

# Planetary Strife

By Sylae - May 13 2009

“ There was once a time, not so long ago, when humanity was united under one flag, and there was no war. The Human Confederation spanned all the known universe, and its people were content. Then all hope was shattered when the 263rd Assembly of the Planets was bombed. The news slowly drifted across the various planets, and was magnified by rumor. Thoria had cracked in half--no, intelligent aliens had attacked--no, it was the machines uprising...the rumors fragmented the states. Although government was quickly restored across the known universe, the ideas remained, and one by one, the planets rebelled. ”

—First paragraph of *Planetary Strife: The people's account of present affairs in Humanity*

Lorn turned as a gust of wind blew the golden sands of Coriolis into his face, and stepped into the huge sander idling on top of one of the many dunes in the desert. The craft, dubbed *Sandworm*, was cooling down for the last leg of its journey back to the port city of Coriolis where the cargo, huge diamond crystals taken from the mines at the far edge of the wastelands, would be sold, hopefully for a great profit if he found a sap stupid enough to buy the crystals this time of year.

He found his way to the bridge just as the great ship thundered to life and began creeping forward. Entering he sought out Tyraven, the captain of the *Sandworm*. "Tyr! How does the great ship fare?"

"She's doing great for a ship carrying three hundred tons of minerals, if that's what you mean. I'll only be worried if this storm doesn't clear up soon. I've got a thousand riding on the races and I'd sure enjoy getting a signal so I can see the results." They both nodded solemnly. Lorn didn't gamble. It was too risky for a small merchant like him, but he still enjoyed the races, like every other person in the Derelict Republic. "Yeah, I hope Alev'll pull off that stunt he did on reentry again. That's something a man only sees once in his lifetime."

Lorn returned to his quarters after several more minutes of pleasantries and the ship rolled on across the great dunes of the Coriolis Desert.

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## Delta 4-7

By Vergil - May 14 2009

Mitsuribi Takagami was lazily polishing his pistols to the rhythmic beat of the current song that was blasting sound throughout his shack, making the sand quiver outside, he idly rubbed his left empty eye-socket through the rough patch over it. Once he felt that his 6 shooters was appropriately cleaned, Mitsuribi shoved them into his pockets. He shut off the music with a careful push of his big toe. Mitsuribi sat down at his table, opening a job listing for his escort fighter. A job offer detailing a certain highwayman assassination appeared, Mitsuribi eyed it with interest, then decided to come back to it later. *It would be much better if I didn't have to do such a cautious task.* A job offer to protect a water convoy came up, Mitsuribi snorted and deleted the offer, continuing on to the next. Mitsuribi sceptically eyed the rest, they either where too boring for the pay, or too tedious for the pay. He reluctantly decided to do the highwayman assassination. *Go in, wait for the scumbag to appear, shoot him, come home to loud music and bacon.* He sighed and put on his boots and coat, eye squinting, adjusting to the harsh brightness of the desert sand. He smiled as he approached his craft. The "D3Y60-AX Eclipse", the custom model making small changes to a navy skirmisher. Mitsuribi checked the ships status. *Energy Shields: Operational, Weaponry: Operational, Atmospheric Status: Unchanged, Autopilot: Operational, Engines: Operational, Music System: Rockin'.* Mitsuribi took a sip of coffee. *God I love this ship.* He turned on the music and set a course for the capital planet of the Chrjstian Empire, Prunilo. With a back look, Mitsuribi silently said good-bye to the barren world of Gormket. He pulled the pistols out of his pockets and rested them on the counter. *Elasticity* and *Irony* glittered in the nearby sun's rays. Mitsuribi kicked his chair up and fell asleep.

The beeping of his auto pilot woke Mitsuribi up with a groan, he reached for the flashing comms button and lightly tapped it. A screen image of a tight-faced navy officer came onto view.

"Unidentified Craft, please state you business here."

"This is Mitsuribi Takagami Delta 4-7."

The officer flipped a switch "Delta 4-7, you are cleared to land at docking port 21 on the east-side of the city Kiju."

Mitsuribi cut off the channel, put his guns into his pockets, and carefully descended on to the jewel planet of Prunilo. Guiding a ship through the atmosphere was tedious, keeping a constant rate of -15 degrees downward, roughly passing through the thick clouds. Mitsuribi gritted his teeth and shut off two of the space-travel stern engines, only using the all-purpose main engine. After breaching the cloud layer, he could see the beauty of Kiju in its blue sky and green ground. Docking port 21 slid open and Mitsuribi gently landed with a small thud after turning off the last engine. The port closed, raising the Eclipse to the elevator level. A conveyor belt reached to the side of the Eclipse. Mitsuribi walked through the small hull and onto the conveyor belt. He

walked into the elevator and pressed the floor 6 button. A young girl in uniform greeted him as the elevator opened.

"Welcome Mr. Takagami, you are expected at conference room 13, if you will please follow me." She briskly turned around and marched down the hall. She stopped at a door near the exit. "Mr. Jonnel is waiting for you inside."

Mitsuribi put on a slight grin. *Ah, Mickey, it will be good to see you.* Mitsuribi walked in and saw a short, balding chubby man with a mustache that he twirled with a furious frenzy.

"Mitsy!" He jumped out of his seat and promptly hugged Mitsuribi.

Mitsuribi returned the bear hug and smiled. "How ya doing Mickey?"

Mickey let out a hearty chuckle. "Fine, fine, now sit down and let me tell you the details on your job."

Mitsuribi took a seat. "Things must of improved last time I saw you, I don't remember cheery schoolgirls greeting me at the door.

Mickey sat down with a slowly fading smile "Ah, well, this time it is a bit more important than any other job you have taken for us."

Mitsuribi raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Why's that, I thought this was just another scumbag who robbed some rich man's son."

Mickey shook his head and sighed "Unfortunately, its more than that, he has always been a noticeable annoyance, but we had him locked up." Mickey's smile evaporated completely, it was a sight that Mitsuribi had never seen before. "Yet in a disastrous turn of events, he managed to break free of the dreadnought that was holding him and went off in a nicked Imperial Interceptor." Mitsuribi involuntarily let out a groan " I remember when the Navy used them to take down a small rebellious moon, they are terrifying. But," He said before Mitsuribi could vehemently deny his offer, "Not only will you get quite a bit of reward money, but since he will be flying the best of the navy's fighters, we figured we could outfit your fighter, which, by the specs I was given, is a very nice model, and it definitely has a good fighter pilot."

The ends of Mitsuribi's lips twitched "What would weapons would I be getting?"

Mickey gave him a list "We have a good idea on your fighting style when we watched you handle previous jobs, we would be giving you 3 Krake Particle Cannons, one which would be mounted on the top of your ship to service as a effective turret, a EMP pulse cannon, and a Sidewinder missile launcher, and we would upgrade your shields, countermeasures, and mines to a level that a Sargent would find on his ship."

Mitsuribi looked shocked "Good god, how tough is this guy if I am getting all this stuff, normally they wouldn't give a privates pea shooter to the man if he saved the queen!"

Mickey grimaced "Well, your rep did help you get this, and we REALLY want him. Alive. And, as a bonus, we would let you keep the improvements."

Mitsuribi smiled "How can I say no?" Mickey stood up and shook his hand.

On his way out, Mickey called to Mitsuribi "Watch yourself, Mit, this guy is different than the rest of them."

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## Cloudsoarer

By Sylae - May 14 2009

Three days later, Lorn had all the things from his meager quarters packed as the *Sandworm* rolled into the huge canyon 'port' of Coria. He thanked Tyraven for the quick journey, arranged for the various payments and fees to be made, and for the diamond to be stored in his warehouse, which was actually one of the many refurbished caves that pockmarked the walls of the redstone canyon. Walking over to the transit station by the large 'pier' jutting out of the rock and into the sands, he put the earbud of the radio in and tuned it to the Derilict News Network feed, relayed from Camilsen by satellite dishes in the mountains far above and brought through terrestrial lines in the ground. "...The Derilict Navy's new frigate, the *Cloudsoarer*, was launched from the military factories in Derilict orbit yesterday. It will join the growing fleet stationed outside the Ring," the female voice said as he stepped on to the craft going to Symphony Point. "Navy forces have been rising as more and more rumors come in of a Borea attack force being amassed. In other news..." the station flickered out as the engines on the craft flickered to life and punched it into the air. The DNN feed came back just in time for Lorn to learn that Tyr had some money to pay up. He turned the radio off and decided instead to listen to the conversations of the other passengers.

"...say Orlen's marrying *her*? What a sap!..."

"...sold the load for twenty-thousand...could've gotten more, but he knows how to haggle...lucky I came out with my shirt in that deal..."

"...my cousin signed up for the navy...on that new frigate...say war's on it's way...damned Boreans..."

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Upon arriving at his small house on one of the many tiered cliffs, he turned on some music, a medley of music from the Ancients (7,000 years hadn't helped the sound quality, but it was still amazing to hear) and checked the wall display to see what new messages had arrived while he was away. Only 42...that was good. He sent the messages to his screen in the study and dropped his belongings off in the bedchambers, then went to the study to read the messages. Most were junk, receipts for the transactions made this morning and several annoying advertisements the filter hadn't caught (he always set it as low as possible, higher settings had the habit of blocking important messages as well), but one message at the bottom of the stack called his eye, sent just an hour ago by an old friend, Ormus Pallery:

*Stay in your house, I will come to you this evening. Contact no one, there are people looking for you.*

He laughed. Ormus had joined the navy years ago and he hadn't seen him since. Still, he'd never been wrong before, and it wouldn't hurt to be cautious, just in case it wasn't a sick joke. Besides, he might as well get the place cleaned up.

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He was done with cleaning and halfway through a 7,000-year-old film, something about a machine-ruled future sending back a cyborg, when the doorbell rang. He paused the film and grabbed a pistol from under the couch. He checked the outside camera on the hall screen before opening the door, gun at the ready. "Why did the rings fall down from the sky?" he asked the man standing at the door.

"Because the red buffalo roamed freely," the man answered, completing the old joke between the two. Lorn lowered his weapon and Ormus walked in, closing the door behind him.

"I didn't think you'd take me seriously...I like what you've done with the place."

"Well, I didn't have any plans, and it never hurts to be cautious. It's not every day an old friend calls you up out of nowhere telling you to lay low," said Lorn.

"I see you still have the service pistol. Listen, you've heard of all the Borean rumors, right? Good. Well, they're true. For the past three years, I've been working covert in the Borean Kingdom. I just got back from Jeter last week."

"So, what does this have to do with me?" Lorn asked, already fearing the answer.

"You know that new ship they just completed, the *Cloudsoarer*? Well, it's not going to the Ring Fleet. It's taking a strike force into Jeter to destroy the battle group they've amassed."

"No. Every time they've asked me to come back, I've said no. My time in the Navy is through. I thought you people knew that." Lorn glared at Ormus. "I have a life now, a business to run."

"Listen, Derilict isn't asking anymore. They told me to bring you here whether you wanted to come or not. R+D is putting in five hundred thousand creds for your diamonds tomorrow, by the way, as payment for your work. They need the best captain they can get, and you're that."

Lorn still glared. "That was a lifetime ago. I haven't used this pistol, much less worked a bridge, in twenty years."

"Why are you trying to convince me? Pack your shit so we can go."

"You never were much for making people feel better about being forced into something," Lorn stated. "Just give me five minutes to repack."

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# Mercenary Aims

By Nioca - May 15 2009

ALLIANCE (*Noun*) - The state of being allied; the act of allying or uniting; a union or connection of interests between families, states, parties, etc.

CORUSCATE (*Verb*) To give off light; to reflect in flashes; to sparkle.

WAR (*Noun*) - A conflict involving the organized use of arms and physical force between countries or other large-scale armed groups. The warring parties hold territory, which they can win or lose; and each has a leading person or organization which can surrender, or collapse, thus ending the war.

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"*Phalanx* to Wehyon Station C-374, come in please... *Phalanx* to Wehyon Station C-374, please respond..." A finger let off a button. "Come on, you idiots, answer the damn hail."

"Maybe they're off for break?"

"And left no one on communications?" A woman replied. She looked up at the speaker, a man with dark hair and pale skin. He kept an eye on a holographic representation of their surroundings; a large globe with the *Phalanx* marked as a blue shape in the middle. Several yellow shapes were present in the globe as well, all of them behind the *Phalanx*. "Something's wrong. I can feel it." The woman added. She turned to face the view screen, then pressed the button she had held previously. "*Phalanx* hailing Wehyon Station C-374, please respond." She released the button upon finishing the sentence, adjusting a watch. She twisted the frame of the watch, and various different statistics flashed across its face. Heart rate, blood pressure, air pressure, oxygen levels... where was the time when you needed it? Finally, it displayed the current time. The woman frowned. "Mick, correct me if I'm wrong, but shouldn't they have received us by now?"

"Yes, they should have." Mick replied. He looked at a few different sensor readings before returning his attention to the holographic globe.

The woman leaned back in her chair. Pressing a few buttons, she opened communications again. "Wing Leader, this is Eyrina of Lead Ship *Phalanx*. We are not receiving response to our hails, please advise." She said tritely. She failed to keep the annoyed edge out of her voice.

The doors to the bridge opened, and a man and woman stepped through. "Sorry we're late." The woman said with a gravelly voice. "We had to check the engines."

"Did you make sure to clean up after *checking the engines*?" Eyrina said irritably, putting extra emphasis on her words.

A male voice came across the ship's communications, cutting off the other woman's reply. "This is Wing Leader. *Phalanx*, fall back to first position. *Maelstrom* is taking lead."

"Thank God..." Eyrina muttered. She pressed the ship-to-ship button again. "Acknowledged, Wing Leader. Moving to first position." She let the button go, and pressed a few others. "I've transferred communication over to you, Daryl. Open the receivers." Daryl nodded and pressed a few buttons at a side console. Eyrina also faced her console. On various screens were various diagrams and statistics regarding the ship. "Thrust... -5%." Eyrina muttered, gently pulling a small lever on the console partway back. The ship's speed started decreasing accordingly. She adjusted several more controls, keeping an eye on the holographic globe at the right edge of the panel. As the yellow shapes within moved closer, one of them broke off from the group and passed the blue shape marking the *Phalanx*. As it did, the viewscreen darkened, and a massive gray hull entered the screen. The *Maelstrom*, a missile frigate armed primarily with anti-fighter missiles, cruised past, taking the point position the *Phalanx* once occupied.

The *Phalanx* slipped into First Ship position in front of a medium-sized destroyer, the Wing Leader of this mission. The entire group consisted of three frigates, the destroyer, and an artillery ship. A few automated salvage ships brought up the rear, carrying destroyed enemy hulks to be sold as scrap or refurbished. They also had four fighters with them, docked on the wings of the *Phalanx*. The *Phalanx* itself was an unusual ship; originally an X-29 cargo frigate, it was modified by Eyrina into the battle frigate it was today. Two plasma guns and a plasma cannon adorned the front of the ship, along with dual missile bays along the side of the ship's face. It also had two wings jutting out from its sides, and on each wing were mounted two fighters, a thruster, and a gun turret. A considerable portion of its cargo bay was converted to hold a stronger power core, heavier shields, increased crew quarters, and a payload bay for ordinance.

A deep voice thundered across the ship's communications. "This is Lead Ship *Maelstrom*. We've established contact with Wehyon Station C-374. They're requesting that we redirect to Amethine."

Another communication came through. "This is Wing Leader, copy that. Plotting a new course for Amethine. All craft, keep formation!"

Eyrina groaned. According to the ship's computer, Amethine was a good six hours away.

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The fleet approached Amethine. A gray planet, it was effectively like every other planet in the Coruscate system: incapable of supporting human life, and loaded with mineral wealth. Amethine was also the base of the Inner Coruscate Government, the winning side of the Coruscate civil war. Despite the system's inhospitality, it was one of the wealthier and more populous systems. The rich mineral wealth on even one planet was enough to make millionaires with ease. Which was why people went through the expense of building massive city-domes on the various planets.

The civil war had torn the once-prosperous system to shreds. Every silver the battling governments had was being spent on the fighting. Before the fighting, Coruscate had been a powerful military and economic force within the known galaxy. Now, they were hiring out

mercenaries like the IceStar Alliance and praying that they were able to finish the war before the neighboring systems of Derilict and Borea got any ideas.

Eyrina carefully guided the *Phalanx* up to the Amethine Space Station and docked with it. Checking to make sure that her clothing was presentable, she quickly brushed a few wrinkles out of her cloak and uniform. Pressing an intercom button on the communications console, she announced, "We have docked with Amethine Station C-299. All personnel is to remain on-board the ship unless ordered otherwise." Releasing the button, she pressed another. A flashing message on one of the displays indicated that the ship's auto-repair was active.

Eyrina quickly made her way through the ship, eventually reaching the starboard port. Stepping through, she was greeted by several station guards wearing the amethyst uniforms of the Inner Coruscate military. After a few minutes of asking guards for directions, she made her way to the lobby of the station's docking bay. The other captains of their fleet were waiting, the commander of the fleet waiting impatiently. She approached, and was about to exchange pleasantries. However, it was interrupted by a man wearing a regal Coruscate uniform. "Gentlemen, ladies, the Sarissa wishes to speak with you. If you could follow me..." He intoned, motioning for them to follow.

The captains merely exchanged glances before following. The Sarissa was the top authority in the Coruscate government. Both the Inner and Outer governments had one.

However, Eyrina wound up pulled aside by a man she didn't recognize. "Captain Haford, you need to come with me."

"Why?" Eyrina said, reaching for one of the guns concealed under her cloak.

"Alliance business." The man stated simply. He lead her to a deserted corridor, then started speaking in hushed tones. "As you know, the IceStar Alliance has high stakes in this system. If we can ensure the Inner Coruscate's victory, we can secure contracts worth millions in this system. Ships, minerals, gold, even manpower. With a little luck, we might haggle an entire planet out of this. But in order to do that, we have to make sure that Inner Coruscate wins the war, and that another system doesn't move on Coruscate in its weakened state."

"Where do I come in?" Eyrina asked.

"Right now, we have intelligence that the neighboring Derilict and Borean systems are on the brink of war. A Coalition contact within the Derilict military reports that Derilict is about to launch the first strike. They're sending a force to launch a surgical strike at Jeter, where the Boreans are massing their fleet. If it succeeds, it'd cripple the Borean military, and allow an easy Derilict win."

"My job's to make sure the strike force doesn't make it." Eyrina finished sullenly, seeing where the man was leading her.

"Not quite. A direct attack, aside from being suicidal, would also do very little. You might take out one or two, but the rest would be intact. No, you'll need to figure out some way to weaken them. Doesn't matter how, so long as the Borean fleet comes out of it intact. And, preferably, the *Phalanx* as well." The man said softly.

"I take it I'm on my own." Eyrina ventured.



"Indeed. We can't spare any other ships right now. The *Phalanx* is the only free ship close enough to stop them. The IceStar system would send reinforcements, but it has its hands full with a recent arrival. Someone in a Chrjstian Imperial Interceptor showed up, and we're trying to figure out what he's playing at." The man paused. "You'll take the *Phalanx* to the Amethine shipyard for supplies. We're giving you a Battlecruiser power cell for the trip. You won't be able to use the rings; you have to use the *Phalanx*'s interstellar systems. Good luck." He added, walking away.

"Wait a mi-!"

"I've already had your payment delivered, Captain!" The man said cheerily, waving over his shoulder.

Eyrina sighed. She could already tell that the upcoming mission was going to suck.'

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## All Guns, Fire

By Ackrovan - May 18 2009

"All guns, fire!"

The ship's guns echoed as an echelon of energy bleated out of the ship. Racing through the vacuum of space, the particles burst into the shields hull. Fires blasted out of the ship, freezing out as it touched the void of space. Smoke half-hear tingly left the ship, out of fear of being engulfed by the hellish fire that was erupting throughout the ship. Glass shattered in every direction. People's remains floated around the vessel, limping throughout the area. Captain Troy could barely see what was transpiring. He was above the ship, in his K-19 Serpent, preparing for the orders to swoop down for the kill. All he could do as listen to the orders being rung on the intercom. His orders.

"Crest Squadron, cover the bombers as they make their second assault run."

"Yes sir", Troy responded. "Edge, on my wing. Blaze, Swordsmen, trail and follow. Archer, Heartbreak, stay low and watch our flanks. Lets keep these pilots alive, soldiers."

"Copy that, Martyr" Heartbreak responded first. The rest followed in unison.

Troy trusted his ship ahead, Edge staying close to his 9 o'clock position. They moved ahead of the column of PT Peacemaker bombers that were forming up into position. Blaze and Swordsmen ducked behind them, holding the rear of the formation. Heartbreak took the lead with Archer in toe, ducking down beneath the group. Once in position, Troy gave the order. "All bombers, attack!"

