

The Cruise of the Huntress

by

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Chapter 1 - Prey

Valancon walked into the briefing room with a frown on his face; a worrying sight for the others sat around the broad, black-stained table. Admiral Drion looked across and his eyes followed Valancon as the intelligence officer strode to his customary seat. There was a general shuffling of feet and chairs as the assembled group got ready to listen.

Valancon began. "I'm afraid the news isn't good, perhaps I should begin with a brief sketching in of the current situation for those of us who are new to these gatherings?" The Admiral nodded. "Recently, tension has been growing between ourselves and the Avasian Empire, hardly a secret, the news has been commenting on it daily. It is clear that the Avasians feel they won't be able to influence the politics of this sector until they have demonstrated some physical capability. This will necessitate some form of armed conflict. Our analysts have come to the conclusion that all Avasian negotiation for at least the past four years have been devoted to the generation of a small war. Aside from them, we are the smallest of the major powers in the sector and we are likely to be their target, moreover there is some traditional animosity between our nations, which makes it easier to begin something of this nature. The Avasians have comparatively limited military strength and that which they do have they will be keen to preserve so this leaves them with a dilemma, how do they start a war, risk little of their major forces and yet demonstrate a strategic capability. The Dorani mines have offered them this opportunity. Dorani is the centre of a huge mining complex, from it we obtain vast quantities of the rare metals and the common ore needed to operate our economy, Dorani is also less than 20 light years from Avasian space and in an area which, until the discovery of the mines had been essentially unpopulated and unclaimed."

Valancon paused and took a drink of water. "If they attack the Dorani infrastructure, damage our interests and withdraw behind their borders they feel we will be unable to pursue the matter militarily. They are correct in this assertion for both military and political reasons. Until recently, however, they had no means of delivering such a strike. Just over a year ago that all changed with the commissioning of the 'Huntress' a large battlecruiser massing some fifty-six thousand tonnes. You may well ask why we feel the need to bring all this to your attention now, so here's the reason. Sometime last night Huntress slipped her moorings and left dock, this is absolutely the first time since her keel was laid that we haven't known her exact whereabouts." Valancon sat, much of his audience appeared shocked and there was no murmur or movement from them.

Admiral Drion looked around the table. "I need to know where Huntress is; I need to know how to stop her; I need answers. Any thoughts people?"

Wasil Hamek leant forward, putting down the pocket computer he used to take notes, "Just how dangerous is Huntress?" he asked.

Commodore Aslian answered the diplomat with his customary brusqueness, "Huntress is a large battlecruiser, built in response to the fleet programmes of other nations over the last few years. Several major powers have built such ships recently, ourselves included. The first ones tended to be in the fifty to sixty thousand tonne range, more recently they've become larger and have emphasised destroyer rather than frigate role specifics. Huntress is smaller than some but she's a formidable gun platform and a major problem for our fleet."

Hamek nodded, "So we can defeat her, if we find her."

Aslian remained impassive, "It isn't quite that simple. Our method for finding her necessarily revolves around placing scout units all over the expected path of the ship, none of these units will be able, individually, to defeat her. She can move quickly and kill anything she's likely to encounter in her path by accident. We can assemble fleets to deal with her but, allowing for the fact that we don't want to lose a large number of cruisers in the process they will have to be large fleet groups. At present we can form two such groups, three if we don't use the navy for scouting and can include in our attack fleets the smaller ships we would otherwise use for patrol." "How about our own capital ships?" Hamek was taking notes again. "In reality we have three such vessels, all of a little over sixty thousand tonnes in mass. The Reliance is in dock under repair, Revenge is still in workup and has a skeleton

crew, mainly raw recruits, and Resolution is available and on her way to the sector. If at all possible, though, we don't want Huntress to encounter Resolution."

Hamek looked up, "If Resolution is our equivalent unit, why don't we commit her?"

The Commodore looked blank. "Because we might lose."

Minister Relee spoke up, "I know the navy constantly moans about budget cuts but I'm sure we have a larger fleet than you're suggesting. We must be able to form at least six attack fleets."

Admiral Drion answered, "We don't know that the mining complexes are the target, we could be attacked anywhere, are you going to tell the people of our highly populous core worlds that you've stripped their defences because a few mines are more important than their homes?"

Relee deflated somewhat, "Can we at least use remote sensors instead of ships to do the locating of Huntress?"

Drion smiled, "We're talking about a huge area of space, Minister, a box around 180 light years on a side, remotely sensing the area would require millions of sensors, just maintaining the ones we already have on the main transport routes is a significant drain on our resources."

Commodore Aslian looked to Valancon, "What do you think her likely targets are?"

Valancon nodded, "Good question, we know the mines themselves are vulnerable despite their defences to a vessel of Huntress's size and capability. The transports used to carry the resources and personnel for the mines are potentially a weak link as well. If I were captain of the Huntress, though, I'd attack the transport re-supply stations."

