're coming in hot, in battle formation, at about eleven o'clock. We should have visual contact in about two minutes."

"Well...that's good, right? I mean, they're on our side."

"Yeh, except they don't know it," Harlow said.

"Right," said Rafferty. "We're in one of the Hammer's fighters. You can radio them, right?"

"Maybe.... If I can find the damn radio controls ... and if they'll listen."

"Harlow...."

A burst of rapid Vasudan came over his com.

"Damn. I think they just figured out who the hell we are," said Harlow.

Several of the Hammer's fighters peeled off from their formation and gave pursuit. A moment later, a familiar voice came over the com.

"Commander Harlow," said Admiral Tallanis, "you are abusing my hospitality."

"Really?" Harlow said. "I thought I was a prisoner of war. And isn't it a prisoner of war's first duty to attempt escape?"

"Harlow! They're coming!" Rafferty cried.

"I know. I see 'em on the monitor. You know how to work the weapons systems?"

"I'm a medic, not a goddamn gunner!"

"Well, I don't need a medic! Damn it, we'll just have to do the best we can. Listen....there should be a fire control console just to your right, by your knee, I think...."

"Okay. I think I got it."

"You should have a row of toggles right across the top. Flick 'em all up to arm the guns."

"What if they're the wrong ones? I don't want to go hitting an ejector seat or anything."

"Well, you'll find out soon enough."

"Terrific."

"Harlow, this escape attempt is doomed to fail," Tallanis came back over the com. "I cannot have you hijacking one of my fighters. I cannot afford to lose it."

"Yeh, well, I couldn't afford to lose my squadron, either," Harlow replied, through gritted teeth.

"Okay. The toggles are all up and glowing orange. What does that mean?" asked Rafferty.

"It means the Banshee guns are armed...I hope," said Harlow. "We'll find out in a moment. Damn!"

A pulse blast from one of the pursuing fighters narrowly missed them on the port side. Harlow pulled back and up on the stick and went into a roll. The fighter on his tail was good. The pilot stayed right with him.

"Shoot the son of a bitch!" said Harlow.

"How?" asked Rafferty.

"Fire control button on your gunnery stick. Direction of the stick controls the turrets in the pods...."

"Okay...."

A new voice came on over the com, but a familiar one. "Turn around and return to the ship at once, Commander Harlow, or my next shot shall not miss."

"Like father, like son," said Harlow. "You're both nuts. I thought you couldn't afford to lose this fighter."

"We cannot. But we shall destroy it if we must. I do not have time to waste on you, Commander. We are coming under attack."

"Will you shoot him, please?" said Harlow.

"I'm trying...."

Two pulse blasts shot out from the weapons banks, directly to the front of the fighter.

"Okay, now you want to try shooting behind us, where the fighter is?" said Harlow.

"How the hell do I that?"

"Directional pod controls, right next to the trigger, on your stick....."

"Oh...okay....I think I got it...."

"Commander, this is your last warning," Tallanis' son said, over the com, from the pursuing fighters. "Turn around now."

"Shoot, damn it!"

This time, the pulse cannon fired to their rear, but the shots did not even come close.

"Hell...." said Harlow.

"I'm doing the best I can!"

"Yeh, I know you are. Trouble is, it's just not good enough."

Another shot from the pursuing fighters narrowly missed their starboard side. They had him bracketed. They were telling him he was directly in their sights.

"Tallanis!" Harlow shouted, into his com.

There was no response.

"Tallanis! Who the hell is going to take your message to the Terran Alliance if you kill us?" Harlow shouted.

Another shot, this time grazing the port side. They were playing with him. Letting him know they could blow him to bits at any time.

"The Omen of Darkness, Tallanis! Who's going to explain that for you? Who gets to tell your side of it, me or the Vasudan government?"

There was a brief burst of Vasudan over the com.

"They're turning back!" cried Rafferty.

"And here comes the Vasudan Fleet," said Harlow, as the attacking fighters came swooping towards them. "Let's just hope they saw them shooting at us and give us time to explain."

The voice of Admiral Tallanis came over the com one last time. "I am surprised at how much you have learned in such a short time. Perhaps we will meet again someday, Commander. In the meantime ... be a good 'PR man.' Tallanis out."

The passenger quarters aboard the Vasudan transport heading out to Freespace and then Tombaugh Station were not all that dissimilar from the quarters Harlow had aboard the Hammer. Reasonably roomy, but with appointments that looked less like furnishings than torture equipment from some bizarre, art deco dungeon. As soon as he came in, a chime from the wall screen informed him that he had a call coming in. It was his division commander from Tombaugh Station.

"Good to see you alive, Harlow."

"Thank you, Colonel. It's nice to be alive."

"About your squadron, Harlow..."

Harlow tensed.

"We received a full report from the crew of the Orion Maru. They also kept a monitor log of your transmissions. I'm satisfied that, under the circumstances, you did the very best you could. Under the treaty alliance protocol, and with the Shivans loose somewhere in the sector, you did the right thing in accepting their offer to assist with escort. You had no way of knowing they were terrorists."

"Yes, sir, but —"

"Even if they didn't have the advantage of surprise," the colonel continued, "your squadron wouldn't have stood a chance. Most of them were replacement personnel, with no combat experience. And they were up against pilots who were once the cream of the Imperial Vasudan Fleet. I don't see how it could have come out any different. You did the best you could, son. Don't go blaming yourself for this one."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"I understand you had a chance to spend some time with Admiral Tallanis."

"Not much, sir, but enough to get a good sense of what he's all about."

"Headquarters is very interested. There will be a formal debriefing as soon as you get back."

"It'll be good to be back, sir."

"Get some rest, Harlow. See you back at Tombaugh."

The colonel signed off and Harlow switched off the screen.

"So...home, sweet, home, eh?"

He spun around. Rafferty was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, her hands braced against the doorframe. She was wearing a short robe.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Harlow, with surprise.

"I told the Vasudans I was yours," she said. "You know how enlightened they are about their gender politics. They didn't even question it."

"I see. How many sleeping cubicles are there in this cabin?"

"One."

"I'm not sleeping in that goddamn chair again."

Rafferty smiled as she came toward him. "Who asked you to?"

The End