The bombers sped ahead, like children running for their candy. Canisters opening up beneath them, the missiles showily dropped out, suspended by thick pillars. Anti-Small Spacecraft guns (ASG's) opened up and tore out lead and power at the incoming ships. Troy and Edge bumped

ahead, shedding out small arms fire to counter the barrage. Ducking and spinning, Edge let lose a Pixel missile, blasting one of the ASG's. Troy ran ahead, shredding another ASG with his inferno guns. Spinning around again, Edge took out another turret with a Pixel. The fire clear, the two fighters broke off, flying farther away from the ship. Behind them, Swordsmen and Blaze targeted one of the communication array's, letting lose another barrage of inferno fire, decimating the component. Below them, Heartbreak and Archer condescended into space, trying to get out of the blast radius. And then the bombs were dropped.

The huge Thug Missiles dropped on the ship, echoing a pillar of death and destruction as it slammed into the ship. Vibrating across the ship, death led the hot plasma throughout the hallway's, incinerating the women and children inside it. In moments, a single voice of independence had cost the lives of the almost 900 people.

And thus the life of a Confederate pilot.

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## The Plan of the Flaw

By Nioca - May 25 2009

YEN (*Noun*) A strong desire, urge, or yearning.

FLAW (*Noun*) - A defect, fault, or imperfection, especially one that is hidden.

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Eyrina looked at the computer screen, idly pressing a key on a keyboard now and then. Various diagrams of Derilict ships flashed across the screen. She came across one that seemed interesting. A Derilict bomber. Capable of holding a massive payload. Showy, like pretty much every Derilict design. But definitely not to be underestimated. Low Amt rating. Easy enough to destroy, though that assumed there weren't a hundred or so fighters taking potshots at you.

Another tap on the keyboard, and Eyrina lifted a thermos of coffee. Another design flashed on the screen. The T-86 Starlancer.

Eyrina paused, stopping the thermos between the desk and her mouth. It simply hung there as Eyrina stared at the screen. But her mind was miles away. This was a craft she didn't need to examine. She knew it already. A venerable mix of missiles and plasma cannons. A respectable fighter. Capable of doing incredible damage, if it were in the right hands... Hadn't she proven that? Her mind flitted back to the Battle of Legacy. The terror... the *rush*. The thrill of proving herself to them, of doing the impossible. Before then, if anyone had said it was possible to kill a battlecruiser with a mere fighter, they'd have been laughed out of every navy in the entire galaxy. Yet she had shown otherwise...

So why was she so afraid now? Compared to that, this mission would be positively easy... right?

"Are you alright?"

Eyrina jumped slightly. Mick and Greta had entered, catching her unaware. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Reminiscing about old times, eh?" Mick said gruffly, looking at the computer screen.

"Screw old times." Greta said huffily. "What's this I hear about attacking a freaking *fleet*?"

"Orders from the top. Wasn't my choice on whether I could accept it." Eyrina said sourly. "If I could take a different mission, believe me, I would."

"So we're getting paid well for it?" Greta growled.

"Depends. Is 1,200 Gold a decent payment?" Eyrina asked sardonically.

"Hell no! Larger bounties go out on individual ships! Why the f-" Greta yelled.

Eyrina winced, raising a hand in an attempt to stem the oncoming rant. "Dammit, I know! It's not a proper mission, so it's crappy pay! And because it's a mandate from Analar that *someonetakes* this mission, I can't say no! Not unless you can think of another ship that could go out and do this!"

"Ladies!" Mick yelped. "Now's not the time to-"

"You go back and demand a better job. Or better pay! I don't care which!" Greta said belligerently.

Eyrina leaned forward. "I already wrestled an extra 200 out of him. That's as far as I can go."

"You're the celebrity here, you can demand this! Now go fix this godd-"

"You want more pay? A reassignment? Then go to Analar. He's aboard the *Epoch* right now. You go and demand it yourself. Because *my hands are tied*." Eyrina hissed.

Greta fumed for a moment. Finally, without another word, she stormed out of the room. "She's quite angry." Mick observed.

"No kidding." Eyrina replied. She became thoughtful for a moment. "She's going to mutiny, isn't she?"

"I don't know." Mick responded. "It's certainly possible. She's rather bitter about her demotion, and she certainly doesn't enjoy serving under someone else. Particularly you. And it doesn't help that she thinks you're soft."

"I can't exactly afford to replace a crew member right now, Mick." Eyrina stated.

"Can you afford not to?" Mick countered.

"And even if I could, I'm not the kind of person that offs every soul who disagrees with my authority." Eyrina continued.

"She may not give you much choice." Mick stated sadly.

"I know." Eyrina said, disgusted. She raised her thermos and took a sip of coffee.

"So what's the plan?" Mick asked.

"I don't know." Eyrina state dejectedly. "Maybe hit the fleet right over Borea, pull some ships off the attack. Buy time for the Boreans to mount a defense. Or do a hit-and-run in empty space with a payload of DENTs, kill several ships and maybe get them to call it off."

"Hmm." Mick mumbled unhelpfully. After a moment of thought, he added, "Well, you know Derilict designs."

"I know the T-86 Starlancer." Eyrina corrected.

"Well, anyway, every design has a weakness somewhere." Mick persisted. "Maybe it's as easy as finding something they have in common." He nodded and left, leaving Eyrina to stare fruitlessly at the computer screen.

The door to her room buzzed open again, and Daryl entered. "I really need to lock that." Eyrina commented, bemused.

"I just wanted to pass it on. They discovered decay in the third rear impulse engine, so we're going to be here a couple hours as they replace that." Daryl said with a smile.

"Okay, thanks." Eyrina nodded at him. She then returned to looking at the diagrams.

But Daryl's words acted as the spark of inspiration. She brought the schematics of all Derilict designs up, and took a look at them.

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Eyrina manned the bridge of the *Phalanx*, as it slowly headed away from the shipyard. Everyone on board was present on the bridge, standing and waiting for why she had called them all up.

"Gentlemen, ladies, before we make the jump to hyperspace, I want to run this past you. Right now, the plan for this attack hinges on a minor design flaw inherent in all Derilict vessels. Mick, tell me, what kind of engines do Derilict vessels use?"

"The same kind almost everybody uses. LAMFM engines." Mick asked, puzzled.

"Exactly. They ALL use LAMFM engines. The *Phalanx*, meanwhile, uses Mark VII Nuclear Impulse Thrusters, combined with two under-wing Mark VIs." Eyrina nodded at Mick.

"That ain't an advantage sweetheart." Greta grunted. "LAMFM's outperform Nuclear Impulse by a mile. They'll run circles around us."

"No. LAMFM's outperform all engines. But only when there's active magnetic fields." Eyrina corrected.

Mick smiled with comprehension. "You take away the fields..."

"...And suddenly the large, bulky *Phalanx* can outmaneuver even their fighters." Eyrina finished. "It's classic piracy technique. An attack on LAMFM-powered ships in empty space, where they can't maneuver. Furthermore, we've got a set of four DENTs in the payload bay." Eyrina added.

"DENTs?" One of the fighter mercenaries asked.

"Directed-Energy Nuclear Torpedoes." Eyrina explained. "Mark IIIs."

"So after we ambush them in open space, what next?" Daryl asked.

"The fighters will focus fire on any bombers that might be present, though not to the extent of ignoring other attacking ships. The *Phalanx* will use its torpedoes to take out the lead ship and their heaviest warships. With a little luck and the element of surprise, we might get a kill every torpedo. And even if we don't, it'll still weaken them enough to make it easy to finish the job. Now, one last thing. I don't want any hero stuff going on here. If I decide to pull the plug and get out, I want all IS-34s to break off and dock immediately. If an IS-34 isn't docked by the time I decide to go to hyperspace, it's left behind. Clear?"

The various people on the bridge nodded.

"Good. Hang on." Eyrina turned to her console. "Places everyone!" Various people scrambled off the bridge. Waiting precisely one minute, she activated the PA across the ship. "Entering hyperspace in 5... 4... 3... 2.. 1..."

The ship lurched forward as an explosion of color appeared in front of it. And in a flash of light, it was gone.

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## Discussions

By Sylae - May 27 2009

Lorn's skin tingled as the shuttle passed through the energy shields of the *Cloudsoarer* and felt his stomach turn over as the shuttle hit artificial gravity. A minute later, he felt a thud as the pilot pushed the craft back into the docking clamps inside the unpressurized hangar bay. A second later, the hatch at the back of the shuttle lowered and Lorn stepped out.

He was immediately assaulted by a Navy low-level technician. "Captain, they are holding a war meeting in Conference 4. The marshal requests your presence there immediately!"

Lorn shook his head. "Suddenly I remembered why I quit this job. Lead on." He followed the soldier through the labyrinth of wide hallways--another trait of Derilict vessels--and into a dark room filled with chairs and displays. He walked over to the captain's chair and sat down, pulling the small screen attached to the arm of the chair in front of him. Pressing one of the many buttons on the touchscreen, he cleared his throat as several faces appeared on-screen. "Marshal, I apologize for being late. I--"

He was cut off by Marshal Sheft. "No, we weren't even started yet. We only have two more before we may begin." After several minutes of smalltalk, mostly about the recent outcome of the races, the other two people, a T-86 squadron leader and a Nav officer from one of the other ships, arrived and the meeting commenced.

"The battle group will be composed of two frigates, the *Cloudsoarer* and the *Aiel*, the destroyer *Coaerencos*, and the carrier *Aedor*, recently recovered from that fearsome incident with the reactor meltdown. This group was going to be led by Commander Moar, but his nanovaccine failed and he, sadly, passed away last night. Captain Lorn, who so kindly returned to us from his

successful career, will take his place." Lorn felt his eyes bulge. He was in command, just like that? He hadn't been off Coriolis in five years, much less fought. "His record shows him to be very qualified for the position. Captain--or should I say Commander--Lorn, you will lead the battle group, via interstellar drive, to the Jeter system and destroy their fleet as best you can. How you do it is at your discretion, but I would ask that you minimize unnecessary damages. I will message your authorization papers to you shortly. If that is all, I will let you confide with your captains." Sheft's screen flickered out, and Lorn turned his attention to his subordinates.

"Well, that was one of the shorter meetings I've been to," he quipped, "I'm sorry, I don't believe I've met any of you...?"

A tall redheaded fellow spoke up. "I'm Captain Locke, of the *Aiel*."

"Captain Jays, of the *Aedor*"

"Captain Jenneke, of the *Coaerencos*."

Once the squadron leaders had finished introducing themselves--Lorn knew he wouldn't remember anyone's name, but that was to be expected--he sighed and brought up a map of the Borean system on the wall. "Our plan is simple. We will warp out on the far side of the sun from Borea. Then we'll use the sun's magnetic field--it's currently stable, according to the charts--to slingshot us around and to the planet. One pass only, that's all we can manage before they get defenses amassed. The Starlancers will deploy before we get there and fire everything forward, then the ships will follow up and take out the survivors. Once we break through to the other side, the Starlancers will return and we'll leave. Any forces left behind will have to high-tail it to the Borea Ring before they kill you. Any questions?"

Jenneke cleared his throat. "It's a nice plan and all, but won't we just be sitting ducks when we leave the sun's field? Wouldn't a traditional field-hopping strategy work better?"

Lorn nodded. "That's why we are using the sun, and not one of the planets near Borea. The sun will give us a greater velocity, and once we leave the sun's field, we're essentially a bunch of projectiles. We'll be able to maneuver once we hit Borea's magnetic field. It's a textbook mercenary plan. That's why we'll catch them with their pants down. I mean, what merc in his right mind attacks a fully-armed military force?"

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## We Go to Icestar

By Vergil - Jun 7 2009

Mitsuribi Takagami shivered with excitement as he watched the *Eclipse* was upgraded, shiny new guns, glittering with deadly brilliance, the individual missiles being loaded with a rhythmic clank. The newly installed guns twisted and turned, the turret doing an previously impossible angle. The new guns made the ship look like a rag that was being encrusted with jewels.

" *Speaking of shiny...*" Mitsuribi took out *Elasticity and Irony*,

"I can't keep these damn guns clean."

The tech crew motioned for Mitsuribi to come to the cockpit, with a sigh, Mitsuribi put the guns back in his coat pockets and flopped into the captain's chair. One of the techies pointed at a wall three miles down the range

"Shoot a missile at that."

Mitsuribi protested "Are you kiddin? We would be here for hours waiting for it to hit there."

The techie sighed "Just fire it."

Mitsuribi scowled and mapped the missile's path, then fired. The air lit on fire as the missile roared down the range and hit the target dead on causing a fiery explosion. Mitsuribi stared in awe. A techie high-fived another. They eventually left the room and Mitsuribi left the planet with a sense of regret. Mitsuribi contacted the captain of the merchant vessel that he was supposed to hook up with for interspace travel to IceStar. Mitsuribi opened a comms channel

"This is Mitsuribi Takagami, captain of the *Eclipse*, requesting permission to burrow."

The captain's pudgy wrinkle-free face nodded "You are clear, your friends are already burrowed, so hold on tight, T-30 seconds." The captain turned off the comms.

Mitsuribi raised an eyebrow "*Friends, what the?*" A comms message opened up to Mitsuribi. He growled and opened it. A warm face looked back at him.

"Hey, we are the back-up for your mission, sorry we didn't tell you, but the decision was made 3 minutes ago. I am Lieutenant James Sanders, and my three other men are-" The channel paused as it was scrunched into a fourth of the screen.

"-are Sergeant Robert Neelson, Private Victoria Green, and Private Ezekiel Rosansky. I shall talk to you after we have jumped." Mitsuribi turned the channel off. "*Is everyone in the military so damn cheerful?*" he mused. The warp was immediate and powerful. He could see elongated beams of light, of all colors. "*Incredible.*" As soon as it started, it stopped, Mitsuribi prepared to be ejected from the trader vessel. With a slight hiss, the broke off and rolled off the ship's top, he saw his other wingmates do the same. A comms channel beeped, Mitsuribi opened it.

"We are ready when you are. Do you have his location?"

Mitsuribi nodded "He is in sector 5F-7, its near a common trader route, and I am ready, go to cruise speed, but stay a little behind me, while the government did order this job, I am still the contractor, you are my back-up, so if he doesn't cooperate, I want him to know I what he is dealing with." Sanders nodded in agreement. Mitsuribi set the location and charged his cruise. A burst of speed rocked him through space. A minute passed. Sector 3E-7. Two minutes, sector 3-4F-7. After 5 minutes, Mitsuribi disengaged cruise. His temporarily inactive shields and weapons turned on with a whir. He immediately spotted the interceptor.

"This is the *Eclipse*, stand down and prepare to be boarded."

A cracking noise emitted as the interceptor opened a comms. "I didn't break out of a dreadnought and steal this ship to be returned." He murmured with a cracked smile. The rest of the wing appeared on Mitsuribi's flanks.

"This is your last chance, power down or feel the wrath of the-" The interceptor opened fire, streams of energy coming off of it in waves. "*Jesus!*"

Sanders yelled into the comm "Shit, evasive maneuvers, all fighters, fire at will!" Mitsuribi obliged. Krakes pulsed beautifully in unison with the EMP emitter, slamming into the interceptors shields. Mitsuribi got a lock and turned his ship to the hard left. The interceptor fired off two missiles, the explosion of the firing mechanism lighting up space like a firework. The missiles sailed to their target with bloodthirsty speed. Mitsuribi heard Sanders order for Green to pull up. The first missile hit the fighter left wing, breaking through the shield, the resulting explosion turned the ship around, as the second missile went into the engine exhaust. Green's ship blew up immediately.

"Wingman down! Rosansky, Neelson, form on me for attack pattern delta." The 3 fighters twisted to the side, gun particles pulsing violently to their targets. The interceptor swiveled and fired another missile. Neelson managed to twist to the side, but not enough to completely dodge the missile. It hit the bottom shield, the force obliterating it. The interceptor fired streams of tachyon at the ship. It hit the cockpit with pin-point accuracy, the ship cockpit exploded, leaving the rest to float in the cold of space.

Sanders voice boomed "We gotta get out of here! We will go to IceStar, full cruise!"

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## The Battle of Borea Solar

By Sylae - Jun 10 2009

Striding into the bridge of the *Cloudsoarer*, Lorn addressed the officers, "Are we ready to move out?"

The nav officer looked up from his station. "Yes, ser. The *Coaerencos* just moved into position. The *Aiel* has docked and they should be ready to go."

"Okay, then let's get this show on the road." Lorn rested his hands on the brass handrail circling the raised captains platform as the communications officer relayed the orders to go.

"LAMFM engines one through four are online," said one of the subordinate engineers as the ship began to move forward.

The systems officer looked up as the ship shuddered slightly. "Fuseactors three and four are online an excess power is being diverted to the *Aedor* for the intersys jump, ser."

"Lorn cleared his throat. "Weapons, I want everything ready and online before we Borea, and I want all the Starlancers out of the ships before we hit Borea's field." he punched some buttons on the screen clamped to the brass railing and spoke into the microphone. "This is Commander Lorn. All hands, prepare for intersys jump to the Borean System." As he spoke, the stars in the front viewscreen disappeared and were replaced with an ugly blue-purple whirlpool, and a three-



dimensional display of the ships shifted to show two jagged circles appearing in front of the four ships. The engines pulsed, and the battle group moved forward into the vortex.

The assault of blue and purple to the senses only lasted two minutes before the colors faded into a dull red heat--the star in the center of the Borean System. "Systems, get us undocked from the *Aedor*. Nav, let's stay back with the *Aiel*. Let those behemoths ahead. Can Borea see us? No? Good. Let's move out. Nav, get us as much momentum as you can. How long before lead starts flying?"

"About half an hour, ser."

"Good. They shouldn't be able to see us for most of that time."

The fleet pushed down so the red giant was facing the topside of the vessels. "All engines online, the star's field is giving us plenty of energy to work with," an engineer said as the ships began to accelerate, "Field state is...302, 317, 298, 4--we're out of the magnetic field."

"ETA twenty-five minutes, ser."

It was several minutes before the navigation officer yelled out, "Ser! we've got a intersys field right ahead of us! Looks like...a freighter?"

"Shit. Should've known something would go wrong. Patch in a comm channel. I want them out of the way pronto."

"...they aren't answering...Maybe they're using an older protocol...wait. Ser, I think those are mercenaries!"

"What? Bring it up!" The nav officer punched some buttons, and a holographic representation of a boxy ship appeared in the air. "FoF tags indicate a X-29 cargo frigate, but those are merc fighters on the wings."

"Deploy the Starlancers. I want that ship vaped. It's no coincidence that this guy's here. And if it is, we're doing the universe a favor."

"Yes, ser." One of the weapons subofficers nodded and punched buttons on his screen. The war siren sounded throughout the ship, and the deck shuddered as the foot-thick steel door shut the bridge off from the rest of the ship. Fainter thuds could be heard as other compartments were sealed off from the rest of the ship. "Starlancers squadrons deployed," the same officer said, and the nav officer confirmed that the other ships were deploying as well. The bridge was filled with the buzz of radio chatter, and a cloud of tiny slivers on the front viewscreen accelerated painfully slowly towards the merc ship. Suddenly, the fighters on the wings burst off, and smoothly dodged the crawling Starlancers. "They've got nuclear drive engines, ser."

"When they come into distance, pick them off with the turrets. Anything they fire will be absorbed by the shields," Lorn said as the enemy fighters flew toward the destroyer *Coaerencos*. ]The four fighters split off from the squadron and fired plasma at the destroyer, well before they came into effective range. The frigate followed suit and fired missiles. "Look at that. How can they even think those will do any--" Lorn was interrupted as the *Coaerencos* exploded into painful brightness and split into three huge chunks.

"Ser! They've got nuclear missiles!" one of the officers screamed.

"Shit! Tell the gunners on all ships to hit any missiles before they get near the ships!" Lorn yelled over the din, then moaned as several fighters turned towards the *Cloudsoarer*. "Get all power to the shields! Now!" The systems officer punched some buttons, and the screen on the handrail next to Lorn flashed red, warning that the reactors couldn't take the stress for long. Thumps echoed through the hull as the gunners began firing on the nuclear missiles, streaks of ionized gas flared across the viewscreens, and several of the missiles exploded into brilliant white flares.

A large thump resounded through the hull and one of the officers addressed Lorn, "Ser, we've been hit. The shields repulsed most of the charge, but the shields won't take much more. Reactor draw is already nearing 150%. No major hull damage, however."

"Ser, they're coming in from another pass!" Lorn watched as the fighters and frigate swung around towards the rear of the ship.