Relee looked interested, "Are those much more vulnerable then?" "No," Valancon shook his head, "not more vulnerable, more critical. If they are destroyed our transports can't make the direct journey to the mining areas, they'd need to work around them through commercial space and then dive into the Dorani areas at the closest point. Transports don't have all that much range. They are fairly well protected but not against a monster like Huntress, you have

to understand, Minister, with the exception of our major navy units we have absolutely nothing which can even resist such a ship."

Relee nodded slowly and made another note. "What do we have going for us in this affair, I mean something has to favour us?"

Valancon looked at him. "Actually we have two things which really work for us, firstly we do hold an advantage in numbers, if we can locate her and slow her down then it's only a matter of time. Secondly we have Captain Strandel in command of a cruiser group in the area."

Relee noted the name, "His cruisers are excellent ships then?"

Valancon looked nonplussed then spoke, "Oh, I see, yes they are excellent ships but the key is Strandel himself. I assumed you'd have heard of him. On his graduation from the naval academy just six years ago he was the first ever officer to complete his last year with a success rate of one hundred per cent. Since then his diligence has won him a number of commendations for academic work on naval strategy and he was awarded the Golok Medal for his actions with the multi-national force at Prala. He is a truly exceptional officer with instincts which never let him down, some would say that's the hallmark of a genius. I'm a little less lavish with my praise, I think he's merely the finest naval officer in the history of mankind, certainly since Nelson." "Why doesn't he command a fleet then?"

Valancon smiled, "He's still only twenty-four, there are those who oppose senior appointments for one so young."

Admiral Drion glanced around the table. "I suggest we all take some time to consider these issues, I'll order Strandel to act as he sees fit and form up a full assault fleet around Resolution. Anything anyone can think of is welcome in this meeting, sometimes the most unlikely ideas are the most successful." He rose and made his way back to his office to hand out the orders.

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Drael Strandel was reading the repair schedule data for one of his cruisers, sitting at his desk in the small anteroom to his sleeping cabin. He was relaxed; his feet resting on the desk, allowing his mind to wander when there was a brisk knock at the door. He reached forward slightly to touch the release button on the desk and the door swung open with a

creaking swish. Spaceship doors were silent, for the most part, but he didn't like not hearing someone come in and he rarely locked his door, feeling that it sent the wrong message to his crew. The small-framed third officer entered with a smile on her face, checked that there was no-one watching and therefore no need to salute and walked to the desk.

"Captain, orders from Fleet, coded K7."

Strandel waved her to the seat opposite him and took the orders from her hand. He inserted his reader card into the viewer and began to read. When he'd finished he looked across the desk. "Commander, I need to see all the senior officers from this ship in the wardroom in two hours, see to it, also bring over the commanding officers from the other ships of the group, they need to hear this too. As soon as you have a free moment change our course to the quickest route to Amarnela and broadcast the change of situation to the other ships. We have a battle readiness situation so also instruct the engineering departments that all non-essential repairs must be suspended at once and all systems brought to full readiness. Begin stations drills for all sections starting in one hour and begin converting recreation areas into triage and surgery wards. Run a complete systems check on all essential systems, I'll need the results by 0400 tomorrow. Walk the ship, full visual inspection, no corridor blocked, no locker jammed, everything polished and spit-shined, I'll be doing the same tomorrow at 0700 and I'd better find nothing at all to spoil my mood. I'll also need full stores and fuel manifests, rates of usage and projected reserve levels. Compare them with the levels on our other ships and send to Amarnela warning them of our requirements, use Admiral Drion's name and get us six berths, one for each ship, I'm not waiting for a point to clear." He looked down at the viewer then quickly back up again. "Still here, I'd have thought you had enough to do?" Commander Alia immediately moved to the door. "Oh, Commander, one more thing." She stopped and turned. "Try and get some sleep, you look wrecked."

Alia began to laugh, "No problem sir, I've scheduled some for next year." She turned again and left.

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Amarnela was a navy town, the planet's surface was dominated by training areas for marines and recreation areas for crews waiting for their ships to be ready to leave again for space. The civilian population on the surface was perhaps ten thousand but the military numbered ten times that. In the giant orbiting docks, the ratio was even more pronounced and the environment there was that of an engineering shop, ordered but scrappy looking.

The six ships under Strandel's command moved in to the docks one at a time and were tightly moored to pylons which were attached at their other ends to a framework of metal struts and air-filled tubes. From a distance the docks looked like giant spiders' webs, the ships like unfortunate prey, caught in the rigid framework for later digestion.

Admiral Drion's name had, as predicted, allowed the use of six adjacent docks each with several shifts of engineers, the fastest possible arrangement, who were on standby as the flotilla arrived. First to dock was the flagship, the heavy cruiser Excellent, massing twelve thousand tonnes and one of the most powerful conventional cruisers the navy had ever deployed. Next the three ten thousand tonne sisters: Formidable, Implacable and Invincible, slightly older but still very much in the front-line of the cruiser force. Finally the two heavy destroyers of the 'Triumph' class assigned to the fleet. In fact, the Falcon and the Adventure had originally been scheduled for scrapping but Strandel had saved them from the breakers by declaring, somewhat untruthfully, that there were no suitable replacements available for his group. In reality the reason was one of nostalgia, Adventure was Strandel's first ever command and the ship which had fought under him at the battle of Prala. His officers and men did not have any objections to the old destroyers being kept in the group, Adventure was seen as a lucky ship and Falcon was, in engineering, probably the best preserved older vessel in the fleet.

Strandel always found the contrast between a ship in space and a ship in dock quite startling. A few seconds before Excellent was moored he was the supreme commander of a fleet, the Captain of a ship and one of the most individually powerful people in the galaxy. A few seconds after mooring he was an inconvenience to the teams of engineers who, mindful of Drion's involvement, moved purposefully around the decks, replenishing and updating systems, sensors and reservoirs of one kind or another. The fighters had already left the ships of the flotilla; they were docked in the fighter station over a thousand kilometres away and would not return to the docking bays on the ships until after departure.

Strandel quietly left the Excellent and went to fleet headquarters, just to pay his respects.

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The surface of the planet was somewhat marred by the industrial nature of the work done there, it was still a planet, however, and attractive because of it. Each planet had its own smell, some sweeter than others, but even the swamp planets where some of the marine

training took place smelled sweeter than the oil and disinfectant laden air of a spaceship on patrol. Commander Alia and Strandel's number one, Commander Velis, joined Strandel on the trip to Fleet. Velis had stayed aboard the last time Excellent had docked; this time it was the second officer's turn. Fleet headquarters was not a difficult building to identify, much larger than the dingy warehouses and bland office blocks that surrounded it. At the front could be found the desks of the senior officers in this sector, at the back, the officers' club and recreation areas. If Strandel had intended to spend more than a few hours on the planet he could have arranged sleeping quarters in the same sprawling structure. On this occasion he led his two officers straight to the Fleet Admiral's office where they were already expected. There was the usual shaking of hands and preening of egos before the actual discussion began. The fleet intelligence officer, a small somewhat chubby man by the name of Wiol began the briefing. He described the situation again and added to the end Valancon's assertion that the transport re-supply stations would be the natural targets for attack.

"Seems right to me." Strandel had developed some respect for Valancon's judgement in such matters.

At that moment a junior officer walked in and handed a datapad to the Admiral. Admiral Relov read it carefully and dismissed the messenger.

Relov read it once more before speaking. "It appears we have a first contact. Huntress has destroyed a freighter on one of the main transport routes. Almost exactly at the mid-point between the sensor systems placed along the route. The sensors never even got a whisper." He brought up the strategic display screen on his wall and everyone crowded around to see the situation.

Velis looked at the distances involved, "About, what, 600 light years from here?"

Wiol nodded, "More than 40 light years from the nearest base."

Velis turned to Strandel, 'We're never going to find her if she sticks to attacking small, unpredictable targets, sir.'

Strandel smiled, 'Don't worry, she won't, she can't sit on our main routes, someone might spot her or one of our sensors might get lucky. She's going to have to attack major targets, fixed assets, unless we give her an even more tempting target. I'm also convinced she'll

have people all over our space telling her of our movements. She isn't going to be easy to find.'

Relov thought for a moment, 'Do you have a plan of action, Captain?'

'The beginnings of one, Sir. May I use your communications, I need to speak with Valancon at headquarters.'

'Of course.' Relov waved Strandel over to the desk before turning back to study the chart on the wall.

Strandel called in and immediately was speaking to Valancon. 'Mr. Valancon, sorry to be so abrupt but I have a plan to destroy Huntress, what I propose to do is to form up a fleet to chase her into a battle she can't fight.' There was a pause as he listened. 'I'll worry about that, the fewer people who know about it the better.' Another pause, shorter this time. 'Thank you, I'm at Amarnela, can you have Revenge sent here in whatever state you can manage, I know she's only got partial crewing and they're mostly inexperienced but the key thing is that after just a few hours in the shipyards here she can look exactly like Resolution. Huntress will run away from her and if we arrange things well enough she'll run into the real Resolution.' After listening for a moment more Strandel disconnected. Turning to the Admiral, he said, 'Sir, can you arrange shipyard facilities for a Reliance class battlecruiser, Revenge will be here in less than a day.'

Relov nodded. 'You do realise, if you're wrong, Huntress could attack Revenge. If she does choose to do so she's got a huge advantage in effective capability. This plan could cost us one of our most powerful ships.'

Strandel thought for a second. 'Admiral, I believe I've thought through all of the implications and in every combination Huntress is destroyed without risking Revenge.'