"All power to the rear shields, now!" Lorn yelled, "We've only got five gunners back there!" the officers complied, and a shudder came from within the ship as one of the reactors gave out. The entire crew watched as the battle was played out on the holograph projection in the air. A cloud of blips dropped tinier blips--the nukes--and swung off to their ship. Several nukes vaporized from the gunners' fire, but too many were still coming. "Brace for impact!" Lorn yelled as the missiles struck.

Lorn picked himself up off of the steel deck and grabbed the handrail for support. "Status..." he whispered to the bridge. One of the few officers still on his chair looked at him and said, "Reactors 1, 3, and 4 melted down, 2 is functioning at 5%. Shieldgens are gone, and all our rear LAMFMs are gone. Our long-range comm-transmitter is fried, and compartments 3, 5, 16, 17, 19, and 24 are decompressed."

Lorn felt his muscular frame sag. "Call back the T-86's, and tell the gunners to stand down. We can't take any more nukes...Try and patch us through to their captain."

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## An Old Friend

By Nioca - Jun 11 2009

**ENMITY** (*Noun*) The quality of being an enemy; hostile or unfriendly disposition. A state or feeling of opposition, hostility, hatred or animosity.

**RECKLESS** (*Adjective*) - Careless or heedless; headstrong or rash. Indifferent to danger or the consequences.

**ATTACHMENT** (*Noun*) - A strong bonding towards or with. A cloying type of dependency. Alternately, a relationship that is not in the best interests of one or both of the participants.

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"Finish them off!" Greta yelled.

"Ma'am, the frigate's hailing us." Daryl said, wincing at Greta's proclamation.

"Put it on." Eyrina stated. She rapid-fired through a sequence of toggles and switches, piloting the *Phalanx* on another attack run against the aft of the crippled frigate.

A defeated voice came over the com. "Attacking vessel, this is Commander Lorn of the Derilict Frigate *Cloudsoarer*. We surrender. I repeat, we surrender. Please call off the attack."

"Don't listen to him! Finish them!" Greta yelled.

One of Eyrina's screens showed the ship in detail. A hole in the side of the ship was accessorized by a set of red crosshairs, and there was one nuclear missile left in the missile bays. One press of a button, and the enemy frigate would be annihilated. Her finger held over the button needed to do the deed. She let her finger come down on it.

And at the last second, changed her mind. Pressing a few different buttons, she veered the *Phalanx* off, sending it after the remaining two ships. "What the hell are you doing?!" Greta screamed.

"We still have a job to do, and those ships are still proceeding with the attack!" Eyrina responded. "Daryl, open a link to our fighters." She looked at Daryl, who nodded. "Legions, attack the other frigate. We'll cut down some of the Starlancers."

The *Phalanx* streaked off after the carrier and the remaining frigate. The Starlancers attempted to reform as they got within long-range sensors of Borea. The IS-34s blew past the *Phalanx*, already opening fire on the frigate. The *Phalanx* followed suit, and sprays of bullets and plasma flew at the frigate. The *Phalanx* then turned its attention to the many fighters. Its railguns voicelessly rattled off hundreds of rounds, piercing several fighters and causing two to explode.

Eyrina locked the last nuclear missile onto a dense portion of fighters and fired. The missile quickly homed in on the helpless fighters and detonated dead-center. The fighters near the epicenter were instantly incinerated by the blast, and those fortunate enough to be further away were either mortally damaged or knocked off-course.

The IS-34s pecked at the frigate with their heavy plasma cannons. The frigate desperately fired back, but with no success. However, in her haste, Eyrina had guided the *Phalanx* into range of the frigate's weaponry. The frigate opened up with missiles and plasma on the *Phalanx*, causing severe damage to its shields. As the *Phalanx* desperately attempted to veer off, the four IS-34s launched a brazen attack against the enemy frigate. Its shields started to falter, and blasts of plasma started striking the hull.

The distraction worked; the frigate moved some of its fire off the *Phalanx* and opened up on the fighters. One fighter took a plasma blast head-on, and was disintegrated instantly. Another was grazed by railgun fire, and wound up on an out-of-control course for the frigate. It struck the ship, ripping a large hole in its hull and lodging itself there.

The *Phalanx* broke away, firing parting shots at the enemy frigate. Suddenly, a Starlancer came out of nowhere and fired a nuclear missile at the *Phalanx*. The Starlancer was destroyed by the *Phalanx*'s port turret, but it was too late: The missile struck the *Phalanx*'s weakened shields and a blinding flash engulfed the ship.

Eyrina picked herself up off the floor, and quickly leaned against the main console. The *Phalanx* was drifting; various failsafes had kicked in, shutting the engines off and preventing it from accelerating off into space. Small wisps of smoke filled the bridge with an acrid odor. Pressing a few buttons, she quickly regained control of the *Phalanx* and directed it away from the enemy vessels. She headed it toward the crippled *Cloudsoarer*, but was alarmed to find that her fighters continued to pursue the enemy frigate.

"Open coms." Eyrina said quickly, watching the IS-34s pelt the frigate. Daryl signaled that they were open. "Legions, return to base!"

She waited with bated breath as her fighters still attacked the frigate. However, they broke off and headed back to the *Phalanx*. "Viewscreen ahead." Eyrina said with a sigh. "Where's the *Cloudsoarer*?"

"Dead ahead." Mick replied. It was true; the frigate was there, drifting rapidly toward Borea. If nothing was done, it'd wind up hitting the planet.

Eyrina nodded in acknowledgement. "Open the salvage bay and deploy the salvage crane. Release the salvage drones and have them start collecting scrap metal." She stated. She then turned to Daryl. "Open communications." Daryl pressed some buttons on his console, then nodded at Eyrina. "This is the captain of the ISA *Phalanx*. We are taking the frigate *Cloudsoarer* in tow to the IceStar system. Any attempt to resist will result in the destruction of your vessel and the death of all aboard."

There wasn't an immediate response. Eyrina was rather relieved at this prospect; it meant she could focus. She turned the *Phalanx* around again so the two ships were facing the same direction, and accelerated toward Borea. The distance between the two ships closed to a mere ship-length when the response came in. "This is Lorn. We are prepared for tow."

"Kill 'em." Greta grunted. "They're at your mercy!"

It was briefly silence. It was broken by two beeps, indicating that the IS-34s had docked with the *Phalanx*. "Are you really that heartless?" Eyrina asked. "I'm not God, I'm not to judge them."

The *Phalanx*'s crane made contact. The electro-magnet on the end clamped to the *Cloudsoarer*. To buy time to think, Eyrina began to apply thrust, and attempt to turn. The ship started to shake slightly as the thrusters struggled against the combined momentum of both ships. Yet, slowly, they started to turn. Once both ships were headed back on a return course to Borea's sun, Greta decided to speak up again. "Great. And what are we going to do with them once we get back to IceStar?" Greta scoffed.

"Ransom them off. Can you imagine the Gold we'd get for an entire ship's crew?" Eyrina said with a smile.

The door to the bridge opened, and a mercenary stepped through. "Captain?"

Eyrina turned. "William. Is there something you'd like to report?"

"Ya. I performed a brief inspection of the ship as I approached. And... it's a mess. It's a miracle the thing's still flying, especially as well as it currently is." The man said in a low, guttural voice.

"I see. Did you get a good look at the starboard wing? It's not responding."

"No kidding. The starboard wing was sheared off." The man laughed.

"Sheared off..." Eyrina repeated in horror.

"And the entire starboard side is charred, pockmarked with shrapnel and holes." The man continued.

Alright. Thank you." Eyrina stated. She turned to Daryl. "Open a link to the *Cloudsoarer*." She added. On his signal, she started speaking. "This is the *Phalanx*. Prepare for interstellar jump." She then signaled Daryl to cut the com. "Get our salvagers back here. We need to go." Eyrina stated. She watched her long-range sensors carefully; large objects were headed her way.

Mick looked at Eyrina. "You think the Derilictians are coming back for us?"

"No." Eyrina said. "But we shouldn't be here nonetheless. Are the scavengers in?"

"Affirmative." Mick responded.

"We're being hailed on long-range communications." Daryl stated.

"Put it on." Eyrina said, fiddling with the controls. The two ships were on a direct course for the IceStar system, but Eyrina wanted some speed before making the jump.

"Unidentified vessels, this is the Borean flagship *Covit*. You are to stand down immediately and prepare to be boarded. Failure to do so-"

The rest of the message was lost as Eyrina signaled Daryl to cut coms. With a button press, the ships jolted forward and leaped into hyperspace. Waves of color assailed the viewscreen.

Then, just as quickly as it began, it ended. The ships gracefully dropped out of hyperspace, and started drifting. A wrecked frigate drifted past the *Phalanx* and *Cloudsoarer* as the two entered the IceStar system. But that wasn't all. A large fight was taking place in front of them. On one side was a bunch of privateer fighters. On the other, a pair of frigates with surprisingly large weaponry. At the appearance of the newcomers', the fighters proceeded to go after the *Phalanx*.

"Nice welcome." Eyrina muttered. "Open general broadcast." She said to Daryl. He nodded to her. "This is the ISA *Phalanx*. You are to stand down or be destroyed." She signaled Daryl to cut communications. A tense moment passed as the fighters closed. Then they broke off and returned to their fighting. Eyrina showed no sign of relief, but instead plotted a course to the third planet in the system.

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The *Phalanx* sat in the 7<sup>th</sup> bay of the Taurus shipyard. The news wasn't good for the *Phalanx*; while the ship could fly just fine, structural damage left it severely crippled. The entire starboard side would give under a pittance of enemy fire, or indeed under stress that could be caused by rough spaceflight. It'd take a lot of time to repair...

Eyrina turned her thoughts back to the situation at hand. The audience chamber was rather crowded; several people were jockeying for position to meet Legend Alexa Cornicov and register various comments, requests, and other various issues with her. She seemed aged; no doubt, the stress of rebuilding the IceStar Alliance had taken its toll. However, whenever her

gaze crossed the room, an imperceptible shiver followed. She was not someone to be taken lightly.

Right now, a high-ranking Aldari official spoke with the Legend. Or, rather, vented at her. "...we wouldn't notice? That your capital ships have *stolen* experimental energy weapons on them?!"

Cornicov gazed at the man. "Of course we knew you would notice. It's just that we didn't particularly care. It's not our fault if there are leaks in your research facilities." Her voice was low, almost seductive. However, there was also a deadly edge to it. The man raised his voice to protest further, but Cornicov talked over him. "I have no problem supplying the name of the man who gave us the weapon, as good faith to Aldari. However, if you want your weapons not to go to the highest bidder, I suggest you keep a closer eye on your men. Not mine." Cornicov sighed and waved the official away. "Now... I believe we have representatives from a Borean space gang interested in establishing weapon sales?"

Eyrina sat pondering her future as the thuggish men attempted to strike a deal with the Alliance. It recently had started fencing weapons and ships to further boost profits, and various unsavory client? poured in for the chance at easily-accessible tools of destruction. The gang representatives walked away with a smile; they had gotten what they wanted.

"Now, Captain Haford..." Cornicov paused long enough to let Eyrina come to the front. Eyrina swallowed nervously. "I heard that your mission was successful. Is this true?" She asked.

"Indeed. We couldn't stop the attack, but we did successfully make it a failure. As evidenced by us getting chased out of the system by the Borean navy." Eyrina confirmed.

"Excellent, excellent. But... what is this I hear about you taking hostages?" Cornicov asked, an interrogative tone in her voice.

"Well, madam..." Eyrina said nervously. "During the fight, their wing leader surrendered. I decided to take their ship in tow- as is common- but to bring the crew back alive. I reasoned that they could be ransomed off to the Derilict government."

"I see." Cornicov replied, her tone perfectly level. It was impossible to tell whether she approved of her actions or not. "Do you have the captain of that vessel?"

"Better. He's not only the captain for the *Cloudsoarer*- that is, the ship I captured, but was also the fleet's commander." Eyrina stated.

"And I presume he is with us?" Cornicov continued.

"Yes." Eyrina signaled for someone at the door. A slight sound of scuffle was heard, and a worn man in chains and a Derilict navy uniform was dragged in. "Commander Lorn Manolin." Eyrina elaborated.

"Well, Captain Haford," Cornicov said slowly, "such a feat is definitely commendable. However, in the future..." Her tone darkened, "I would much prefer if you didn't take hostages unless your mission demands it." She turned to the Derilict commander. "Commander Lorn... do you know who I am?"

"No." The commander replied defiantly.

Cornicov seemed mildly taken aback. "No?" She asked. "How unfortunate. I'd think a commander in the Derilict Navy, of all things, would know of me."

"Apparently not." Commander Lorn spat.

"Very well. Take him to confinement. And get a message to the Derilict navy." She said to a pair of guards by the door. They nodded and dragged the commander away. "Captain, you're free to go. I'll make sure that the Overseer grants your pay. Also, I'll see to it that you're fully compensated for damages to your ship. Dismissed."

Eyrina nodded and exited the chamber.

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The lights flicked on in the docking bay as Eyrina entered. She felt slightly fatigued, but it didn't matter. She had decided on a new mission, one that came from a local group of IceStar pirates. Apparently, a rival group of pirates who recently moved to the system had been harassing them lately, and they had a bounty out on each of the ships brought down.

It was a private bay, reserved typically for larger ships. Indeed, it was a grand room. But its contents seemed, by comparison, to be pitiful. A single T-86 Starlancer sat in the bay, currently being worked on by a pair of men. They nodded to her as they finished their work, and quickly left the bay.

Eyrina ran her hand over the Starlancer's hull. It was cool to the touch, and sleek as a bullet. Two wings held an array of missiles, several anti-fighters and a pair of small nuclear warheads. Eyrina shivered slightly and closed her eyes. It was her first time. It was where she was most comfortable.

Then she opened her eyes and examined it more carefully. She called it *Enmity*... Out of both personal attachment and because it was not quite recognizable as a Starlancer anymore. It had only two LAMFM thrusters out of its original four. The other two were replaced by Nuclear Impulse. The hull was darker, reinforced by a stronger Ametium alloy. The two plasma cannons were replaced by a pair of extra missiles. Right in each crook between the wings and the main body were two large pulse rifles. The underside of the craft had expanded slightly to hold a larger generator, a small salvage bay, and a Defensive Energy Field (DEF) emitter. And the main hull had been plated with solar panels to improve range.

A contented sigh escaped Eyrina's lips. "It's been a while, hasn't it, my dear?" She asked, gliding her hand across the ship. She climbed into the cockpit, a light dancing in her eyes. She closed the cockpit, and pressed a button. The panels all lit up with a gentle hum. "Voice protocol: Active" Eyrina stated.

There was a beep, and an electronic voice came through hidden speakers. "Initializing voice commands... Voice Protocol and Command version 3.2.3.85a." It seemed to pause. Then the voice returned, this time in gentle male tones. "Voice Protocol and Command active. Speaker identified as Haford, Eyrina."

"Activate AIS Co-pilot systems." Eyrina commanded.

"Processing com- Right away, dear." The voice cut out mid-sentence, changing to a friendlier sentence. "All systems are go." It paused. "It has been too long, Eyrina." The ship's systems crooned.

"Yes it has. Ready?" Eyrina asked the ship.

"As always, madam." The ship responded.

Eyrina smiled. "Broadcast the exit code. It's about time you and me got reacquainted."

Lights flashed in the bay as the ceiling opened. Taking the controls, she kicked the LAMFMs on. The ship instantly jolted slightly as forward thrust caused it to suddenly leap forward. Then, just as quickly, the ship stopped, and drifted back to the center of the bay. "If I may be so bold, perhaps I should take us up?" The ship intoned, bemused.

"Oh, hush." Eyrina said with an exaggerated air of irritation. "It's just been awhile, 'tis all." She gently adjusted the controls, and the ship started drifting upward. It cleared the bay, and lifted from the desolate planet. The ship then darted forward, this time intentionally. The ship made a run for the edge of Tauras's atmosphere as Eyrina guided it away from other ships nearby. The sky faded from blue to black as they left the planet.

Eyrina clicked Impulse thrusters on, but left them idle. She then rammed the LAMFMs' throttle to full. "I woul-" The ship started.

Eyrina was instantly yanked back against her seat as the ship shot like a bullet away from the dull planet. "You've gotten an upgrade, I see." Eyrina said through gritted teeth.

"Indeed." The ship said, once again sounding amused. "I tried to warn you."

Eyrina threw the main computer a dirty look as the ship streaked away.

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*Eyrina watched her surroundings. She felt alive... Terrified, but alive. She was free! And now... she had no idea. She was in unknown space. Somewhere drifting in the Derilict system, stuck in a Starlancer she had little idea how to fly. Her father had taken her along for flights... oh, why couldn't she have paid more attention to how he controlled the vessel?!*

A beep caught her attention. Even as unfamiliar as the vessel seemed, it didn't take long to figure out what was wrong. One of her screens showed something approaching. A sense of dread filled her being; she didn't want to die. She was too young to die!

She started looking through buttons, toggles, and touchscreens. She knew how to adjust speed and direction... but everything else seemed like a mess of unintelligible controls. Panicked, she pressed one button that looked promising.

A voice played through hidden speakers. "AIS system active."

"AIS?" Eyrina asked herself.

"Artificial Intelligence Simulator. And you are?" The ship asked.

Eyrina was dumbstruck. This was something she had never encountered before. "Ha-Haford." She stammered out.



"Are you aware there is a privateer vessel approaching?" The ship asked.

"Yes! But I don't know how to fly this thing!" Eyrina said, her voice rising desperately.

"Would you prefer that I fly?" The ship said soothingly.

"Y-you can do that?" Eyrina asked, startled.

"Yes." The ship confirmed.

"Well... yes, yes! Get us out of here!" Eyrina pleaded.

---

A klaxon blared, jerking Eyrina awake. She blinked. "What...?"

"We've got company, Eyrina. Fighters inbound, weapon discharges detected. Unknown whether they've detected us." The ship quickly explained.

"Activate combat mode." Eyrina stated, quickly alert. She cut the throttle on the LAMFMs and got thrust on Impulse. The inside of the ship got darker as armored visors closed over the cockpit. A viewscreen came together in front of her, replacing the original view.

The ship rapid-fired words. "DEFs at full, weapons hot. Combat visor closed, targeting system active. General com channels are set to receive. We're at the edge of the system."

"Alright, let's go." Eyrina stated. *Enmity* raced toward the other ships, its thrusters burning bright against its dark hull. "Alright, now, what do we have?" She asked herself as she got closer, looking at the readout. The stats appeared, showing a custom skirmisher. However, before she read much, the *Enmity* intervened.

"Eyrina..." It said, with a cautious tone. The screen flipped to the ship furthest back.

"Oh, no..." Eyrina moaned. Her mind flipped back to her conversation in Coruscate. "*The IceStar system would send reinforcements, but it has its hands full with a recent arrival. Someone in a Christian Imperial Interceptor showed up, and we're trying to figure out what he's playing at...*"

"Well, if there's anyone that could do it, it's us. We did take out a battlecruiser..." The ship offered.

"Believe me," Eyrina stated, looking over the design of the Interceptor. "I'd rather take the battlecruiser right now. High Amt ratings, shields and weaponry out the..." She hesitated for a moment. "Ah, what the hell. You only live once." She activated long range coms. "This is Captain Eyrina Haford of the IceStar Alliance. Identify yourselves and your purpose in this system!"

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# Wild-Eyed

By Vergil - Jun 13 2009

*Cruise Engines 78%, Incoming missile 1100 meters and closing. Oh god, oh god, damn you Mickey! Cruise Engines 85%, Incoming missile 400 meters and closing. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck!* Mitsuribi cancelled the cruise engines and shut off the port thruster, causing the ship to turn at a wild angle. The missile hit the top shield of the bow causing it to spin down a complete 360 degrees. The sudden angle change made Mitsuribi feel sick, but he was able to regain control swiftly, asking the computer for a systems check, it rattled off in succession: *Energy Shields: Top: 43% and charging, others in near full capability, Weaponry: Completely Operational, Atmospheric Status: Unchanged, Autopilot: Operational, Engines: Port engine slightly damaged, all other engines are in normal parameters, Music System: Completely Destroyed. SON OF A BITCH! I will rip his spleen out of his NOSE for that!* Before either party could do anything, a transmission boomed into the ship:

"This is Captain Eyrina Haford of the IceStar Alliance. Identify yourselves and your purpose in this system!"

Mitsuribi sighed in relief, *Help, finally!*

"This is Freelancer Mitsuribi Takagami Delta 4-7, requesting assistance to bring in escaped prisoner of the Chrijistain Empire, I have my orders. Captain." Mitsuribi scowled over the comms.

"I shall grant your request for aid. Freelancer."