Relov sat down, looking tired all of a sudden. 'I hope you're right, Captain, I really do.'

Chapter 2 - Stalk

Strandel was on the bridge of Excellent to see Revenge arrive, the formalities for securing and organising such a ship take quite a while but Captain Anders of Revenge managed to slip out of the majority of it and was in Strandel's cabin less than an hour after he'd docked.

The two officers warmly shook hands and sat down for a quick drink. Anders was about twenty years Strandel's senior and a highly experienced ship's captain. Revenge was his third command and his first plank.

Once the formalities were covered Strandel put his glass down and started the discussion. "How prepared is Revenge for war, Captain?"

Anders shook his head. "Not at all, really. We're fully engineering capable but Revenge is supposed to ship with 3,000 crew, at present we've got only 750 and most of those have never been tested in action."

Strandel nodded. "If you had to fight in that condition what percentage effectiveness could you muster?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, five per cent, maybe ten. As it stands only the relief engineering crews could man the weapons and they've never been trained in their use. I know that isn't what you want to hear." Anders looked upset, he was now fairly sure his beautiful new ship would miss out on the battle.

"Don't worry, Captain." Strandel picked up his drink and took another long swig. "That will do quite nicely, I do need your permission to make some minor modifications to Revenge, however."

Anders looked up sharply. "What kind of modifications?"

"Just enough to make her look exactly like Resolution."

There was a very long pause while Anders digested the information. Finally he shook his head. "I'm sorry Captain, I don't think it's possible."

"Problems?"

"I can see the external configuration being made to match, the problem is the electronics. Revenge is fitted with thousands of systems, Resolution also, but they're different. A bit of engineering work just won't make a difference I'm afraid."

Strandel nodded. "Very well. Plan B."

"Can you still use us at all?"

"Oh yes, I need both you and your ship but the priorities have changed somewhat. I'm afraid I'm going to ask you to sail at once."

Anders smiled broadly. "Not a problem, Revenge will be ready in an hour."

Strandel took another drink, "You'll meet with three other ships at Calabran and chase Huntress down into the open space near the Dorani mines."

"Which ships?"

"Formidable, Implacable and Lion."

Anders stared across the table. "Lion?"

Strandel nodded then pressed the intercom beside him. "Alia, can you come in for a moment please?"

Alia arrived two minutes later. Noticing that Captain Anders was in the room she saluted smartly and came to attention. "Sir."

Strandel waved her to a seat. "At ease Commander, have a seat. These cards carry sealed orders for you, the Captains of Formidable and Implacable and another individual who is named in your orders, much as I am sorry to lose you at this time I am assigning you to Formidable at once. Pack your things and be aboard in twenty minutes. Hand the orders to the two Captains personally, I will arrange for both to be aboard Formidable. Once the ships have departed you are to read your own orders. At that point schedule a few minutes for the inevitable apoplectic fit and screaming session. I am relying on you to see to it that the orders are carried out, to the letter. Questions?"

"No sir, am I dismissed?"

"Yes Commander, good luck."

Alia left the room quickly.

Anders was looking speculatively at Strandel. "You knew."

Strandel returned the look. "Knew what?"

"You knew that the conversion was impossible, you knew that your plan would have to change."

Strandel offered another drink. "I knew it might be impossible, I planned on that basis. There's something else you need to know. I'm placing Marik in command of the group."

Anders knew the young Captain of the Formidable slightly and had a fairly high opinion of him but still it was a shock. "May I ask why?"

"Revenge is not fully worked up, I'm sorry Captain but I need a bridge crew who have months of experience working together aboard the senior ship. In the absence of a higher ranked individual it is my decision that Marik should command. I know this must be difficult for you, you are commanding a battlecruiser, the command should be yours. It may ease your concern if I tell you that Marik will only hold command until Calabran. Lion has an old Admiral aboard."

Anders had heard better news than this, he racked his brain to remember whom it could be. "Deeras?"

Strandel nodded, "Yes, Admiral Deeras."

There was a long, sympathetic, silence.

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Alia stood at the bridge of Formidable watching the fighters dock aboard Implacable. She loved this part of the job, a ship pulling smoothly into space. Long before people had said of such days that they were sending their ships 'in harm's way', it resonated still. She could almost feel wind in the sails. Alia had joined the Navy only five years before, straight after school and she'd advanced rapidly. Joining had been almost inevitable, both parents had served for their entire careers, in fact her mother was still serving. She had originally intended to become a fighter pilot, they seemed so confident, so exciting when she was young. Unfortunately there was no way to overcome some decidedly average reaction times and a small medical condition. She opted for Intelligence instead. Inevitably the choice meant she would never command a ship but it seemed a small price to pay, she was able to

use her considerable intellect almost all her waking hours and her quick wits and lively sense of humour had served her well, especially under Strandel's command. Strandel was a man who expected everything to be right, all the time. He delegated with ease and speed, those who couldn't keep up were abandoned, left in his wake. Alia had found the demands stimulating and Strandel had seen to it that she was promoted, respected and trusted.