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"Commander, I-"

"Damn your excuses!" A loud voice cut off the man.

"God damn it Sanders, if you don't go back there and get Mitsuribi's ass back here, I swear, I will demote you private duty!"

"Commander, all due respect, we were heavily outmatched, two of my wingmen went down *in the first thirty seconds*, and you want me to now risk my life as well as the life of a private under my command for a *freelancer*? Sir, what makes his life more important than mine and my private?"

Michael Jones Lkia did not show any emotion in his words "You have your orders."

---

Mitsuribi closed his eye in a slow blink, and started up his thrusters, Eyrina following. The interceptor burst to life and started firing at Eyrina. Eyrina did a fantastic twirl and let loose particle cannons and a missile. The Eclipse turned on its side, Mitsuribi firing a stream of krakes

and debilitation fire, ending his pass with a Sidewinter missile aimed at the starboard wing joint. Eyrina's missile missed but her cannons splashed across the bow of the ship. The interceptor fired a seeker missile at Mitsuribi and turned towards Eyrina and opened streams of pulse fire, turning his back to Mitsuribi. Mitsuribi jerked his ship down as the missile collided into a countermeasure he had dropped. The interceptors back was open and Mitsuribi had the advantage. *Freddy Mercury's music will not be silenced without punishment!* Mitsuribi opened up with everything he had on his ship, red particles soaring through space alongside 3 sidewinder missiles all headed at the interceptor. Just before the missiles hit, the interceptor turned around at the worst time. The missiles pummelled the shields into dust. *Enemy Ship's Shields inoperable.* the computer reported. The interceptor stood still for a moment, then charged at Mitsuribi, *Warning, Enemy engaging cruise, collision course is a possibility. Okay big guy, I will give you what you want* Mitsuribi set his engines at full impulse. The interceptor did not change course. Neither did the Eclipse. Right before they collided, Mitsuribi let loose a torpedo and pulled up. The torpedo ripped a hole in the ship, travelling to the back of the interceptor before exploding, causing a chain reaction of explosions that completely annihilated the ship. Mitsuribi read an escape pod escaping from the ship. He tractorated it in and filled the cargo bay with knock-out gas. On his camera he watched the convict escape wild-eyed from the pod, only to crumple to his knees and fall down. Mitsuribi sighed in relief. He had beaten the bastard.

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## Tightening the Belt

By Sylae - Jul 9 2009

The guard shoved Lorn into the small cell and slammed the door shut all in one quick move. Lorn sighed as he was engulfed in darkness and began sorting his thoughts--quite literally. His head began to ache from the mental implants he hadn't used in years. He concentrated, and suddenly he couldn't feel anything.

Acting quickly--the imperiousness to pain only lasted a short while--Lorn felt around the cell for a sharp corner. A post on the tiny bed felt like it would suffice nicely. Sighing, he jumped up on top of the small bed and slammed his right calf on the square bedpost. He immediately thrust his finger into the hole created and felt around. Several seconds later, he felt the warm metal of a knife blade and pulled it out of his leg. Navy officer 'modifications' were macabre at best but still innovative, to say the least. Lorn reached deeper into his leg and pulled out a canister of medfoam and sprayed it over the wound.

He turned to the door and began his next plan of action. He slammed his shoulder into the steel door and began pounding on it while screaming like a madman. Sure enough, the din was loud enough for the guards to come in and shut him up.

Tightening the belt on his new guard's uniform, Lorn closed the door behind him and set off down the dim hallway and out of the brig. Now to find where he was. Lorn began wandering the hallways looking for a map of any sort, politely nodding to the few passerby in the corridors.

Soon enough, he came across an evacuation map pasted to the wall and took it off. He set off towards the area marked *Hangars*.

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The lights flickered on, and Lorn studied the dim hangar slowly, searching for a suitable ship. The bay was full of ships from every system imaginable, from Borean bombers to Aserian courier ships, as well as several boxy models that Lorn didn't recognize offhand. He set off towards the nearest T-86--there were several scattered throughout the hangar in various shades of functional--and opened the cockpit. He settled down into the padded leather seat and powered up the system. The controls were different than what he'd remembered, but he could manage.

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*"Command, this is Second Leader, are we clear?"*

"Squad Leader, you are good to go. Please be aware that enemy frigate has moved from 14, 3, 0 relative home to 15, 2, 4."

Lorn nodded to himself and opened a channel to his squadron. "Once we are out, form up on me in staggered arrow formation." He hit the thrusters and was launched out of the Derilict frigate *Rialsin*. The bright blue-green orb of Derilict IV beckoned far below him.

Once the squadron had formed up, he gunned the T-86 and headed into the fray, squadron following, "Ignore their fighters and hit the frigate!" he yelled just before they entered the fray.

Lorn pulled the fighter down and shot across the enemy frigate's back, launching plasma at several protruding turrets. A second later, he finished his run and was pulling the fighter back around to come at them again. Suddenly, his ship shook and the controls started beeping and flashing. A quick look at the diagnostics showed that he'd lost three of his LAMFMs. He opened up a com channel to command, "This is second leader, requesting repair bay access."

It was several seconds before there was a reply, "Second leader, all repair bays are full. Carry on with your mission." Lorn felt numb inside. Derilict frigates had enough repair bays for over half their armada of fighters and support vehicles. If they were all full, then...

"Second squadron, cover me for a bombing run. We need to destroy this frigate." He pulsed his remaining LAMFM to full power and shot off towards the bridge of the enemy frigate, and armed all of his remaining missiles. The HUD projected over the glass of the cockpit displayed the crosshairs directly on the enemy's bridge. He hit the firing stud on the joystick and didn't wait to see if they hit before pulling down, blacking out as a wave of plasma rolled over the ship.

Lorn woke a minute later to the whistling of air past the cockpit of the Starlancer. Lorn jumped to action when he saw the sickening blue sea lurch below him. He punched some buttons and the ship slowly leveled out of its careening path to the water below. Lorn breathed a sigh of relief and checked the diagnostics. The only things working were life support and the atmospheric control systems--and those were barely functioning at all.

Several minutes later, he sighed in relief as he recognized a landmark up ahead of the ship--the seaside city of Port Samilfor. Then he realized he was traveling well above the speed of sound, and there was no way to dodge the skyscrapers up ahead, what with the current state of the ship.

Although it was hopeless, he put out a mayday over the coms, on all channels, hoping someone would hear him, then tested the systems on the craft. The life support flickered out and died. At least he didn't need that part of the ship.

Lorn slowly lined the Starlancer up with one of the wide avenues going through the city. Lowering the flaps as far as they would go, he bit the bullet and flew through the city, emerging out the other side of the commercial district intact. He dove down towards the River Saralfin around which the city was built, wincing as a series of transmission antennae got clipped off by his passing ship.

He instinctively ducked as the craft passed underneath bridge after bridge, then got knocked about as the underside of the craft touched the surface of the river, the maneuver causing the nose of the ship to bite into the water. Lorn blacked out again.

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## Dylithanium and Starfire

By Nioca - Jul 18 2009

*History looks upon the Aldarians as the warriors. The conquerors. The engineers of destruction. During the time of the massive Human Confederation, Aldari was regarded as a bitter, harsh system. Most of the planets were filled with corrosive, volatile, and dangerous substances. One supported life, but barely: Those who lived there often lived in poverty with low standards of living. With the Confederation in power, they were a forgotten corner of the galaxy.*

Until the Confederation's collapse, that is. Aldari was one of the first systems to rebel. Their harsh system provided a unique advantage; things considered useless by the Confederation became weaponized by the Aldarians. Ingenuity from centuries of improvisation and getting by came to the surface. Within a mere month of the catastrophe at Thoria, the Aldarians had completely shaken off the Confederation's control. But they hadn't shaken off the Confederation's influence.

The nearby system of Contra remained loyal to the Confederation, long after the Confederation had completely collapsed. Sparked on the Aldarian side by jealousy of the other's luxurious system, and on the Contran side by the Aldarian's blatant treason, the two sides went to war, and engaged in a conflict that'd last nearly a century.

And was ended in a matter of days by the emergence of a terrifying new Aldari superweapon, one feared even today.

**- The beginning of the chapter on the Aldari and Contra systems, *The Traveler's Guide to the Systems of Evoron*, 123 NE**

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Eyrina brought the Starlancer about as the Interceptor exploded in a bright globe of blue light. She directed *Enmity* away from the blast, bracing herself against the cockpit. The blast wave hit, violently rattling the ship as if some deity had grabbed ahold of the fighter and started shaking it.

"Damage reports." Eyrina stated as the ship stopped shaking, completely unfazed.

"Minimal. Very light armor damage across the bow from weapons fire, and the cockpit glass is severely cracked from the blast wave. All systems operating normally." The ship's computers intoned.

"Good. Open coms to the mercenary vessel, and bring it up on visual." Eyrina ordered, directing the fighter toward the skirmisher.

The eyepatched-mercenary appeared on the screen. Eyrina noted that he seemed to wear a perpetual scowl. "I trust," she began, "that you need no further assistance?"

"Affirmative." Mitsuribi growled.

He started to say something else, but Eyrina cut him off. "In that case, I need you to accompany me to Tauras. The Alliance will want to know of this development."

"Who?" Mitsuribi asked, wary.

"The IceStar Alliance. The mercenary coalition that controls this system." Eyrina paused. She was at a loss; it wasn't often that she ran into someone who hadn't heard of the Alliance. And never someone who was in the mercenary business. "You must be new to the mercenary trade." Eyrina stated. "Someone experienced wouldn't have blindly trespassed into potentially hostile territory, nor would they be unaware of the Alliance and its influence on the galaxy for the past 60 years."

Eyrina watched the screen with a smug smile as she explained. She felt vaguely superior to the mercenary named Mitsuribi, who glared angrily at her. Meanwhile, she was magnetically pulling in small pieces of the vaped Interceptor's armor. Its high AMT rating would guarantee a good price at market.

The smile faded slightly as she said, "You aren't the only one concerned with that interceptor. The Alliance was having trouble with him too. Which is why you need to come with me."

"And why..." Mitsuribi began slowly, venom lacing his voice, "would the Alliance care? It sounds as if I did them a favor." He sneered. "Surely mercenaries wouldn't be so bureaucratic?"

"Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't. They have little concern with freelancers entering or leaving the system. However, they get understandably considered when military forces make incursions without Alliance knowledge or consent. They'll want to know the details of what will happen to the convict you apprehended, his crimes against the Chrjstain Empire, and on who's authority it was to send military vessels on a hostile mission into Alliance space without the awareness or consent of the Alliance."

"Look, all of this is lovely, but I want to get this over with. I need to get back to the Empire-" Mitsuribi began quickly, annoyed.

"Yes, yes, but this shouldn't take too long." Eyrina persisted.

"-and I'm not comfortable flying into the hands of some 'coalition' that I've never even heard about. I have my orders, and I intend to carry them out. Thank you for the assist, but I'm leaving." Mitsuribi finished.

"No, you aren't." Eyrina stated coldly.

"Excuse me?" Mitsuribi responded, startled.

Eyrina smiled coldly. "This is a matter of great political importance. The Alliance has had little contact with the Chrjstain Empire. Perhaps your people are naturally brazen and inconsiderate of others' territory, or perhaps it is merely you who are exceedingly foolish or inexperienced. It doesn't matter-

"You presume too much. The Empire is wise, and I have been flying missions since before you were born, little girl." Mitsuribi snarled. His patience had reached its end. Yet his tone remained calm.

Mitsuribi smiled slightly on the viewscreen. Eyrina was enraged. *Little girl...?* It struck deep, deeper than Mitsuribi knew. How many times had she encountered that before within the Alliance itself? Before she had proven herself? She was young, yes, but she still wanted to vape the skirmisher right then and there. Doing her best to keep her voice level and diplomatic, as it seemed he did so easily, she spoke again. "The Alliance... has shipyards for you to repair your vessel. Surely you'd want to... to fix it up before heading back out? And it wouldn't be out of your way."

She appeared to have peaked his interest. "And if I say no?"

"Then you leave me no choice but to destroy you." Eyrina said coldly.

Mitsuribi sighed theatrically. "I have no desire to fight you. I'll come with you and see this 'Alliance'. If only to repair my ship." The comms cut out.

Eyrina swore, taking some of her pent-up anger out on the air around her.

"Dear... You shouldn't let people get to you like that." The ship said soothingly.

"I know." Eyrina said through gritted teeth.

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Eyrina neared Tauras. She hailed the Tauras Shipyard, hoping to get some fast repairs. "This is Captain Haford. Requesting repair bays for one T-86 Starlancer and one custom Skirmisher."

All was quiet for a moment. Then the response came. "Haford, this is the Tauras Shipyard. You are to dock aboard the Starcruiser *Starfire* and report to Legend Cornicov immediately. Hangar bay 5 is open, slots 14 and 15. We have sent docking telemetry to your vessels." The dispatcher stated.

Eyrina paused for a moment. "Affirmative. Haford out." She closed comms, looking worried. "You get that?"

"Yes, Eyrina." The ship responded. It shifted course on its own, following the telemetry provided by the shipyard.

Comms opened up again. It was Mitsuribi. "What's going on?" He asked roughly.

"Cornicov wants to meet with me. With you too, most likely." She responded.

"Who?" He replied, wary.

"One of the five Legends. The leaders of the IceStar Alliance, and Cornicov is the most respected."

The comms went out again. Eyrina wondered what was going on, and as she got close to Tauras, she wasn't disappointed. In fact, she was alarmed. Though Mitsuribi didn't know any better, Eyrina saw the signs right away. IS-34s zipped around like flies, flying off into space. Several larger ships seemed to be on alert. Most alarmingly, Alexa Cornicov's personal Starcruiser, the *Starfire*, was lifting off from the planet. An Aldarian Armageddon-class Starcruiser, it boasted incredible weaponry. Four experimental Aldarian Jet Plasma cannons were mounted on its front, and 12 jagged wings held an array of high-power weaponry, from pulse cannons to plasma turrets, railguns and massive missile and torpedo batteries. The finest weapons in the known galaxy dotted the hull; the Aldarians' reputation of creating advanced weaponry was well earned. The belly of the craft consisted entirely of hangars and repair bays for fighters, skirmishers, and frigates. Its brown hull was infused heavily with Ametium, and red lights had been added to the craft, gaining it a glowing red outline. Powerful LAMFM and Nuclear thrusters pushed the craft forward.

Eyrina repressed a shudder at the sight of it. Its sheer size was enough to evoke awe: even by Derilict standards, the ship was large, a little over half the size of a Derilict Starcruiser. The wings, while symmetrical, were at various odd angles, and the red lights that Cornicov had added to it only furthered the psychological effect it had, making it look like a demon out the mouth of Hell. It scared the wits out of its allies... Lord only knew what kind of terror those fighting against it felt.

Feeling as she was getting swallowed alive by this monstrosity, she could only watch as the Starlancer guided itself to a hangar bay underneath its belly. The mouth of the bay was tinted a violent red, but once it got inside, the light became clean and friendly. The two ships pirouetted and touched down lightly onto the bay's floor. *Enmity*'s cockpit opened, and Eyrina quickly scrambled out. Mitsuribi was clambering out of the Skirmisher as a man approached, wearing heavy glasses. "Captain Haford. And... who is this?" He said, nodding at Mitsuribi.

"Mitsuribi Takagami." Eyrina rattled off. "Mercenary. In the employ of the Chrijstain Empire. He was hired to take out that Interceptor; its pilot was a convict. He was accompanied by two Chrijstain fighters, Overseer."

"I see. In that case, Miss Cornicov should see you as well." The overseer addressed Mitsuribi. "Come with me."

The overseer led the duo through several spacious corridors. He explained as he walked, "Both the Starlancer and the skirmisher are being moved to the shipyard's repair bays. On the house." Eyrina raised an eyebrow at the last part, but said nothing.

Eventually, they wound up in a war room. The overseer quickly walked over to Cornicov, standing at the other end of the room, and started whispering in her ear. Eyrina watched Mitsuribi look around carefully. It wasn't surprising that he was curious about his surroundings;



while the exterior of the ship look downright hostile, the inside was friendly and warm. Well, as warm as being the interior of a massive warship allowed, which wasn't much.

Alexa nodded as the Overseer finished. He quickly hurried out. "Captain Haford, I need you to wait outside for the time being while I talk to this... Mitsuribi."

Eyrina nodded and swept out of the room. After the doors sealed behind her, she leaned against the wall. Once again, she felt sleepy.

"Eyrina!" A familiar voice called out. Eyrina perked up at the sound of his voice.

"Mick! What are you-?" Eyrina started.

"I've been looking all over for you. You're being sent on another Alliance-mandated mission." Mick stated.

"How do you kn- Wait. Let me guess." Eyrina said, dawning comprehension in her voice.

"The *Phalanx* is getting the fast-repair treatment."

Mick nodded. "They moved the *Phalanx* to Fast-Repair Bay 2 based on orders from the top. They're getting it armed and ready for flight. It'll be fully operational within a couple hours. But other than that... I have no idea what it's about." Mick said quickly.

"Not even a guess?" Eyrina asked.

Mick hesitated. "Well... there is a rumor. You know the Aldarians were here, right?" Eyrina nodded. "Right, well, before they went to bat over the Plasma cannon issue, they demanded a full inspection of the *Starfire*. Alexa granted it without hesitation."

"That's odd. Alexa never would cave to demands like that normally." Eyrina said, confused.

"Right. Well, rumor is, it's for good reason." Mick said darkly. Eyrina gave him a baffled look. "You've heard of Dylithanium Artillery Rounds?"

"Vaguely." Eyrina said. "I've heard they're really destructive."

"Hah. That's like calling a Derilict Starcruiser 'somewhat large'. They're classified as a superweapon by pretty much every government in existence. It's an artillery shell made by the Aldarians. Only a few governments have access to these, and only Aldarian Armageddon-class Battlecruisers carry them routinely. They're a weapon of last resort." Mick paused theatrically. "This ship, the *Starfire*, is an Armageddon-class ship. It was thought destroyed by the Aldarians, but was salvaged by Alexa. She assured the Aldarians that the *Starfire* had already launched its two DARs. However, there's rumors going around now that Alexa has a working DAR."

"And the Aldarians don't want that?" Eyrina asked.

"This weapon is capable of sterilizing a continent or fatally irradiating an entire fleet. The Aldarians won the near-century-long Aldari-Contra war with two Dylithanium shells, one rendering 36% of Ryos completely uninhabitable by even bacteria. The thought of such a weapon in the hands of a criminal empire? Even to someone within the Alliance, it's terrifying. The Alliance isn't bound by the same treaties as the various governments. Alexa could do whatever she wanted with it." Mick shuddered.

"I see." Eyrina said, concerned. "If the *Phalanx* is in a Fast-Repair bay, I intend to take advantage of it. That ship has a lot of wasted surface area, and I intend to change that."

"How so?" Mick asked.

"I want to put a hangar bay on the top of the ship. The four ports for the Quadfury fighters will get retooled into weapons ports. The two inner ones will house regenerating Combine pulse rifles, and big ones. The two outer ones will be plasma turrets. Got it?"

"Eyrina, such changes will be... expensive..." Mick said carefully.

"I should have the credits to cover it." Eyrina replied.

"If you say so." Mick responded.

The conversation was ended by the doors to the War Room opening. Mitsuribi quickly walked out, looking quite pleased. Eyrina took that as her cue. "I'll see you on the *Phalanx*, Mick."

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## Concerns

By Nioca - Aug 14 2009

Mick sighed. He had suspected it when Eyrina had gave the order, and he was right. Eyrina didn't have the credits to cover the upgrades. Thankfully, with Eyrina being a celebrity, the shipwrights were willing to let it slide. For now.

He was worried for Eyrina, though if he were honest, he always was. She reminded him of his daughter. And she was young... so young. She shouldn't be here. Not because she wasn't capable, but because she wasn't supposed to. He could tell; there was something else for her. A different path she should have taken. And while young people did join the Alliance, Eyrina was unlike the others. She wasn't a hotshot, or someone dreaming of glory. She seemed almost... *resigned* to it, as if it were some sort of punishment. As if she had no choice.

She puzzled him. And whenever he approached her about her past, she became evasive. He had dug into her history, or, rather, tried. He knew she was from the Derilict system, but he kept hitting dead-ends. There were three known Eyrina Hafords on Derilict IV, and another on Coriolis. All were accounted for. No one seemed to be searching for her. It was as if she appeared out of thin air.

More recently, however, he had noticed that she was behaving oddly. On her birthday, she had shut herself away from everyone. During a mission to the Derilict system over a month ago, she had disappeared for several hours, only to reappear and insist nothing was wrong. She was keeping to herself even more than usual, and she acted depressed. As if she was losing the will to live. And, a few hours ago, she insisted on going through the *Cloudsoarer's* computers. No, *demanding* it.

Something was wrong with Eyrina. Very, very wrong.

Mick arrived outside Eyrina's guest quarters and noticed the door was open. He stepped inside, and found Eyrina sitting on the edge of her bed. She gazed at a blue-tone pistol in her hands, sniffing gently.

Mick froze, the worst possible scenario running through his mind. He knew Eyrina was in bad shape. But... suicidal?

"Eyrina?" Mick called, trying to keep his tone light. Eyrina didn't respond. She continued to stare at the gun, acting as if she didn't even recognize her own name. "Eyrina!" Mick said loudly, trying to get her attention.

Eyrina lifted her head slightly, then looked at Mick. "Yes?"

"Are you alright?" Mick asked gently.

"No." Eyrina said flatly.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Mick persisted.

"No." Eyrina repeated.

Mick didn't know what to say. Finally, he settled on telling her what he came to tell her about.

"You're overdrawn on credits. The shipwrights are willing to let it go for now."

"Wonderful. Anything else?" Eyrina stated monotonously.

"No, I suppose not. But if you need anything, let me know. Alright?" Mick said, worried.

"Yeah, sure." Eyrina said dismissively.

Mick frowned, then turned to walk away.

"Have you ever killed someone you loved?"

Mick was at a loss. She had said it lightly, but he could tell she was desperately looking for an answer. After a long pause, he finally answered, "No. Why?"

"No reason." Eyrina said, acting as if it was a mere curiosity. She quickly took on an authoritative tone. "We're leaving with the *Starfire* for the Chrijstain System in two hours. We've got a new job."

"Who's the hirer?" Mick asked.

"Alexa herself." Eyrina stated.

"Another in-house?" Mick said with a note of irritation.

"No, she's personally paying a bounty for this one. She offered it to me, I accepted." Eyrina replied tritely. Much to Mick's relief, she holstered the pistol.

Mick scrutinized her, trying to decide whether it was safe to leave her alone. He was still shaken from walking in on her holding and contemplating her gun. Finally, he settled on saying, "I'll be on the *Phalanx* if you need me."

He turned and walked away. He had a lot to think about.

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Eyrina stared up the *Phalanx*. One thing fast-repair bays were good at; making repairs and modifications at a record-setting pace. The ship no longer looked like a floating wreck, but instead a gallant starship.

Eyrina awoke from her reverie as the ship came closer. It occurred to her that making docking arrangements with the ship's new hangar might be a good idea. Pressing a button on *Enmity's* comm, she spoke to the person piloting the ship. "This is Eyrina Haford. Open hangar doors."

There was a beep on the console, followed by Mick's voice. "We've sent docking telemetry. Welcome aboard, Captain."

Eyrina nodded and cut communications. *Enmity* piloted itself into the open blast doors of the hangar bay. Eyrina felt her stomach turn as the Starlancer hit the combination of DEF Emitters, magnetic barriers, and inertial dampers that held the atmosphere inside the bay. *Enmity* then spun itself on the spot and settled down on the hangar floor.

The cockpit opened, and Eyrina quickly clambered out and rushed out of the hangar. She had no intention of staying here any longer. She needed to know. She needed to find out whether she had... whether she was guilty of...

She arrived on the bridge of the *Phalanx*, slightly winded. Everyone was present that should be. The world seemed, for a moment, right. "Status reports!" Eyrina ordered.

A new mercenary Eyrina didn't recognize spoke up. "Everything checks out. All the upgrades and everything. We had to upgrade to a bigger reactor to support full combat conditions, so we've got a lot of excess power. The new weapons are primed and ready to fire. Shields operational and covering the new hangar perfectly. Everyone's in position. And we've got our coordinates set on the Chrijstain sys-"

"Belay that." Eyrina tritely cut him off. "Change of plan, people. We're to head to the outer reaches of the Derilict system. Plot a course immediately."

Silence reigned on the bridge, save for the beeping of a couple consoles. Finally, Mick spoke up. "Um... Are you sure you want-"

"Yes, I'm sure." Eyrina said with finality. "Lay in a course."

Mick made some adjustments on his holographic display. "Laid in. Eyrina, if I could speak with you..."

Mick stepped through the doors that led out of the bridge, and Eyrina followed.

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## Name Your Price

By Sylae - Aug 14 2009

Lorn's stolen T-86 soared out of the planet's atmosphere, and ships and debris began appearing on the ship's HUD. The IceStar system was obviously not well-maintained, Lorn thought as he passed a twisted LAMFM coil off of some sort of cruiser that he could've flown through.

Leaning forward, he punched some commands into the nav computer to alert him of any ships of notable size leaving for Derilict. He needed to alert the Navy to IceStar's threat, and quick.

Lorn gunned the engines and accelerated rapidly forward. It couldn't hurt to do some scouting. The system was populated with many small ships, as well as some larger frigates, and...

Slowly, a hulking object came into view, and Lorn gasped as it was revealed -- a huge behemoth of a ship, glowing red with weapons attached to every available space. Winglike extensions jutting out from odd angles held even more weaponry. The ship was large enough to take on a Derilict Starcruiser, and with all its weapons, it would probably win.

His ship passed under the behemoth, revealing huge blast doors covering hangar bays, and LAMFMs the size of a Derilict Frigate pushed it forward. Lorn breathed a sigh of relief as he came out of the ship's shadow. He did some more scouting for several hours, then leaned back in the leather seat and let his eyes close.

The console beeped, and Lorn jolted out of his slumber. [tt]1 Result found: ISA Phalanx - en route to Derilict.[/tt] He punched some buttons, and the ship turned and accelerated rapidly. Slowly, the Phalanx - the name sounded familiar to Lorn - came into view. He hit a button on the comm panel, and hailed the ship.

The boxy frigate was silent for several minutes, then a woman's voice came over the speaker. "This is Captain Eyrina Haford. What do you want?"

"My nav computer says you are heading to Derilict. I was wondering if I could get a ride," Lorn replied. Her voice seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite tell who Haford was.

"I don't have the time or money to haul people all over the galaxy. Sorry."

"Wait!" Lorn yelled, before she could cut the comms, "It is important that I get there very soon. Name your price, and I'll double it."

The other end was quiet for another minute, then Haford's voice came over the comms, "We've sent docking telemetry to your ship."

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The Starlancer's cockpit popped as pressure returned to the ship's small hangar bay. Lorn jumped out, slipping on the steel deck below him, and having to grab the side of the T-86 to keep from falling down.

A door slid open at the far end of the hangar, and Lorn stiffened as he saw who stepped out.

"Captain Eyrina Haford, of the ISA Phalanx. Any you are?"

"I'd prefer not to go by name, I hope you understand," Lorn shook her hand, then put a hand on the fighter to steady himself.

"Are you okay?" Haford asked. It had become obvious by now that she didn't recognize him. "You're as white as a sheet."

"No, I'm fine. I just cut up my leg a little," Lorn replied, "I'll be fine after some rest."

"Okay...400 creds ought to cover the costs." Eyrina stated. It was pricey, but it wasn't as though Lorn had any other choices.

"Double that...about 200 golds? All my money's in the Derilict system, so..." he trailed off.

"That's okay. We'll use your ship as collateral until you pay us off." She turned and walked out the hangar door, obviously meaning for him to follow. He did, limping slightly on his cut-up leg.

"Why are you heading to Derilict? If I may ask."

Lorn quickly pulled an answer out his ass, "Messenger duty. Some confidential stuff for their Navy higher-ups, something like that," he said, hoping the lack of details wouldn't provoke any more questions. Instead, Haford just frowned and continued walking down the corridors of the ship in silence, until they came to another door.

Haford pulled a key out of her pocket. "These are your quarters for the trip. Mess hall is down this corridor and to the right. The crew eats in an hour." She turned and left without saying anything else, leaving Lorn standing there.

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## The Reflections

By Nioca - Aug 16 2009

Lorn looked about the small mess hall. He noted that the food was edible, but nothing more. At least the Derilict navy furnished palatable food. The dishes and cups were metal, as though it the atmosphere didn't seem artificial enough. Wincing slightly, he set himself down next to the Captain, Eyrina. "So, Captain, when do we leave for Derilict?"

"In a few minutes. We've got to get clear of all the other ships first, otherwise we could wind up opening a hyperspace window inside another ship. Or worse." Eyrina stated blandly.

"Ah." Was all Lorn had to reply.

"What kind of mission were you running for the Alliance, again?" Eyrina asked, curious.

"Messenger duty to the Derilict Navy." Lorn said quickly. Almost a little too quickly, he thought, for Eyrina was giving him a strange look.

"That's... odd. The Alliance usually doesn't accept messaging tasks. And especially to Derilict." Eyrina said slowly.

"Well, from what I understood, it was from Alexa Corvicov herself. I could be wrong, though, It's my first day..."

"Ah. Yeah, be careful with that. I think I know what the message is, and the Republicans won't be too happy about it." Eyrina said with a smile.

"And what are you doing in Derilict, captain?" Lorn asked.

"One of the new IS-34 pilots I hired has a mission here. Aldari wants a criminal who stole and fenced a Sentinel dead by any means."

"The Aldarians work with the Alliance often?" Lorn asked curiously.

"Yeah, not that one could prove it. The missions are all sent to the Alliance anonymously, so they can't be traced back and cause an incident in the political scene. Still, you can get an idea for which ones are offered up by Aldari." Eyrina replied.

"So you're-"

Lorn's reply was cut off as a sudden lurch sent everyone sideways. Dishes went clattering to the ground and food went flying; a pronounced hum could be heard as raw energy thrummed through the hull. They had entered hyperspace.

Lorn gingerly picked himself up off the ground; he had landed on his bad leg. The rest of the crew had caught themselves before falling, as though they had seen it coming. "Yeah, and that's why I got rid of the ceramic dishes." Eyrina quipped.

"So..." Lorn again started his question. "You're ferrying him?" Lorn said, a sour note in his voice. He became acutely aware of the 200 Golds he owed her, and hearing of someone getting a ride for free was irritating.

"That, and I have other business there." Eyrina stated.

"Oh?" Lorn inquired.

"It's personal." Eyrina quickly snapped.

"I see." Lorn paused. "Been to Derilict before?"

"Grew up there, as a matter of fact." Eyrina grimaced as she said this.

"I grew up in Saralin. You?" Lorn offered.

"The same. Not that it matters much anymore." Eyrina replied. Lorn gave her an inquiring look. "The IceStar Alliance and Derilict are on bad terms. Doubt it'll ever change either. Many years back, the Alliance attacked the yacht of some big-wig political in Derilict space. Derilict struck back. Nearly destroyed the Alliance. Alexa was the only surviving Legend from the battle. But ever since, the two have been on bad terms. Aldari is the only thing keeping Derilict from attacking."

"Why doesn't Derilict just go around Aldari?" Lorn asked. There was a slightly disgusted tone in his voice, but Eyrina didn't notice.

"Because it risks war with Aldari. Did you happen to see Cornicov's personal battlecruiser, the *Starfire*?" She paused, noting the incomprehension on his face. "Giant demonic ship?" She offered. He nodded in realization. "It's a salvaged *Armageddon-class* Aldari battlecruiser. Aldari has six of those in service, and each one is capable of destroying a Derilict Starcruiser. And Aldari is always looking toward neighboring systems for expansion. Derilict doesn't dare strike unless it wants to give Aldari a reason to go to war."

"Lucky for us, I suppose." Lorn replied.

"Yeah, but it means that you can pretty much give up any life you... you had in Derilict." Eyrina's voice faltered slightly.

"That must've been before my time, but I know what you mean. I left a successful trading business to join the Alliance." Lorn responded.

"More than that. Not sure if it's true, but I've heard that any Alliance ship caught in Derilict space is to be destroyed on sight. And the Alliance actually pays bounties on the larger Derilict vessels." She shook her head. "There's no love lost between them."

"I'd believe it, what with that whole Borea thing. That was you, wasn't it?" Lorn asked.

"Yeah. Funny how things turn out. See, I planned on going into the Derilict Navy. But... well, fate intervened." Eyrina's voice suddenly seemed hollow, and she stared stiffly at her plate.

Lorn pressed on. "A few of my old college friends went into the Navy. I never saw why, though. It always seemed too...structured for my taste."

"Hah. Most of my family is in the navy. Father, brothers... Even my mother did some work for the military once. But I got involved in something I shouldn't have, and..." Eyrina stopped.

"...and ended up in the Alliance? Well, just watch out for your family when Derilict attacks us." Lorn quipped.

"Not a problem." Eyrina stated casually with a laugh. "Not... anymore." Eyrina smiled, but it was nothing more than bravado. Her composure quickly started slipping. Moving a little quickly, she got up and left the hall.

Lorn sighed. Knowing what he had to do, he got up and followed, nearly slipping on his plate of food, now laying on the deck. Wending his way through the corridors, he found Eyrina leaning against the door to the captain's quarters. She was taking in shuddering breaths, as if unable to take in air, and tears sparkled in her eyes. Lorn couldn't help but feel a little guilty about what he said earlier. "It'll- It'll be alright." He said, trying to sound reassuring. "I'm sure they're fine-"

"No." Eyrina choked out. "They're not." Eyrina stared at Lorn through watering eyes. "My brother was... he was aboard a Destroyer that made up part of the strike force."

"What...happened to the destroyer?" Lorn asked, knowing full-well the fate of the Destroyer and hoping it wouldn't spur more crying.

"I... I..." Eyrina took a shuddering breath. "I torpedoed it. Completely destroyed it. I didn't have any idea, it just... I..." Eyrina quickly started hyperventilating, her face falling into her hands.

"Well...I'm sure he's...in a better place now...and there was no way...you could've known..." Lorn trailed off, not knowing what to say. He was growing uncomfortably aware of the fact that comforting sobbing women wasn't exactly his specialty.

Eyrina's breathing slowed, and she looked up again, a desperate fire in her eyes. "I have to know. I have find out whether..." Eyrina looked away.

"Well, who was your brother? I might know him, and if I don't, I know a bunch of old friends who might've." Lorn offered.

Eyrina sniffled. Her sense of caution was immediately overridden by her need to know. "Captain Jenneke Haford."

Lorn stiffened. "I...worked with him recently...just before I came to IceStar. He was alive and well, I assure you."



Eyrina's face lit up. "You... you knew him? How was he? Was he okay? What kind of person was he? Was he married?"

Lorn winced as he was pestered with questions. In hindsight, he really should have seen that coming. "Red hair like yours? He was in the Navy, the captain of some ship. We...worked on a transportation project together. He was very nice, knew what he was doing, seemed very content. I don't know if he was married or not." Lorn shrugged helplessly.

"Oh." The hope that had lit her face up was now dissipating. "Well... Look, can you do me a favor?"

"Of course." Lorn replied.

"If you see him again... would you let me know?" Eyrina asked softly.

"I'd be honored to." Lorn replied humbly.

"Thank you." Eyrina said. She got a distant look for a moment, as if pondering whether Jenneke was still alive.

Lorn and Eyrina suddenly had to brace themselves against a wall as the ship lurched violently again. At once, Eyrina's disposition changed, taking on an authoritative aura. "We're here." At a confused look, she added, "Derilict." She walked over to an intercom and pressed a few buttons. "This is Captain Haford. All personnel, Prepare to meet me on the bridge in five minutes." She turned off the intercom. "You too." She added to Lorn.

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Lorn stared. Everyone was gathered on the bridge. Even the relief bridge crew and gunners were here. It was a small crew, but it worked nonetheless. And now, Lorn was taking part in one of the oddest briefings he had ever seen.

"Now, it is imperative that you follow my orders. I don't want anyone playing hero-" Eyrina stated calmly.

"Don't have ta worry 'bout that, sister!" Greta exclaimed, excited at the prospect that Eyrina might get herself killed.

"-or getting noble. If at any point you think the *Phalanx* is in trouble, you get the hell out of here. Head to the Chrijstain system and meet up with Cornicov and the Aldarians. I can handle myself." Eyrina continued as if Greta had never interrupted.

Lorn saw that she was clearly trying to be deadly serious, but her choice of apparel was completely undermining the effect. Apparently, she had decided that a small, flowing, pink frilly dress like those a teenager might wear for prom would be appropriate for blending in with the Derilict IV populous. This didn't escape the notice of the various crew, who were either petrified with shock and horror at their Captain's poor choice in clothing, or overcome with mirth.

"Now, after I depart, this ship is going to the Derilict V outpost. Pilot Daniels, Pilot... erm..." Lorn raised an eyebrow as Eyrina struggled over his name. "You. The coordinates to the outpost are already uploaded to both of your ships. Daniels, you will rendezvous with the *Phalanx* after your mission. Assuming everything goes smoothly, by the time you're finished, I should already be back on the ship."

"And if you aren't?" Mick asked.

"Wait two hours. If I'm still not back by that time, you are to proceed to the Chrijstain system." She raised a hand to quell further debate from Mick. "Alright, the longer we spend here, the more things that could go wrong. Let's go!"

---

Eyrina lowered herself into *Enmity's* cockpit. As the cockpit sealed, she looked across at the other Starlancer in the bay. She felt that she had seen that mercenary before... but where?

Lorn took a glance at *Enmity*. It was a Starlancer alright, but not one he had ever seen. The entire thing was covered with solar panels, the weaponry was drastically altered, and two of the LAMFMs was replaced with Impulse engines.

He knew what he was going to do. Alert the Republic. Alert them to the threat that the IceStar Alliance posed. Alert them to the hidden outpost on Derilict V. But most importantly, alert them to the presence of the very person who caused the failure of the Borean Strike, right here in the Derilict system.

She knew what she was going to do. Find her family. Find out if they were okay. And if necessary, defend them by whatever means necessary. She wouldn't lose her family again. She'd make up for what she did to Jenneke...

"Mick here. We've reached the active magnetic field of Derilict I. You are go for launch." His voice blared across the comms of every ship in the *Phalanx's* hangar bay.

The hangar bay doors started to open. The engines on the two Starlancers roared to life, and they lifted off from the hangar floor. Then, with a bright flare of light, they blasted out into space.

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## Spinning a Web

By Sylae - Aug 27 2009

Lorn's T-86 shot away from the *Phalanx*, and out into the void of space. He gunned the LAMFMs to 100% thrust and was pulled back by the acceleration.

Soon enough, he saw the blue-green globe of Derilict IV appear, and he slowed down slightly. Eventually, his navs began picking up Navy vessels--the Home Fleet--and he headed towards one of the two huge blips--Derilict Starcruisers. When he got within one hundred Saerons of it, his radio crackled and a tired officer's voice came over the comms, "Unauthorized vessel, you are in Military space. Follow the approaching Starlancer escort in to the ship or you will be destroyed." the comms cut off, and Lorn sighed.

Two Starlancers pulled up beside him and directed him toward a hangar bay on the Starcruiser.

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Several minutes later--it had not taken Lorn long to identify himself, thankfully--Lorn stepped onto the bridge of the *Derilict Honor*. He felt startlingly out of place in the dirty IceStar grey uniform.

Admiral Fyrnest turned away from observing the main part of the bridge, "Commander Manolin, nice of you to join us. What brings you back to the Republic?"

"Ser, Captain Eyrina Haford is in the system. She is responsible for--"

"The failure of the Borean Strike. Yes, everyone in the Navy knows about how you made four top-of-the-line Derilict vessels lose to one patched-together mercenary frigate." Fyrnest smirked.

Lorn resisted the urge to punch the man in the face. "Ser, the point is that she is on Derilict soil, and within reach of--"

"I have heard enough. Put him in confinement like the traitor and coward he is," The admiral stated. Before being drug out of the room by a pair of guards, Lorn expressed his anger onto the nose of one of Derilict's highest authorities.

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Lorn leaned against the wall of the cell, legs slowly sinking until he was sitting. He couldn't believe it...Haford would walk away because of an incompetent Admiral. He got up and punched the wall in fury, ignoring the breaking knuckles and the sizable dent in the solid steel panel.

The door opened, and Lorn turned, expecting some guards to beat him for punching the wall or some such. Instead, a man in the cream and green of a Armyman stepped in. Lorn normally would have stiffened upon seeing the general's insignia on the man's shoulder, but he currently didn't give a shit, to be frank.

"Commander, I am General Weslyn. Apologies for the Admiral's stupidity. I think I talked some sense into him," the man said, obviously expecting Lorn's comprehension.

Lorn noticed that Weslyn seemed to be used to dealing with situations like this. "I'm sorry, ser. I'm not sure I understand."

"It's not relevant," Weslyn said quickly, "Come with me, we're moving forward with a ground strike. Seeing as you are the only person who knows anything, you're coming with us."