After a few minutes, once the ships were well underway, Alia returned to her cabin to examine her orders. It is fair to suggest that they were not entirely what she was expecting.

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Admiral Deeras was a large man in every way except size. He had a deep, booming, penetrating voice, a massive personality and a huge reputation. Meeting the five-foot Admiral for the first time in person usually caused other officers to spend several seconds adjusting to the reality. He stormed down the companionway to the bridge to explain to the Captain his concern that Lion was not moving fast enough. He did this regularly. Captain Grel had come to the conclusion some months earlier that Admiral Deeras either thought he was an idiot or thought he was some enemy agent sent to sabotage the ship's efficiency. In fact Lion needed little sabotage, she was old, badly designed, poorly maintained and recently had been subjected to horrible abuses by Admiral Deeras. Lion was a battlecruiser of an earlier age. She was certainly big, certainly imposing and certainly inadequate for the tasks now placed upon her. She had been designed to carry the full weight of the heaviest weapons available at enormous speed and deliver them to an enemy. Inevitably certain sacrifices had been made in carrying this plan to fruition. She was poorly protected, her engines were troublesome and really needed replacing and she was dangerously light in short-range defensive weapons. She was making good time to Calabran and was prepared to destroy her engines to get there if necessary, Deeras felt that this might be her last chance to fight a major battle. Aside from the design flaws and maintenance issues the money that was available to keep her fighting was mostly spent on repainting her so that Deeras could use the relic as an impressive private yacht. It needn't have been that way.

In total silence the remaining ships of Strandel's command slipped their moorings and departed Amarnela. Four ships, over five thousand crew and among them all just one man knew where they were going.

Admiral Deeras surveyed his fleet. Despite his age and experience he had never had more than one ship under his command, now he had four. Turning to the waiting officers in the

briefing room aboard Lion he began to lay out his plan for the pursuit. Marik was to take the two cruisers ahead to scout, the heavy ships were to be held back ready to attack Huntress as soon as she was sighted. He had already assessed the capabilities of his officers and had reached his own conclusions. The young but gifted Captain Renal of the Implacable, he decided, was unfit for command. He instructed him to stay in constant contact with Marik for instructions. This suited Renal perfectly, he and Marik got on very well indeed. Captain Anders of the Revenge obviously seemed competent and he therefore decided that Anders, and not Grel, would command when he was unavailable. Deeras had taken one look at Commander Alia and asked her to make them all drinks. To give her her due she didn't even flinch, but she was the only one in the room who didn't.

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Captain Renal was dozing at his command console when the first report came in. He did this often since he had a talent for transitioning from asleep to alert in astoundingly quick time and resented the time it took to walk from his cabin to the bridge.

The Flight Control Officer let out a yell, "Captain, we have a sighting!"

Renal started awake, carefully adjusted his console for comfortable viewing and replied, "Details, FCO."

"Dagger fourteen has a stripe green at fifteen, sir."

Renal examined the trace on his console. "Helm, come to course 2295. FCO, launch all Daggers, wide pattern." He pressed the shipcom button. "All hands, all hands, all hands, action stations, action stations." Touching another button he said. "Formidable, this is Implacable, we have contact at fifteen, stand by for details."

Admiral Deeras was shaken awake by a nervous junior officer just minutes later. It took him almost twenty minutes to navigate his, slightly disorientated, body to the bridge and a further two to ensure that the most junior rating there understood how he took his coffee. He listened carefully to the situation and immediately ordered maximum speed in pursuit of the target. Captain Anders was dismayed when the news was relayed to him aboard Revenge. The Lion might be old but she was fast, Deeras was slowly leaving Anders behind. Alia, aboard Formidable, was watching the scene unfold. Something didn't seem quite right to her. Obviously the best chance Huntress had was to run, but the ship didn't seem to be attempting an escape, quite the contrary.

Captain Marik was staring at his console so hard that the information was starting to become nonsensical, he closed his eyes for several seconds and massaged his forehead with his palms. Inevitably when he opened his eyes again the scene had changed. Dagggers were suddenly reporting sightings in two locations. "Alia, your opinion on this please."

Alia stepped up to look at the console, "It could be a spectre, jamming, but I don't think so. The patterns are different, not just in intensity but in harmonics. There are two ships out there."

Marik nodded. "I'll pass the information on, we can't attack till we know which is Huntress."

Aboard Implacable, Renal was intrigued. He ordered his Dagggers to close for visual confirmation of the target they had encountered. He had to wait several minutes before he could be sure.

Lion was now far ahead of Revenge and Deeras was determined to engage, he decided that the first target, the closer, was Huntress, the other must be one of Strandel's ships approaching from the other side. A smile started to play across the Admiral's face. At last he would have a genuine victory.