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The dark room was illuminated solely by the holographic Derilict IV floating in the center of the room. Lorn held up a hastily-drawn sketch and spoke to the array of Army officers. "Captain Eyrina Haford, of the IceStar Alliance. Her brother is Captain Jenneke Haford, who was on the Borea Strike with..." Suddenly, it dawned on him. "Captain Jenneke Haford, who leaked information on the Borea Strike to the IceStar Alliance." Suddenly, all the pieces fit into place. He yelled to the technicians seated at terminals around the outside of the dark room. "Households of all the Hafords on Derilict!" Within five seconds, several blips appeared on the holographic globe.

One of the Armymen cleared his throat and pointed. "It's that one, commander," He paused as every eye settled on him. "I was on the shuttle that took Captian Haford to his residence, sers."

"Thank you, captain." Weslyn nodded to one of the technicians, and the globe flattened into a detailed topographical map of a largish island. Weslyn quickly assed the map and used a pointer to mark several points on the map. "We will need artillery support behind this rise--two Lofters should be enough, with a Titan for protection. One squad of light infantry will accompany the Admiral and his entourage to the Residence, to subdue the rogue captain." He nodded to the Admiral, who obviously had been told to keep quiet. "Commander Manolin, you will have one squad of light infantry at your disposal, to find the Haford girl. Two squads will surround the area, along with two tanks, to move in if this gets physical. One squad will wait in the wings to help out when this goes wrong. Admiral Fyrnest, I assume we will have airstrike support in case they won't surrender?" Weslyn asked. Fyrnest nodded, mouth still clamped shut in a glower. Weslyn ignored the lone snicker from the back of the room and continued. "Commander, I took the liberty of getting a suitable uniform for you. It's waiting outside. Any questions? ... Wheels up in ten minutes. Oh, and Admiral, if you'd stay back, it'll only take a minute."

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"ETA thirty seconds." The voice of the pilot from the wall-mounted speakers jolted Lorn out of his daze. He stood up and grabbed the Army helmet from the small compartment above where he was sitting and strapped it on. As soon as he clicked the eyepiece down over his left eye, the shuttle jolted as it hit the ground, and the twenty-man squad of soldiers poured out, Lorn following.

"We're a little early, the artillery is still on their way in," Squad Leader Hessian stepped forward and gave Lorn a small battery-powered display. "Our eyes in the sky show one large heat signature in a clearing, possibly her ship. I've depatched five men to check it out. We've got three other signatures in the woods, possibly animals, possibly her. I'm splitting the squads into three groups, you'll be leading five men to check out this point, just east of the manor."

Lorn nodded, and Hessain pointed to five troops standing by the edge of the clearing, "They're waiting! Good luck!" he yelled as the shuttle's LAMFMs flared and it lifted off.

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"Signature is fifty yards from your position, Commander, can you ID her?" one of the troops whispered through the coms as Lorn crouched behind a fallen tree. He peeked his head over the rotten mess and saw a flash of pink.

"Christ!...half to death!" Lorn recognized the voice, and whispered into the helmet's mic, "Positive. This is her."

The six men moved forward once more, slowly so as to not make any noise.

"Admiral moving in." The message came from one of the other squads. Within a minute, Lorn began to hear men yelling farther away.

Lorn's ear rang as a beeping filled it. The helmet's motion sensors had gone off. "Haford's on the move," he whispered into the mic.

"Situation escalating! We've got weapons drawn!" The message came from the same man in the other squad. Several seconds later, a gunshot rang out, quickly followed by more, and Lorn jumped into action.

"Move in!" He screamed into the mic, then ran forward, closing the gap between him and Haford quickly.

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## Memento Moirae

By Nioca - Aug 27 2009

"Can you hear me?" Eyrina said, a finger planted in her ear.

"Loud and clear." Came the reply through her earpiece.

"Good." She walked through the streets of Saralin. The people she passed gawked and pointed at her. Apparently, they didn't think much of her fashion sense either. She found the building she was looking for, a library, and entered.

It was her turn to gawk. She had forgotten what amenities most cities offered. Hundreds of computer terminals dotted the vast room, and the sound of clicking keyboards filled the air. A massive database. Only a few people were here at the moment.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" A librarian had come up to Eyrina.

"Oh, um, no, I'm alright." Eyrina said, startled. She walked away from her and approached a console. Sitting down, she started typing into the console, muttering as she typed. "Derilict KnowBase... Search... Johnathon Haford..."

An article relating to her father appeared. Eyrina quickly started skimming, picking out the important bits. "Commander Johnathon Wes Haford... Married to Jen Suleiman Haford... Father of five?" Eyrina blinked. She was the second youngest of four children. "Offspring... Captain Miles Haford, Captain Jenneke Franks Haford, Marie Haford (Missing), Pilot Alan Haford, Eve Marie Haford."

Eyrina blinked. It felt so surreal... How long had it been since she had been called "Marie"? *Enmity* had been the one to come up with the name Eyrina for her. And more than that... She had a new sister? Shaking her head, she continued reading. And she eventually found, "After their eldest daughter went missing, Johnathon and his family moved to Yarin Island, having a new manor built there."

There it was. She had found what she was looking for. Excited, she jumped up and started toward the door. But something else caught her eye. Looking back at the article, she spotted another name she recognized. "It can't be..." She said to herself. "How could he...?"

Eyrina shut the terminal down and hurried out the door.

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Eyrina desperately struggled out of the underbrush. Throwing a dirty glance at the woods behind her, she straightened out her dress and quickly started across the field. The Yarin Island was gorgeous. White sandy beaches, wonderful weather, magnificent flora... She grew somewhat envious. And overlooking it all was a manor that could only belong to one person. Her father.

When she had left, her father had been a captain in the Derilict navy. Apparently, he had received a promotion. She couldn't help but feel shame; Here he was, a prestigious commander of the Derilict navy, and she was nothing more than a mercenary. A common criminal.

Finding a small copse north of the house, she settled down. "Any news?" She asked, pressing her earpiece.

"A merchant ship carrying 15 tons of bananas crashed into Port Samilfor." Came the reply.

"Um... I meant important news." Eyrina said.

"That is important. It took out 19 cars and two houses."

"Fine, *more* important." Eyrina replied exasperatedly.

"Unfortunately, that's the most important thing that's come across."

"Well, keep me apprised." Eyrina muttered. She watched the manor. She saw a little girl, no older than 11, playing in front of the house. She must be Eve... her baby sister.

And so it went. She kept watch on the house as the day wore on. She frequently checked her watch; she had estimated that she had five hours when she started this venture. Three were up, and she had no idea either way about her brother.

"Eyrina, listen to this."

Eyrina nearly jumped three feet in the air. "Christ! You scared me half to death!" Eyrina whispered into her earpiece.

"Are you okay?" Came the reply.

"What- yeah, I'm fine. I didn't mean it literally." Eyrina muttered.

"Listen to this, then." There was a brief silence. Then a distinctive voice, recorded, came across the earpiece. "We're now getting reports that the Derilict Navy launched a preemptive strike against the Kingdom of Borea. Navy officials refused to comment, but sources say a small strike force was sent to take out the Borean attack force, only to get intercepted by as-of-yet unidentified forces. Casualties are somewhere upward of 600, and two ships were lost. The terrorist factions known as the IceStar Alliance and the Bornt Coalition both claim responsibility for the attack." The report ended.

"The Bornt Coalition's claiming they did it too?" Eyrina asked rhetorically.

"There's more." The recording started again. "In Galactic News, raids have hit an all-time high in the Paquis system. Several merchants have sworn the system off as a lost cause as the Veros Empire continues to raid mercantile vessels entering and leaving the system. Aldari publicly announced their support of Borea in the oncoming war, and has sent ships to support them. This comes as fighting between Aldari and the Saln Confederation continues to intensify. The D-" The recording cut off again.

"Strange. You've recorded everything?" Eyrina asked.

"Every word."

"Good, I think- Wait, someone's coming." Eyrina stopped. A car was approaching. She watched intently as it pulled up to the manor and landed on the grass, its LAMFM engines cooling as they turned off. A woman stepped out of the house as the doors to the car opened upwards. Eyrina's heart pounded with anticipation. She saw her father, a tall and dignified man, get out of the car, followed shortly by her brother Miles. Eyrina held her breath.

And then let out a small cry of relief. Jenneke cautiously stepped out of the car, balancing himself on a crutch. His right leg was wrapped almost entirely in bandages. He hadn't gotten out of the ship unscathed. But it didn't matter. He was alive.

She wanted to stay a while longer, but knew better. "He's alright!" She whispered excitedly into the earpiece. "Okay, I'm heading back immediately."

"Eyrina, stay put."

"What?" Eyrina asked, confused.

"Scanners indicate several more vehicles approaching."

Eyrina looked back. They weren't hard to spot. Five silver cars quickly flew across the field, landing several yards from the house. About twelve men piled out of the cars, dressed in cream-and-green Derilict Army uniforms. Two were wearing Derilict Navy uniforms.

Eyrina got a very bad feeling. Reaching under her dress, she pulled out the larger of her two semi-automatics, the massive Saris Firebore. Chambering a round, she crouched behind a bush, straining her ears. Thankfully, the sound carried well across the field.

"Admiral Fyrnest." Johnathon's deep voice said. "What brings you here?"

"Well... Commander, I need to ask your son some... some questions. About the, um, Borea Strike." Fyrnest stated nervously.

"What kind of questions? Surely his report was thorough?" Johnathon responded. Jenneke stared with disgust at the man next to Fyrnest. Miles simply seemed baffled.

The door opened again. Eyrina recognized her mother and her youngest brother, Alan. Alan was dressed in full Derilict Navy regalia, his sidearm displayed proudly. "I told you they'd want me to deploy today." He said. "I'll see you-"

"Stay put, Alan." Johnathon sharply commanded.

"Commander Haford..." Admiral Fyrnest started again. "Some new information came to light, and... Well, we need to talk to Captain Jenneke. It's important." Fyrnest stammered.

The man next to him spoke up. Eyrina recognized his hated voice immediately. "What our nervous Admiral isn't saying is that your son is suspected of treason, Haford."

"Treason?" Eyrina's father Johnathon responded, aghast. "On what grounds?"

"What is this?" Jenneke, her eldest brother, growled. Even from across the field, Eyrina could see the hatred on his face.

"It's quite simple, Captain. You passed information to the IceStar Alliance regarding the Borea Strike, allowing them to intercept it. And now, they're holding the crew of the *Cloudsoarer* for ransom."

"Commander Aso!" Admiral Fyrnest spoke up. "That's another Commander's *son* you're speaking to!"

"I'm fully aware of who I'm speaking to, Admiral." The man named Aso said slowly. "As I am that he was in the running for your position, was he not? I suppose it's for the best he never got it."

"And why would I pass information to the Alliance?" Jenneke said, seething.

"Money, prestige, don't know, don't care. But you're coming with us." Aso replied smugly.

"He's staying right here." Johnathon replied angrily. "Any questions you want to ask can be asked here."

"Alright, alright!" Admiral Fyrnest yelled.

"Fine. Captain Jenneke Haford, the details of the Borea Strike were classified. Only a select few knew the exact details of the strike, you amongst them. So tell me," Commander Aso snarled.

"Why did a criminal mercenary known as Eyrina Haford know the date, time, and target of the attack?"

"I don't know." Jenneke replied through gritted teeth. "There must be a leak-"

"And it's just coincidence that the person the information was passed to happened to be your sister?" Aso asked, an unrestrained glee in his voice.

Jenneke raised an eyebrow. "Uh, in case you've gotten stupid, I don't know an 'Eyrina Haford'. You've got the wrong family."

"Yes you do." Aso replied. "Ah, but forgive me. You might not have heard what your sister has been doing these days."

Johnathon stepped in. "Aso, have you gone insane?" He asked angrily. "No daughter of mine would join the IceStar Alliance."

"On the contrary." Aso pulled a computer tablet out from his coat and tossed it to Johnathon.

"Thanks to some new information, we were able to discover Eyrina's, or shall I say, *Marie's* real identity."

There was a brief silence amongst the Hafords. Then, Johnathon, sounding extremely insecure, finally stammered out, "It... can't be."

"Marie's alive?" It was Jen, Eyrina's mother. She sounded hopeful.

What was said next, Eyrina couldn't tell, for her earpiece rang at that moment. "Eyrina, was someone supposed to meet you?"

Annoyed, Eyrina put a finger on it. "No. Why?"

"Because scanners indicate six lifesigns headed directly toward you, 40 yards to your east. Also, twelve lifesigns are approaching my position."



Eyrina quickly glanced east. She didn't see anyone, but her view was mostly blocked. "Alright, stay put for now. I'm going to move and see if they're tracking me or not. Is there anything else I should know?" She got up and quickly darted away. Moving through the copse, she made a brief dash into a new one and hid behind a purple bush.

"Scanners indicate two larger vehicles 400 yards west of your position, and energy readings suggest plasma energy weapons are present on it. Three more vehicles are located 3 Saerons north of the house, readings indicate artillery."

"Tanks" Eyrina spat. "They know I'm here." She settled returned to watching the house, and became even more alarmed. She didn't know what had transpired, but whatever had happened, it wasn't good. Her father was standing between Jenneke and Aso, Alan had pulled his sidearm and had it pointed at the Admiral Fyrnest, and the various soldiers that had gotten out of the car were now pointing automatic weapons at the entire family. Moving carefully, she pushed her way through the foliage.

"Is this really how you want your careers to end?" Aso snarled to Johnathon and Alan.

"Defending a traitor?"

"Shut up!" Alan screamed. "No one talks about-"

"Alan, get back inside now!" Johnathon yelled.

"Yes, listen to your daddy before you get your brains blown across the-"

There was the loud bang of a gunshot and a car window shattered. Taking careful aim as everyone started scattering, Eyrina fired again. Wincing as the massive .50-caliber gun's recoil slammed against her wrist, she watched an unfortunate soldier move into the bullet's path, taking a shot meant for the man she hated so much, the one named Aso...

Rallying, the soldiers returned fire. Bullets sprayed around Eyrina as they fired wildly into the copse. Eyrina hit the ground, firing back. Within three rounds, another soldier went down. The rest took cover behind the cars.

The firing stopped. Eyrina quickly examined the situation. Her family had been pulled behind one of the cars. The soldiers were crouched behind the various cars for protection. Another group were running across the field, dressed in full arms and armor. She realized that her advantage was slipping; the soldiers behind the cars lacked the armor of the ones crossing the field, and the soldiers in the field had the typical army visor. They'd be able to spot her quite easily.

Light though their armor was, Eyrina knew that she wouldn't be able to beat them just by shooting bullets at them. She'd just run herself out of ammo. Dropping the Firebore, she pulled another gun, an Aldarian Pistol, out from under the skirt of her dress. Jet black with a dial and a glowing blue light on the side, it felt heavy in her hand. Adjusting the dial, she leveled the gun and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud snap as an arc of electricity, for a brief moment, connected the gun to one of the soldiers. The man seized up for a moment, then collapsed, sparks flying from his helmet. Profanities flew as Eyrina took aim and fired again. Another was fried, and then another. The remaining three started firing at the copse, but two more went down before they could reach

safety. The last had just made it to the line of cars when Eyrina squeezed the trigger one last time, killing the final soldier.

The lights on the gun went out. Ejecting and stowing the dead battery away, she loaded a new one. She was just leveling it again at one of the cars when a burst of automatic fire sent her diving for cover. She then cursed to herself; she had dropped her lightning gun and Aldarian Firebore. Yanking out her small blue Derilict Rean, she chambered a round, hid behind a large tree, and tried to figure out what was happening. That gunfire sounded a lot closer...

And indeed, she could hear men crashing through the copse. There was another, prolonged burst of fire, shredding the foliage around her. When it let up slightly, she returned fire, snapping off four shots.

As if things weren't getting chaotic enough, the soldiers in the field started firing on the copse. Eyrina heard curses as bullets bounced around the grove of trees, and someone shouted, "Damn it, you just hit one of ours! Hold fire!" Eyrina cocked her head slightly... where had she heard that voice before?

Seeing an opportunity, she peeked around the tree and saw a soldier who had chosen a bad time to look away. One shot later, he fell in a crumpled heap. She then retreated back behind the tree as another burst of automatic fire nearly took her face clean off. Reaching under her dress again, she yanked out a dark, brownish gun. It was a truly bizarre-looking weapon. It had a thin handle, too thin to hold a magazine. The top was slotted, as if something snapped into place on top of it. And the barrel was unusually wide.

The shooting stopped for a moment. "Marie Haford!" Someone called out. "Lay down your weapons and come out with your hands up!"

Eyrina knew that voice now. It was the same man that had hitched a ride with her. "You bastard! You sold me out! And to Derilict?" She angrily snapped a large magazine into place on top of the odd gun, and an orange light lit up on the side.

"This can be resolved peacefully, Marie!" Came the reply.

"Oh, sure!" Eyrina laughed bitterly. She looked around the side of the tree and surveyed her surroundings. The glint of two rifle barrels could be seen. "Just turn myself in! And what? Get my veins loaded with poison? Get shot on a firing line? What kind of death do I have to look forward to if I give myself up?"

"You're just a young girl who's in over her head, I'm sure something can be worked out! But you need to stop before you make things even worse!"

"Worse? For me? How could the death penalty get worse?" Eyrina snapped.

"And what about your family?" Came the reply. "You surrender now, and we'll drop all charges that have come about from this whole mess against them. I'll personally see to it that Jenneke gets off as lightly as possible for his part in the failure of the Borea Strike."

"Jenneke didn't have anything to do with it!" Eyrina shouted.

"Marie, we know that he passed you the information needed to stop the strike. He will face consequences for that. But you have the choice of how well, or how poorly, things go for him. You surrender now, and all this fighting stops. No one else has to die."

Eyrina took a deep breath. "You know what?" She raised the pistol. "Go to hell!"

She aimed the pistol around the tree and fired. An orange globe of plasma flew out of the gun, burning its way through one tree and exploding into a cloud of flame against the second. The temperature spiked what had to be 30 degrees Celsius as the foliage ignited instantly. Flames roared high to the sky as the ground glowed orange. She heard screams as someone, possibly two people, were caught in the inferno.

Scooping up her two dropped guns, Eyrina backed up as far as she could without stepping out of the copse. The heat was unbearable. Looking toward the house, she leveled the lightning gun again, adjusted the dial higher, and fired on one of the cars. There were shouts as three different soldiers collapsed, electrocuted through the car.

A cry carried across the field. "Fall back!" Desperately, several soldiers made a run for the other end of the field, firing their weapons into the copse. The flames Eyrina had lit were getting too close. When the storm of bullets let up slightly, she risked making a run out into the open, firing shots wildly toward the fleeing group with the Firebore, emptying it. Of the five shots, two found their mark, taking down two more soldiers.

And then, it was quiet. The soldiers were all gone. The firing had stopped. All that could be heard was the crackling of the foliage behind her. Eyrina, ever-so-cautiously, made her way to the manor, reloading her gun. She saw her brother Miles peek out from behind a car. He promptly disappeared for a moment, then reappeared leveling one of the downed soldiers' automatic rifles at her. She raised her hands; it hadn't occurred to her that they might not recognize her, or that they might shoot her anyway if they did.

"Don't move any closer!" Miles shouted. "Drop the gun!"

"Miles, don't shoot!" Eyrina shouted back.

"Drop the gun!" Miles repeated.

Eyrina started panicking, but thankfully, the situation resolved itself. Her father, Johnathon, looked over the edge of the car. "Miles," He stated, somewhat shaken. "Lower that weapon."

Miles stared reproachfully at his father for a moment, but complied. Eyrina quickly strode across the field, intent on reaching them. She then stopped within 100 feet. She suddenly became uncomfortable. It had been four years since she had last seen them, and the difference between her and them was staggering. They were an upstanding military family, held to virtues of honor and country. And she was a mercenary for one of the more cutthroat criminal empires in the galaxy.

Then, suddenly, Jen ran forward and hugged Eyrina. Eyrina stumbled back slightly, stunned under her mother's embrace. "You're okay." Jen mumbled. "I was so worried... I thought you were... Oh, Marie..."

Eyrina didn't quite know what to do. Finally, she settled on just standing there. Eventually, Jen let go of her and started scrutinizing her. However, Eyrina's eyes were on the males of the

Haford family. Johnathon, her father, looked stunned. Jenneke, her oldest brother, looked livid. Miles, the middle child, was unreadable. And Alan had something between shock and admiration.

Johnathon spoke up. "Is it really...?" Eyrina, feeling rather stunned herself, simply nodded. "And... is it true that you're a...?"

Eyrina couldn't bring herself to respond. She simply closed her eyes, not wanting to see his face.

"Let me get this straight." An angry voice spoke up. Eyrina opened her eyes again, and saw Jenneke. "You decide to go off and defy the family. Just join up with the mercenary group that's fought us for the better part of 60 years. And then, that not being good enough, you decide to come back and kill me? Take away everything I love?"

"I... I didn't know, I didn't-"

"There's no time for this now, we can settle this later." Johnathon cut in. "Right now, they think we're all traitors, and are going to come at us with everything they've got."

"But Admiral Fyrnest..." Miles started slowly. "Fyrnest wouldn't believe that. He's stupid, but he knows us. Aso wouldn't dare move without his say. I know he's strict and harsh, but..." Miles continued reassuringly, "he's fair to us."

"Miles is right. If we got Jenneke and Marie out of here right now, this whole thing could blow over. The worst that could happen is that we get demoted. Fyrnest would see through any crap Aso sends our way." Johnathon confirmed.

"The Admiral won't do anything like that." Alan spoke up. "He can't say anything."

"Why not?" Miles demanded.

"Because he's got a .50 caliber bullet lodged in his head." Alan kicked over a body, revealing Admiral Fyrnest.

"Oh, great. Just freaking great. No, really, Marie, well done." Jenneke fumed. "You managed to kill the one person that might have been on our side, *and* knock off one of the highest authorities in Derilict."

"Alright!" Johnathon said, trying to keep order. "What's plan B?"

"Well..." Eyrina motioned towards the various guns scattered on the ground. "We have plenty of weaponry and ammo. The cars make good cover. We could... we could fight." Eyrina paused.

Her earpiece rang again. "Eyrina, I intercepted communications. Two squadrons of soldiers have the manor surrounded and are moving in. Another squadron of soldiers is heading your way. The vehicles to the north are artillery emplacements, and are aimed at your location. And the two tanks are approaching your location."

Eyrina nodded. "Whatever we do, we better make it fast. They're rallying, they've got tanks, and they've got us surrounded." Eyrina put a finger on her earpiece. "Do you think you can take out the artillery?"

"Yes. Should I pick you up after?" Came the reply.

"Negative. You'd just present a nice target to the tanks." Eyrina stated.

"Copy that."

Johnathon, who'd been watching the whole exchange, finally spoke up. "Why didn't you say you had back-up?"

"I wanted to keep that in reserve." Eyrina replied. She had laid all of her guns down on the ground, and was

"A plasma pistol?" Jenneke scoffed.

Eyrina knew what he was getting at. Plasma pistols were heavy, cumbersome, inaccurate, short-ranged, and their magazines held a mere four shots. "If you think bullets will get through a tank's armor, you be my guest." She snapped the magazine into the top of the gun as if to punctuate the point. She then swapped the battery out of her lightning gun and adjusted it to full power.

"Actually..." Johnathon began slowly. He looked at the blazing copse. "We don't stand a chance if they come at us from all directions. But..." He stared at the plasma pistol. "Marie, give the plasma pistol to Miles." Eyrina wanted to protest, but something about his voice stopped her dead. She felt like a little kid again. Obediently, she handed the plasma pistol and its magazines to Miles, who looked curious about his father's plan. "Alright, now, the back of the house is mostly woods. Miles, I want you to shoot into it, light it up. It'll force 'em to come from the front and sides, which we should be able to manage. Now, everyone grab a rifle. Alan, take the left flank. Jenneke, take the right flank. Let's do this." Johnathon looked down field.

Miles shook his head as he held the plasma pistol. "Never in my life did I think I'd..." He left the thought unfinished, heading off to the back of the house.

As Eyrina hefted an automatic rifle into position, she looked over her family. Never before now had she seen how collected they were in combat, especially as a team. Even her mother, Jen, was calmly balancing a rifle against a car as they waited for the oncoming horde.

The rumble of tanks became audible, and two massive beasts of steel could be glimpsed through trees. Alan, the youngest brother, fidgeted slightly.

A loud, booming voice echoed across the field. "This is Commander Aso of the Derilict Navy. You are surrounded by a superior force. Lay down your weapons and come out peacefully, or we will be forced to open fire."

"Well, that's it, then, isn't it?" Jenneke said sarcastically.

Miles returned from behind the house, handing the plasma pistol back to Eyrina. "Two shots left." He said simply, grabbing a rifle and taking position behind a car. "Where's Eve?"

"She's in the basement. She's been told to stay there." Jen said, her voice laced with worry.

They didn't have to wait long for the soldiers to attack. They came in waves of cream and green, automatic weapons blazing. The Hafords returned fire, alternating between firing and ducking behind a car for protection. Several soldiers fell quickly, outmatched by the superior marksmanship of the older Hafords.

However, they weren't stupid. They quickly fell back as a tank approached. The massive Skyle tank opened up with its chainguns, sending the Hafords for cover as the cars were pounded with bullets. Eyrina quickly popped up from her cover and fired with her lightning gun, holding the trigger. A massive arc of electricity connected gun and tank, holding for a couple seconds. Then both the gun and the tank died, a gentle line of smoke rising from the latter.

"You got enough juice in that for the second one?" Miles asked. Eyrina shook her head, hefting a rifle again and firing. The two forces went back and forth. The soldiers hid behind the shorted-out tank, popping out to fire on the line of cars. The Hafords stayed behind the cars, taking shots at the tank and hoping to hit one of the soldiers.

Alan and Jenneke were fighting as well, holding the flanks as soldiers attempted to slip behind the family. However, while casualties were mounting on the enemy's side, things weren't going well for the Hafords. They didn't have enough ammo to hold the enemy soldiers off much longer. And the second tank was moving in. Eyrina leveled the plasma pistol at it as its chainguns poured leaden death at the line of cars. Two blasts of plasma flew towards it. The first arced above it, striking a line of trees behind the tank. The second headed straight for the hatch. The tank was illuminated as the globe of fiery death came closer... and flew past, leaving the tank unscathed

Eyrina cursed very loudly, then pressed her earpiece. "I could use some help here!"

No reply.

"*Enmity*, come in, I need assistance!" But there was still no reply.

"They've likely jammed everything!" Johnathon shouted to her.

Eyrina focused on taking out as many of the enemy soldiers as possible. However, ammunition was running dangerously low, and she soon was resorting to her pistols.

The tank opened up with all of its chainguns. The cars they used for cover were starting to disintegrate. A shouted profanity punctuated one shot, which cut through the car where Miles was standing. Most of the Hafords were now on sidearms, slowly giving way under the oncoming soldiers.

Eyrina took a risky shot at the tank. The bullet bounced off harmlessly.

A blinding pain rippled through her abdomen, closely followed by one in her sternum. She staggered backward and landed in a sitting position, reeling and sick. The wind had been knocked out of her. Her torso felt warm... wet... she looked down, trying desperately to catch her breath. Two spreading stains of dark red were visible against the faded pink of the dress.

There was a shout as Eyrina fell against the grass. Alan stood up, only to get caught in the arm by hostile fire. The other Hafords stopped firing, hiding behind the almost-destroyed cars as the storm of bullets focused on them.

Then the shooting died down again. An amplified voice came from the tank. "This is Commander Aso. This is your last chance. Surrender. If you do not, we will open fire with the Skyle's primary weapon. You will not survive. We know you have wounded. If you surrender, we can get them treatment." There was a pause. "You have one minute."

Jen quickly ran over to Eyrina's side. "Marie, no! Not now! You can't...!" She stammered, at a loss for words. Miles stood next to her, surveying his sister's injuries. Eyrina was trying to take deep breaths, but they kept coming shallow. She couldn't focus... Jen looked up at Miles. "Will she be okay?"

Miles stared at his sister for a moment. Finally, he said in a measured voice, "She took two rounds from a tank's chaingun. It's a miracle she's not spitting up blood. But... I don't think she's going to make it to a hospital."

"But she has to! I-"

Eyrina's breathing was slowing. Miles spoke up again. "Mother, you were a medical officer for the past twenty years. Take a look at her. Do you really think she'll make it?" Miles paused, watching Jen for a moment. "We're two down. We're not going to get out of this alive unless we surrender. Marie certainly won't."

Johnathon came over. "Alan won't be able to fight. He's got to keep pressure on that arm. How's..." His voice trailed off as he looked Marie over. He kneeled close.

Eyrina bolted upright for a moment, yanking her father near. She whispered something in his ear for several moments. Then her grip started slackening, and she collapsed back to the grass, her breathing as shallow as ever. Her skin was extremely pale, and her eyes couldn't stay open.

Then her breathing stopped. "Marie?" Jen asked with a trembling voice. "Marie, can you hear me?"

Miles looked away. Johnathon felt for a pulse. Then he looked into his wife's eyes and shook his head.

"No! No, Marie!" She grabbed Eyrina's body as tightly as she could, crying.

Johnathon roughly pulled her off. "There's no use, Jen." He struggled with her, now shouting loudly. "Jen, Marie's dead! We have to-"

"No!" Jen sobbed hysterically.

"We need to surrender! We can't let any of the other children die!"

Miles looked at Johnathon. Johnathon said over Jen's shoulder, "It's over. Surrender."

The Hafords laid down their arms, and one by one stepped into the open. Jen was still hysterical, casting glances at Eyrina's body. Johnathon was the last to leave Eyrina's side, stepping out with his hands up.

The soldiers approached, hesitantly at first. Keeping their weapons raised, they surrounded the family.

"Happy now?" Jenneke snarled at one of them. The man looked up and smiled. He looked like what one might expect from a romanticized pirate. Dashing, roguish. However, there was a cold light in his eyes. Jenneke's eyes were filled with hatred. "Happy that you got even with her, Aso? With us?"

He didn't respond to Jenneke's goading. Instead, he calmly paced over to Marie's body. "Foolish, foolish girl. I offered you the world, didn't I? And instead... this is what you choose." He

smirked. "Was it worth it? Scrounging with scum. The filth of the galaxy. And all so you could die like the traitorous bitch you are." He motioned to the nearby soldiers. "Take her away. Call the dropships and tell them to pick us up. Ah, Commander Lorn!" He said, addressing someone new. "Good work. Looks like we brought her down. And rustled out a whole family of traitors while we were at it. Excellent work indeed." He walked away, adding, "Get Admiral Fyrnest to a hospital. He's in bad shape."

Soldiers quickly started binding the Hafords. There was a yelp of pain as one soldier accidentally twisted Alan's injured shoulder. Miles edged over to his father. "What now?"

Johnathon simply stared down at the ground as the soldiers prepared to bind him as well.

"COMMAN-!" A soldier's cry was cut short by a gun shot. Johnathon suddenly struck the man behind him with an elbow, grabbing ahold of the soldier's rifle.

"GET DOWN!" Johnathon yelled. Hitting his knee, he started firing on the scattered and confused soldiers. As they started taking aim at Johnathon, Eyrina stood up behind one of the cars and opened up on the enemy. Gunfire sprayed everywhere as over twenty soldiers fell in confusion. Johnathon shouted to his family, "RUN! GET EVE AND RUN!"

As the bound Hafords scattered, Johnathon retreated to Eyrina as the soldiers started returning fire. Johnathon took a position next to Eyrina as the tank's chainguns started firing again. There was a scream from the house, and the other family members ran out. Miles was the last of the group, firing a Derilict Rean back inside. He was answered by a burst of automatic weapons fire, and they took cover behind the cars. Jen was holding the little girl Eyrina saw earlier. "We're surrounded!" Miles announced. "We're trapped, there's no way out!"

Eyrina turned around, bring her rifle to bear. A single man walked out of the house. Commander Aso. He strode boldly toward them, completely unconcerned with their weapons. A searing hatred overwhelmed Eyrina, and she started firing. She emptied the entire magazine of the rifle into Aso.

But it didn't even slow him down. He was bleeding profusely, but under the blood and torn flesh, glints of metal could be seen. He walked on, completely unhindered, and the wound was already starting to heal slightly. "What are you?!?" Eyrina screamed, overcome with terror.

He didn't answer. Instead, he lofted a massive .60 caliber pistol and pointed it at Eyrina's head. As the other Hafords realized what was happening, Aso pulled the trigger. There was the sound of a gunshot. And the pistol exploded backwards. Aso cursed as shards of gun metal embedded itself into his hand. He dropped the now-useless gun and retreated under a hail of weapons fire.

Someone started shouting on comms, just barely audible over the gunfire. "Fire the main gun! We're getting no response from artillery, FIRE THE MAIN GUN!"

The tank's primary cannon, a massive plasma cannon, started moving. Slowly, it took aim at the Hafords' barricade, an audible hum in the air as the weapon primed. Eyrina knew it now. It was over. There was no way they'd survive the shot that was coming. Eyrina took one last look at her family before staring down the tank's barrel.

There was a bright flash.



And the tank exploded. Roaring onto the scene came *Enmity*, pulse rifles blazing. It slowly hovered over the field, raining fire down on the enemy soldiers. As their tattered forces retreated, the ship landed a few feet from the now pathetic-looking shot-up line of cars.

"About time." Eyrina groaned. The adrenaline rush she had been experiencing was fading, taking most of her strength with her. She was getting unsteady on her feet, and her skin had taken on a deathly pallor. She pulled off the pink frilly dress, revealing a bullet-resistant IceStar uniform underneath. However, it was clear that the uniform had only slowed the bullets. She was still wounded rather badly, and was still bleeding.

A male voice drifted from the ship, loud enough for everyone to hear. "They've called in an airstrike. We need to get away from here as quickly as possible and find the nearest medical center."

"I've got to hand it to you," Jenneke muttered at Eyrina as she tore strip off the dress for bandages. "They must *really* want you dead."

Eyrina strode up to *Enmity*. "Open the cargo bay." She turned to her family. "I need everyone in the cargo bay. I'll fly us out of-"

"Hold on a minute." Johnathon stated. "Marie, you've lost a lot of blood. You're trembling, you can barely stand, and you're on the verge of passing out. I think I need to fly-"

"Dad, when's the last time you were in the cockpit?" Jenneke started up. "It-"

"And you plan to get into the cockpit *how*?" Alan said irritably.

"Someone will help me up. But tell, how can *you* fly with one hand?"

"Guys, this isn't a debate-"

"I'm the only uninjured-"

"-If we reach the *Phalanx*-"

"No, you've bled half to-"

"Is now really the time-?"

As the argument quickly started snowballing, Eyrina's earpiece activated again. "Sis, get in the back." Eyrina looked up, and saw the only person who wasn't fighting to fly *Enmity*, Miles. He was too busy getting acquainted with the controls. Eyrina sighed, handed what remained of the dress to Jenneke, and clambered up behind Miles. "Come on, let's go!" Miles shouted to the others. They quickly scrambled for the cargo bay.

"Activate combat mode." Eyrina stated as the cargo bay began to close with her family inside.

"Affirmative. Closing combat visor." The Starlancer's armored visor went over the ship's canopy.

Miles apparently having figured out the controls, pushed the thrust to half. The ship jolted as its engines blazed, carrying it out. Suddenly, the ship shook slightly. "Voice command: auxiliary screen to camera rear." Miles stated professionally. A side viewscreen showed what was behind the fleeing Starlancer.

It mostly consisted of fire. Plasma was raining from the heavens, leveling the Haford manor and causing the entire south side of the island to glow orange with hellish flame. "God in heaven..." Eyrina muttered as she continued pressing shreds of her dress against her wounds. Miles didn't respond in any way as the Starlancer climbed upward toward the sky.

Eyrina tried to breath a sigh of relief, but it only aggravated her injuries. Wincing, she said, "We might be able to catch the *Phalanx* if we hurry to Derilict V. They'll probably think they got us, so we shouldn't have any trouble."

"Scanners have spotted several fighters and a two frigates waiting for us just outside atmosphere." *Enmity* chimed in.

"Or, you know, we could be completely screwed. Works either way." Eyrina said, retaining a deadpan tone.

"What kind of pulse rifles are these?" Miles asked, concerned.

"Regenerating." *Enmity* replied.

"Um..." Miles was caught off-guard. "Wasn't asking you, but thanks."

"You're welcome." The ship replied. They were now out of atmosphere. "Several dozen ships are approaching of frigate size or larger 90 Saerons off and closing fast. They're deploying fighters."

"This just keeps getting better!" Eyrina laughed, which quickly turned into a painful cough.

"They are *not* Derilict vessels." The ship stated.

"Wait, if they aren't Derilict-" Miles started.

"Readings indicate vessels of Borean and Aldarian design. They are heading for the Derilict Fleet, which is engaging them." There was a pause. "Two Derilict frigates are pursuing us. They have deployed Starlancers. A small detachment of Borean Comets, with an Aldari Sentinel, are also heading this way.

"Marie, handle missiles and countermeasures. I'll handle the flying and main guns." Miles commanded.

"Got it." Eyrina replied. Her speech was somewhat slurred.

Miles glanced back, worried. "Don't go dying on me now." He said, slamming the throttle to full.

*Enmity's* thrusters flared as it turned for an orbital path, Derilict Starlancers in hot pursuit. Miles deliberately aimed it so that they were flying directly for the Borean Comets. With a little luck, the two forces would get too entangled with each other to worry about one lone Starlancer.

Both forces fired a storm of missiles, aimed at each other and *Enmity*. Miles backed off the thrust. "Don't deploy countermeasures." He told Eyrina. "Just wait..." The missiles ahead and behind roared closer.

Just as the missiles came within a stone's throw, he rammed the throttle to full while turning the ship upward. The two swarms of missiles chasing *Enmity* collided, disintegrating each other and leaving the ship unscathed. The two forces started engaging, firing plasma, particles, and bullets at each other. *Enmity* made it away clean.

"Whew." Eyrina muttered. "That was easy!"

Out of nowhere, two squadrons of Starlancers came roaring out of Derilict IV's atmosphere, chasing *Enmity* at top speeds. Another group appeared ahead.

"Yeah, I blame myself for that one." Eyrina groaned.

*Enmity* whirled over in an attempt to avoid the enemy Starlancers getting a lock with missiles. Pulling around, it opened up with its pulse rifles. One Starlancer was unfortunate enough to get into the *Enmity's* **line of fire and was blasted apart. Eyrina fired off missiles at four of the Starlancers, which fired missiles in return. Miles yanked Enmity over, performing a gut-wrenching turn that briefly overwhelmed Enmity's** inertial damper.

"Miles," The ship stated as Miles made another hairpin turn, throwing off several missiles, "pulling 8g turns with loose and wounded passengers is a bad idea."

"I had no idea." Miles said through gritted teeth. He could hear Eyrina struggling for breath behind him. "Stay with me, Marie."

Eyrina didn't reply. She was too busy trying to stay conscious. Her vision was washed out and faded. Her head spun faster than a top. And everything was a dull brown. As she focused, color slowly started returning, but she couldn't shake the vertigo, or the feeling that she had just been hit by a Starlancer. Sluggishly, she put in commands and locked onto four of the enemy Starlancers. Four missiles shot from *Enmity*, homing in on the enemy.

Whether they connected or not, Eyrina didn't know. Miles had pulled *Enmity* around, and had gotten behind an enemy Starlancer, likely the Squad Leader. He watched with satisfaction as it struggled to throw *Enmity* off, whirling about to avoid pulse rifle fire. It jolted upward into a blue projectile, and exploded in a ball of bright light. *Enmity* shook slightly as the blast wave washed across it.

Eyrina's head pitched forward and struck the console. They had taken a hit. Cursing dazedly and wiping a stream of blood away from her eye, she looked at her console as *Enmity* started to explain. "Fury missile impact across top of craft. Severe armor damage. Long range sensors inoperable. All other systems functioning." It paused as Miles pitched the ship around in a dizzying, helix-esque path. "The other group is approaching, and will shortly be within weapons range. Sensor damage prevents identification."

"Just what we need. More trouble." Miles muttered. He steered the Starlancer toward another which was making a run at *Enmity*. With a tiny smile, he squeezed the weapons trigger on the steering column. A spray of particles vaporized both the enemy Starlancer and the missiles it had fired.

Several larger blasts of plasma flew past the whirling group of fighters. One Starlancer was turned into a glowing, melty mess as it was directly struck and floated off toward Derilict's atmosphere. Eyrina instinctively ducked as a massive particle blast soared through the fighters' ranks.

"Miles!" Eyrina exclaimed quietly. "It's the *Phalanx*!" Indeed, the boxy frigate could now be seen, spraying energy weapons fire into the fray. All four Quadfury fighters were firing full,

turning the area into a storm of plasma. Starlancers started dropping like flies, with half getting blown apart. Chaos reigned as the Starlancers scattered.

A familiar and reassuring voice came across the comms. "Eyrina, can you read? This is Mick. If you get clear of the Starlancers, we can get the hell out of here."