Captain Renal got the information back from his Dagggers just as Lion approached the scene. He contacted Marik at once. "It looks like Huntress, the hull pattern is correct, and the weapon layout. I'm sending the data now."

Commander Alia was immediately suspicious on seeing the data. "Captain, I grant you this looks like Huntress but I don't think it is Huntress. Frankly she's too small, look at the metrics from the Dagggers."

Marik prompted, "So what is she?"

Alia thought hard, "I think she's a cruiser, the Elegant, she was designed to look very similar to Huntress, perhaps we should concentrate on the other target?"

Marik nodded, "Perhaps we should, but that option isn't really open to us now. Lion is committed and we have to help her."

"Surely a cruiser won't pose a threat to the Mighty Lion?" Alia had unconsciously used the phrase in common usage amongst civilians.

"The Mighty Lion is armoured with paper, Commander."

"Open Fire!" Captain Grel shouted. Gunners hurried to obey. The first salvo missed, the Lion shook as the recharge cycle ran through her power sitemaps. Twice more the weapons fired without reply, then heavy beams streaked across the dark barely missing the old battlecruiser. "Admiral, the fire isn't coming from Huntress, there's another ship out there!"

Deeras stood on the bridge, his feet planted wide, hands clasped behind his back. He took his right hand from his left, pointed at the distant target and shouted, "Close, the range must be closed, we must hit!"

"Confirm, the second target is Huntress and she's firing on Lion. Lion appears to be outside target one's range." The helmsman aboard Formidable was watching the battle unfold and providing a running commentary for others on the bridge.

Marik looked at his console, it was still some time yet before Revenge could enter action. "Signal Implacable, we attack target one."

A massive bolt of energy struck Lion just ahead of the engines on the port side. Her ageing shielding systems parted after offering token resistance and the shot was absorbed on the hull. As a tribute to the solidity of her construction the hull held, but inside the energy was transformed into red hot molten metal globules which flew across the space between the hull and the bracing bulkhead, right through the lining gap where the heat shield was to have been installed. The heat shield upgrade was abandoned in favour of a new coat of paint and some industrial strength polishing fluid. The engineers in the port management compartment were about to discover that paint is an inefficient armour plating system. The bracing bulkhead rippled, tore and finally disintegrated all in the space of one tenth of a second, the men inside took much longer to die.

"Lion is hit, no visible damage!" Marik acknowledged the comment from his helmsman.

Disbelievingly Alia watched as Lion moved ever closer to the cruiser target, creeping within range. "How soon can we fire on the cruiser, Captain?"

Marik checked his console. "About two minutes, Implacable slightly later."

"I'm not sure that's going to be soon enough."

Damage control parties raced to the scene aboard Lion while on the bridge Deeras stared at the target ahead. His crew had yet to land a hit and they were taking fire, to Deeras this had a negative effect on morale, he was determined to be a giver as well as a taker.

Captain Anders was becoming more agitated with every report, the situation was confused, to say the least. One key thing he had decided was that the target currently firing upon Lion was clearly the more dangerous, he had also heard of the phrase 'in harm's way'.

The helmsman aboard Formidable sang out again, "Revenge is firing on Huntress!"

Marik watched as the very first salvo from Revenge hit Huntress. Even though he knew he couldn't take time to enjoy the feeling he felt a shiver of delight. Seconds later he saw another salvo from Lion go wide of the mark.

The cruiser Elegant was now within range and she opened fire at once. Two of her shots hit Lion. She was a far lighter ship and her weapons less dangerous, indeed one was deflected easily by the shields, the other was not. The shield was broken by an almost perfectly perpendicular hit and the energy struck the hull underneath a bracing member. Instantly the forward compartments of Lion became cloudy, a thick fog appearing as depressurisation sucked all the temperature out of the air inside. In most of the ship the depressurisation was fairly trivial, but not in the number seven magazine. Lion's main weapons were powered using a highly dense form of energy cell, the cells were experimental with the class and never adopted elsewhere, there were reasons for this.

As the depressurisation wave hit it coincided with the energy flow to the main weapon above, a slight change in pressure caused the main pipe to fracture, just slightly, but the intense energy inside did the rest.

Commander Alia stared at her console, watching energy flow in Lion. "Lion's gone." She said in a totally emotionless tone. It took several seconds before everyone understood what she meant. There was no fire, no visible sign of internal damage but the hull of Lion split slightly and a great deal of debris was thrown through the gap. Every sailor knew that was the end.

Marik glanced at her. "Ideas?"

You now have command of the group, I'm convinced we can't win this one, not now."

Marik slowly began to nod. Pressing his comms button he said, "All ships, break off engagement at once."