Miles didn't reply. He made a run for the *Phalanx* as the enemy Starlancers attempted to regroup. They quickly started to chase *Enmity*, firing on both it and the *Phalanx* with plasma cannons. There was a vibration and a sizzling sound reverberated throughout the hull "Plasma hit to left wing. Minimal damage." *Enmity* stated.

There were several loud beeps. The Starlancers were firing missiles on the various targets. Several nuclear missiles homed in on the *Phalanx*. Not to be outdone, the *Phalanx* opened its missile bays.

"Argh!" Miles yelled as an incessant string of beeps filled the cockpit. He slammed his hands over his ears. Eyrina covered her ears as well. Dozens of tiny missiles swarmed from the *Phalanx's* missile bay, locking on to the pursuing Starlancers and their missiles. The enemy Starlancers desperately veered off, but it was useless. There were just too many missiles, and the group was flying into the swarm. All but three, along with their missiles quickly succumbed to the salvo in a display of bright flashes.

As the remaining Starlancers fled, the comms opened again. "This is Mick. Eyrina, we're clear for the moment, but long-ranges pick up several large ships closing on this position. We need to get out of here as soon as possible. Please respond."

Mick opened a comm channel to the *Phalanx*. "This is Captain Miles Haford. Have a med team on standby, we have wounded. We're prepared to dock."

There was a pause. "Negative. Where's Eyrina?"

"She's here, but she's badly wounded. She needs medical attention immediately." Miles snapped.

"And why should we trust you?" Mick snarled across comms.

Miles opened comms again, and started to calmly explain. However, Eyrina beat him to it. "MICK, OPEN THE DAMN HANGAR BAY!" She roared. She lapsed into a small string of breathless obscenities, clutching her sternum. She was growing faint.

Mick came back sheepishly. "Sorry, bay doors opening. We've sent docking telemetry, and we'll have Syne standing by. What kind of injuries are we talking about, here?"

"Two wounded. One with two chaingun hits to the torso, a minor head wound, and severe blood loss. The other has a minor gunshot wound to the arm. We have a medical doctor with us to assist, if necessary." Miles rattled off quickly.

"Copy that. We're calling in the IS-34s. We'll need to hurry if we want to get away from here without further incident." Mick stated.

*Enmity* steered itself toward the *Phalanx's* hangar, following two Quadfury fighters. Eyrina groaned slightly. Her head was spinning, and she felt nauseated. She was fighting to keep her eyes open. Looking at the viewscreen, she saw that the *Phalanx* had gone through its own battles

as well. There was a long, vicious burn across the starboard side of its hull, presumably from a plasma hit, and several smaller scorches dotted the hull and wings.

There was a thunk as *Enmity* settled down within the hangar bay. Miles opened the armored visor and canopy, then the cargo bay. Mick ran into the bay with a dark-skinned, muscly woman, both of them looking extremely frazzled.

Miles leaped out of the cockpit, landing rather awkwardly on the bay floor. Eyrina wasn't nearly as graceful, crawling her way out of the cockpit. She slipped and fell to the floor, forcing Miles and Mick to catch her.

"Status report." Miles barked as he helped Eyrina up.

Mick gave Miles a particularly nasty glare, unappreciative of the newcomers sudden attempt to take control. "All systems are functional. We're about to make a hyperspace jump as soon as we get the IS-34s in... just what the hell's going on here?!?" Mick finished with a yelp. The other Hafords were climbing out of *Enmity*'s cargo bay."

Johnathon, stumbling slightly, stepped forward. "After years of faithful and loyal service, the Derilict military kindly asked us to leave." He said with a grim smile.

There was a sudden, violent roar. Another IS-34 Quadfury had passed through the hangar bay's plasma window, and was working its navigational thrusters to land the multi-ton vehicle. Everyone in the bay had covered their ears, doing their best to avoid losing their hearing. The fighter landed with a heavy thud and powered down.

Wincing, the dark-skinned woman spoke up. "I need to get her to the medical ward immediately." She stated, referring to Eyrina. "She needs a blood transfusion, and fast. The fact she's still conscious is incredible, but it won't stay that way long."

As if on cue, Eyrina wobbled and collapsed. Miles and Mick struggled under the sudden increase of weight.

Jen came forward. "I'll help you get her to the hospital ward. I was a Navy medical officer, I should be able to help. Alan," She motioned to her injured son, "also needs attention."

The woman looked at Mick, who nodded. "Do it, Syne."

She nodded, grabbing ahold of the unconscious Eyrina and carrying her off with Jen, Alan following close behind. Mick motioned to a pilot that was climbing out of his IS-34. "Would you show these folks to their guest quarters on your way out?"

The pilot nodded, and the Hafords followed him out. Only Miles remained behind. He shook his head. "What were the odds?"

Mick stared curiously. "What do you mean?"

"If even a single factor in this travesty had been off. If Borea hadn't attacked when it did... or if the artillery deployment had arrived on time... or Aso's gun hadn't misfired... or if you hadn't arrived when you did... or if even one of a thousands of bullets had been accurate..."

"Or if the *Phalanx*'s shields hadn't fritzed over Derilict V." Mick added to the list. Miles gave him a curious look. "Derilict bombed the Alliance outpost on Derilict V. Many Alliance ships

there were destroyed because they couldn't lift off in time. But the *Phalanx* was having shield difficulties at the time and had to remain in orbit to avoid reentry damage. Just when we fixed the problem, sensors spotted the oncoming fleet. We were able to give early warning to the outpost and get clear. But if we were on the ground when they hit, there wouldn't have been a chance in hell."

Miles simply continued to shake his head in disbelief.

The final IS-34 approached the bay. Mick and Miles instinctively clutched their ears as it passed through the plasma screen and landed. When the noise from the craft died down, an alarm klaxon could be heard.

"What's going on?" Miles asked.

"I suspect we have company." Mick said plainly. He walked to the nearest intercom. "Mick to bridge. Close hangar bay doors and jump to hyperspace immediately."

The *Phalanx*'s massive thrusters lit up as they pushed the ship forward. As a small detachment of Derilict frigates came within weapons range, a blue-and-purple hole in space opened up. The *Phalanx* accelerated, passed through the window with a flash, and was gone.

By some miracle, they had escaped.

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## Recovery and Denial

By Sylae - Sep 28 2009

"...Go to hell!" Haford screamed, and Lorn lifted his arm to shield himself from the plasma that poured over him.

Sometime later, Lorn's eyes opened, and he was greeted with a white tile ceiling. A voice from far away whispered, "He's awake. Get the doctor."

Lorn struggled to lift his head, but found it immobile. "Whe..where...?" His tongue refused to form words. A man's face appeared above him and spoke. Lorn couldn't understand what the man was saying, so he just stared. Eventually, the face disappeared, and Lorn fell back asleep.

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"...the Military Council announced today that the Borean threat has been completely removed from the Derilict System. Unofficial estimates state that anywhere from 15 to 20 Derilict frigates were damaged or destroyed in the battle, as well as seven Titan-class destroyers. Civillian flight has been reopened to Coriolis and Derilict V, however, the Navy is not currently allowing civillian vessels near the Ring.

"In other news, authorities have begun investigating the fire at the household of retired Navy Commander Johnathan Haford, which resulted in the deaths of over thirty Army troopers and multiple civillians. No other information has been released. Reporting from DNN Headquarters in Saralfin, I'm Dana Sylford."

Lorn's eyes opened and he leaned forward, wincing as an IV drip pulled at his arm. A sleeping man in an Army uniform dozed in a padded armchair next to his bed, apparently in a hospital of some sort. Lorn cleared his throat, and the man jolted awake.

"Oh, ser. You're awa--"

Lorn cut him off. "Where am I, soldier? What happened?"

"Ah... You are at Lower Saralfin Community Hospital, ser. You had severe plasma burns... Ah, ser, I'm supposed to call headquarters when you get up..." The soldier stood and left out the room, and Lorn looked up at the small screen mounted in the corner, where the DNN logo floated behind a female news reporter.

"Breaking news, Derilict has announced that the Aldarian Empire has joined forces with the Boreans..."

---

Lorn smiled as he stepped out of the hospital doors and into the sunlit outdoors, before slipping into the LAMFM-powered limosine that waited. "Saralfin Military Base," he stated to the driver, and the limo pulled away.

Several minutes later, he stepped through the revolving doors of the Administrative Building at SMB. He stepped up to the civilian secretary and stated "Commander Lorn Manolin, of the Navy, I'm--"

She cut him off "Overcommander Aso will see you in his office." She pointed at one of the many hallways, "up the stairs, third door on the left."

Lorn frowned and walked down the hallway. He stopped at the right door and knocked.

"Come in, Commander." The voice seemed familiar, Lorn thought as he opened the door and stepped into the dark office.

The man who sat behind the desk was tall, handsome, and quite muscular. His eyes, however, were cold and flat, as if they belonged to a dead man. "Commander, I am sure you know why you are here." Aso said, then continued without waiting for an answer. "Beyond turning the simplest military maneuver into a disaster and being taken prisoner in the process, you also managed to *fuck up* the capture of a girl who was outnumbered a hundred to one." The overcommander nodded to himself, and Lorn suddenly realized where he had seen the man before.

"Ser, if I may be frank, my role in the Haford operation did not make any more shit hit the fan--" Lorn was cut off again as Aso pressed a button on one of the touchscreens mounted on his desk, and Lorn's voice sounded from small speakers embedded in the wood of the desk. He recognized it as his final moments of the battle.

"You had her in your grasp, one bullet would've solved everyone's problems. But no, Commander, you had to go and destroy any chance of getting her." Aso pushed another button, and Lorn's voice came out of the speakers again, this time noticeably grainier.

"This is... Manolin. Requesting an ... trike. This ... cation. Priority Alpha." The recording cut off, and Aso smirked.

"Instead of chasing the girl and her family, the two squadrons of Starlancers fired every conventional missile at that manor. Not to mention the Boreans attacking."

"Yeah, because it's my fault the Boreans attacked," Lorn stated, "Ser." he added as an afterthought.

"Yes, it is your fault." The flat eyes blinked, "And that is why you will appear at this building in three days for your courtmarshal before the Military Council," Aso smirked.

Lorn's eyes blazed. "You know what, fuck you!" He ripped his insignia off of the uniform he wore and threw them on the desk. "I didn't need to come back, I didn't want to, but I did. I thought I was serving my nation, not this bureaucratic bullshit." Lorn spat. He watched as Aso slowly wiped the spit off of his face, then those flat eyes became filled with hatred and he punched Lorn in the chest. He could only wonder what kind of cybernetic implants Aso had as he flew through the closed door.

"I'll see you in three days," Aso stated as he stepped over the splinters and towards the lobby.

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"Ser, the next available shuttle to Coriolis is in three hours, althe earlier ones are filled." The woman behind the counter at Saralfin Intrasystem Spaceport stated, looking down at the screen before her.

Lorn sighed and pulled out the Derilict Navy ID card that he'd wisely not thrown on Aso's desk. "I'm Commander Lorn Manolin of the Navy. I need access on the next shuttle going to Coriolis, and I need it now."

The woman frowned, "But, Commander, doesn't the Navy have it's own shuttles?"

"Miss, have you noticed that we just entered a war?" Lorn asked, avoiding the question.

"Ah...the next shuttle leaves in five minutes, I can get you a seat and delay the flight until you're on it." She pressed some buttons, and a few seconds later handed him a ticket. "Here's your ticket, Commander Man--Wait, are you the Manolin that's been all over the DNN?"

"I don't know, you tell me." Lorn turned away and headed for the takeoff strip.

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The shuttle jolted as its landing studs hit the asphalt of the sole passenger landing strip at Coria Spaceport. A few minutes later, the hatch at the back of the ship opened and the occupants filed out. Lorn spotted a man pulling a cellular out of his pocket and walked up to him. "Excuse me, could I borrow your cellular for a moment?" The man handed it over when Lorn flashed the Navy card. Hooking the device over his ear, he winced as the headset's grossly loud earpiece blared.

"Coria Switchboard," A female voice came over.

"Dries Walkerson, local, please."

"Connecting." a minute later, a man's voice came over. "Hello?"

"Dries, it's Lorn. I need you to liquidate everything."

"What? What do you mean, everything?"



"Put thirty million on the *Dawn*. Spread the rest among the employees. Now, before our accounts are frozen."

"Ah, yes, ser. It'll take some time to get some of the investments out--"

"Dammit, just get whatever you can on the yacht, before it's frozen! You've got until tomorrow morning, Dries!"

"Yes, ser."

"Okay, thank you. Contact my household listing if anything comes up. I'll call you again before I leave." Lorn hung up and handed the man his cellular.

---

The *Golden Dawn* gleamed in the Coriolis morning sky as Lorn approached. Capable of holding thirty passengers and crew, the *Dawn* would only be carrying one person on this journey.

Dries stepped from the aft hatch as Lorn neared. "I've got approximately 28.3 million Derilict-minted golds in the hold. The rest is still in the Amethine futures."

Lorn nodded in acknowledgement. "Good. I assume she's ready for the voyage?"

The balding clerk nodded. "If I may ask, ser, where will you be going?"

"I'm just going to lay low for now," Lorn lied, "You're in charge until I come back. I'd keep low for a while, though." He nodded and stepped into the ship. "Until then, Dries."

"Just please don't make as much paperwork as you did last time you used the *Dawn*, ser."

Lorn winced at the memory, then secured the hatch and headed into the cockpit at the front of the sleek vessel. He sat down and fired the four LAMFM coils.

"Coria airspace, this is *Golden Dawn*, designation 51-A9175, requesting launch."

"*Dawn*, this is control. You're clear for standard departure. Be aware that Ring travel is blocked by the Derilict Navy."

"Roger that, control." Lorn taxied the interstellar yacht onto the takeoff strip, then fired the LAMFMs to 110% thrust. The yacht quickly sped and eventually the stublike wings managed to lift the vessel off the asphalt. The magnetic fields around Coriolis made for a quick entry to space, and soon he dropped the engines to half thrust. He typed a quick string into the navigation console to his left, then flipped the switch below it. The cabin lights dimmed as the interstellar drives opened a purplish window in front of the civilian yacht.

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## Mercenary Business

By Nioca - Dec 9 2009

Eyrina awoke slowly, blinking at a light that seemed to envelop her. She felt like she was floating. Free. There was nothing but that light ahead of her... Then everything came into focus. She realized she was staring at a white ceiling, with harsh white lamps embedded within.

She groaned. Her entire torso felt like she had been smashed with a leaden weight, and there was a gentle stabbing sensation in her chest and stomach, where the minigun rounds had caught her. Her middle finger had an odd, tickling sensation as well.

"How do you feel, Eyrina?" A scratchy voice asked. She could feel someone standing near the edge of her bed.

"Bad. Just..." She shook her head. That's when it occurred to her. "What's going on? Where am I?"

"Cataer Hospital. You got here yesterday." The voice informed her. She looked over to see a squat little man at her bedside, wearing the traditional garb of a surgeon. He gave her an odd look. "You're a very lucky woman, Miss Haford."

"I don't feel that lucky, though." Eyrina grimaced. Every heartbeat was making her increasingly aware of how much damage her body had sustained.

"Those are the ribs talking. You managed to shatter ten of them. Plus you went into shock, had a moderate concussion, and severe internal bleeding." The man paused. "Frankly though, with the hits you took, you're lucky to still have everything above the waist."

"No kidding." Eyrina made to sit up, only to get yanked back down by her right arm. She looked over to find that she was shackled to the bed. "Wha-?"

"That was a special recommendation from a certain woman. Alexa, I believe her name was. Seemed rather upset about something." The man nodded sagely. "Unless you need anything else, I have other patients to attend to, so..."

"No, I'll be fine." Eyrina slumped back on her pillow.

---

A few restless hours later, Eyrina heard the door open to one of the last people she wanted to see.

"I see you're comfortable." Alexa stated coldly.

"Not particularly." Eyrina replied.

"This is a fine mess you've created for us, Haford." Alexa said with no trace of emotion. "Our operations on Derilict V were destroyed. Billions of Golds worth of damage, along with the lives of several hundred competent mercenaries. Derilict now thinks we've aligned with the Boreans as well, and I, personally, was *humiliated* in front of the Chrijstain delegation because of you."

Eyrina wanted to say something, but couldn't. What was there to say? Finally, she responded lamely, "I didn't mean to..."

"No, but it's done." Alexa looked away. "I suggest that the next time you take a ship, *you don't take hostages*. If that Commander had never been brought here, we'd still have all of our holdings in Derilict."

Eyrina was confused. What was she talking about. "I... don't understand, ma'am. Wh-"

"The Commander you captured, Lorn? He escaped. Reported to Derilict about our outposts, our ships..." Alexa went on for a while, but Eyrina wasn't listening. It seemed Eyrina had an incredible stroke of luck; the Alliance didn't know that she was directly responsible for the

damage caused. "...And who knows what else this could lead to?" Alexa took a few breaths. "You're officially on notice, Haford. You screw up like this again, and I'll personally track you down and kill you. Understood?"

Eyrina nodded. If Alexa found out in the near future that she had actually told Lorn where the Alliance outpost was, she had no doubt that Alexa would carry through on that threat.

"Good. Now, Chrjstain's looking for mercenaries. Before I learned of this... fiasco, I suggested you to them. Don't make me regret it more than I already do." Alexa walked away without another word, tossing a key to someone at the doorway.

Eyrina sighed and collapsed back on her pillow as she felt someone undo the shackles around her wrist. It looked like it was going to be a long year.

---

After another 20 hours of lying helplessly in bed and counting the minutes go by, she had finally finagled the doctors into letting her out. Not that they were particularly happy about it; it required both assertions that she had a fully qualified doctor on her ship and empty promises that she'd take it easy before they finally signed off on it.

She had wanted to do a bit of sight-seeing before she left, or at least find a local pub to drink herself into oblivion. However, there wasn't any time. And even if there was, syntheglobin and alcohol often reacted in spectacularly dangerous ways.

She found the land-based shipyard where the *Phalanx* and *Enmity* were docked. The Alliance steadfastly refused to cover docking costs, nor were they prepared to reimburse any sort of repair work. She had to dig deep into her pockets to cover the docking fees, and they were stuck with whatever the *Phalanx's* auto-repair could do. She just hoped none of her crew asked for their pay early. Or... well, ever, really.

But her attention was held now by her family, and a pair of obstacles they were presenting. One she had foreseen; getting them out of the Chrjstain system and safely settled elsewhere. But it lead to another, however, one she hadn't seen coming.

"But why would you even want to come with?" Eyrina protested.

"Marie, we've been searching for you for the past four years." Her mother, Jen, answered indignantly. "If you think we're just going to let you wander off God-knows-where, you have another thing coming."

"Besides the fact that some of us aren't interested in retiring." Her middle brother Miles added. "Additionally, in case you haven't noticed, we're a bit homeless right now. So unless you have a better suggestion..."

Eyrina struggled desperately to come up with one, but was backed into a corner. She couldn't afford to purchase property right now, and casting her own family out on the street wasn't an option. There never really was any choice. "Fine." She sagged slightly. "But I call the shots on that ship. Clear?"

"Crystal." Jen replied coolly. "If you need me, I'll be in the medical ward." Jen walked off.

"Medical... We don't have a medical ward!" Eyrina stated.

"We do now!" Jen called back.

It was funny. For the past four years, she had yearned to get her family back. Now that she had them, though, she was starting to like those earlier years of solitude.

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"On approach to Gormket, Captain." Mick stated. He seemed somewhat more sullen than usual. "Shall we land?"

"Affirmative. I'd normally take *Enmity* down, but I want the auto-repair to keep working on it. Besides," she added with a slight grin, "I want to make an impression."

The *Phalanx* pitched over and started descending from its orbit. A slight rippling could be seen across the ship's surface as its shields started to counteract the reentry. This turned into a fierce red glow as the ship burned into the moon's atmosphere like a comet.

"Get the inertial manipulators going full, and get an upward pull on the ship. Let's take this descent nice and easy." Eyrina commanded. She watched Mick adjust dials and screens on his console, and felt her stomach turn over. Inertial manipulators typically just provided the artificial gravity on a ship, but with a larger vessel like this, they served a secondary purpose: anti-gravity. They couldn't use simply the navigational thrusters to land; they'd turn everything around the landing site into glass.

The *Phalanx* aligned itself with the ground, closing in on a small shack and a Chrijstain skirmisher. An incredible roar could now be heard as the massive engines worked to keep the vessel from crash-landing, blowing sand around and making a slightly-charred crater underneath. Then, with an earth-shaking thud, the *Phalanx* touched down.

Eyrina nodded to the bridge crew. "Open the hangar bay doors. I'll be back in a few minutes."

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