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Chapter 3 - Kill

For two days the two cruisers under Marik's command had tracked the targets, Huntress and Elegant. They were determined not to lose them having once found them. Steadily the ships had travelled faster and faster, now they were stretching the maximum speed of the chasing cruisers and the credulity of one officer aboard.

"Huntress can't go that fast." Alia was explaining her problem to Marik. "We've been chasing her back to her own space, faster and faster, now we're almost at our maximum, Huntress cannot possibly travel that fast."

Marik looked unimpressed, "Elegant can, so we're chasing one of them, presumably they haven't split up."

"I think they have split up, can I show you?" Alia walked over to the wall and punched up a large map of the area.

"Immediately after the battle Huntress disengaged. She didn't have to but she chose to, that's important. With Elegant covering her flank she rapidly accelerated towards her home territory. Four hours later she made a rapid turn, we followed, here. Three hours after that she turned again towards the border and accelerated to maximum speed, leaving our cruisers with no hope of maintaining contact with Revenge. Now what if her sole objective in this was to split us from Revenge, what if she recognised that Revenge was weak but couldn't risk running the gauntlet of two cruisers to get to her. Then on that second course change she might have turned back in exactly the opposite direction, away from her own space, she could be far behind us now and hunting Revenge."

Marik looked on carefully. "Revenge is heading home, she couldn't keep up and I couldn't risk her."

Alia nodded vehemently, "But Huntress isn't aware of that. She doesn't know your actions, she's guessing."

Marik sat down, looking weary. "So you really believe that the most powerful enemy we've ever faced is blundering around out there hoping to stumble across Revenge?"

Alia shook her head, "No, she'll have tried to find her on our course at first, but she can't linger in our space for long, she must have headed off towards Dorani."

"Why Dorani?"

Alia gathered her thoughts, "Dorani is on their border so she has an escape route, it's unexpected after a battle that she would seek another so soon. I think her Captain feels it's unexpected, it also gives her the chance of encountering some of our assets on the way through. Huntress could be about to have a very successful cruise."

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Captain Strandel was finally moving, he had collected the fleet carrier Ardent and her escort, the old battlecruiser Tiger. Tiger and Lion were sisters but had had very different lives, Tiger being constantly used as a fleet ship and expected to be maintained accordingly. She had new weapons, replacement engines, higher performance, improved armour and shielding and brand new heat shields throughout. She hadn't been painted for quite a while. None of Strandel's four ships were slow, not by any means, and he was determined to use their speed. Marik may have had difficulties believing that Huntress would still move on Dorani but Strandel had no doubt whatsoever. He was entirely sure that Huntress was approaching his group fast, and he had every intention of finding her. Sadly Captains, even those of Strandel's ability, are bound by the inviolate laws of physics. He intended to use the impressive Dagger complement of Ardent to find Huntress but the realities of the area to cover meant that it was still going to be difficult. It had been a hard decision but finally he had agreed that the Daggars should be used to widen their reach, not lengthen it. He was so sure that Huntress was heading his way that he was determined to spread the net wide. Unfortunately this had a side effect, he lost his early warning system. Because the Daggars were spread on the flanks of the fleet any sighting of Huntress would be as she passed in the opposite direction, leading inevitably to a long stern chase. He had decided to take Excellent ahead and use her Dagger complement to provide some measure of early warning for the fleet behind him, leaving the extremely capable Captain Freese of the Tiger in command of the main group. Being Strandel he was confident, being Strandel he trusted his instincts, being Strandel he was alert and waiting for news when the first Dagger reported in.

"Contact, sir!"

"FCO, give me the numbers"

"Dagger twelve has stripe at sixty!"

Strandel checked his console and began passing information rapidly to the fleet behind him. "FCO, bring in all Daggars not in the stripe area, refuel and ready them for an encircling

operation, brief all the squadron intel officers on Huntress personally. Launch the fighters in waves, I never want to be out of contact, tell the pilots not to get too close, any of them who stay alive long enough can go in for some fun with the main strike but I'll eat the kidneys of any who engage early, fried with butter, at breakfast tomorrow. Clear? Velis, contact the rest of the fleet, tell them to recover and refuel all their Daggers, use the facilities on all the ships to speed the process, I want a massive strike on Huntress and if I don't get it I'm liable to become vexed."

Six hours later the strike was moving, the fighters speeding towards their target, specified by the controlling FCO on Ardent. This caused Strandel some frustration since he was simply completely unaware of where they were. He expected to see some of them though, he was essentially on their flight-path to Huntress. In fact when they appeared, the entire strike seemed visible, the consoles were almost solidly painted with colour.

Strandel waved at his FCO, "I'm sure you enjoy taking time to accuse other officers of incompetence, why don't you ask the FCO on Ardent why the entire Dagger strike is travelling in each other's hip pockets."

The FCO grinned and turned to his console, a few seconds later he yelled out, "We're being jammed, I can't get a signal out!"

Strandel checked the console again, tried to reconcile the number of incoming Daggers with the maximum number of fighters that Huntress could carry, failed and pressed the intercom button. "All hands, action stations please, it appears we are about to become the victim of an administrative blunder."

Strandel was afraid, he knew that the Daggers were following their orders and that they were unlikely to recognise his ship as friendly until it was an expanding cloud of friendly dust. Strandel was also Strandel and he knew how to command a ship. He strode to the middle of the bridge and rapidly punched up wall-high screens showing the attacking fighters. "Helm, ignore everything going on around us, ignore noises, images and anything except my voice, do exactly what I tell you exactly when I tell you and I'll buy you dinner the next time we touch planetside."

The helmsman was watching the fighters, but he tore his gaze away and forced himself to focus entirely on the instruments in front of him and the calm tones of Strandel's voice. "Aye aye sir, but I should warn you, I tend to order the most expensive thing on the menu, it's a

matter of principle." Strandel didn't respond to the jibe, something so uncharacteristic that glances were exchanged among the rest of the bridge crew.

Strandel was focusing on the screens, his mind rapidly processing what he saw, remembering everything he'd been taught about Dagger attack tactics. He mentally adopted and discarded a thousand strategies then finally decided on just one. "Drop shields!" It was a credit to the bridge crew that even as their minds were digesting this piece of unbelievable lunacy, their fingers were carrying out the order. "Turn off all damage control systems, all active sensors, all life support, non-essential lighting and all medical centre power. Turn off corridor lighting, waste reclamation processing, computing systems other than bridge and engineering and all offensive and defensive weapons. Stop all engines." The ship turned silent, dark, frightening. Strandel did nothing more except stare at the screens. All over the Excellent, gunners were sitting in suddenly dark and cold turrets, with no power to defend themselves. Other crew had always told them that it was worse if you couldn't fight back, suddenly they understood quite how much worse.

As the fighters approached Strandel watched, as they formed into attack formation he looked on unperturbed, as they launched their missiles he still stood silent.

The basic anti-ship missile was guided by a brain more than a sensor. It did some basic calculations of the size of the target, the most appropriate location for a damaging strike and the potential speed and agility the target could exhibit. Once it had decided these things it used the remainder of the fuel not required for manoeuvring to increase speed so that it spent as little time as possible flying under the sights of defensive weapons mounted aboard its target. Of course, those were the standard settings and they could have been altered, many pilots ordered their missiles to keep up to ten per cent of their fuel back as a contingency against agile enemies. If Strandel was to get this right he had to allow for the ten per cent.

"Ready Helm!" Strandel heard a slightly strangled grunt rather than the expected response but he decided he'd forgive the breach of protocol. "Full speed ahead, now! Come starboard five degrees!"

Strandel was eager to continue shouting orders, but there was really nothing else he could do, he'd either win or lose with the hand he now held, there was no other card to take.

Excellent leapt forward in a gentle curve, startling the fighter pilots who'd never seen anything of such a size accelerate so fast. Her engines were grabbing all the power now available from all the inactive systems aboard and were operating at twenty-three per cent above designed specification. Many of the younger engineers started to look worried. The older ones were less worried, they remembered when Strandel had taken command, his first action had been to spend a week with the engineering crew stripping down the engines and putting them back together. Strandel knew the engines like he knew the bridge. The engines strained, but coped, the ship still smoothly pulling away.

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The commander of the Dagger wing was Commander Kael, a young fighter pilot who nonetheless knew a great deal about the trade. Within seconds of the Excellent's acceleration she realised that few if any of the dozens of missiles fired at her would hit. It was a disappointment but it was early in the battle yet, she had one hundred and twenty fighters under her command and they each carried twin beam weapons. Granted, fighter beams killed big ships by the death of a thousand cuts, but dead was dead. She formed up her wing and charged towards the fleeing target.

Strandel waited until he was sure that every missile had missed then ordered a reduction in engine power and restored power to the systems throughout the ship. There was one exception, he was sure that if they got close enough the fighter pilots would realise they were attacking the wrong ship and he had no wish to kill any of them before realisation dawned, he ordered shields raised but refused to restore power to the weapons.

Commander Kael was leading the charge, this was what she lived for, the beautiful moment of perfect adrenaline, no doubts, no fears, just speed, reactions and glory. It was quite a shock when she suddenly realised that the target was Excellent. It surprised her so much, in fact, that it took her a few seconds to order a halt to the attack, during which time several of her wing opened fire. Fortunately there was no damage worthy of mention. As soon as the jammers were turned off she called Captain Strandel to apologise for the attack. It was something of a revelation that Strandel was unruffled by the fact of the attack but absolutely furious that it had been executed so poorly, Kael found herself apologising for her incompetence, incompetence that had saved her accuser's life.

Strandel was furious for other reasons as well. With the Ardent's Daggers heading back to rearm and refuel he had insufficient fighters to destroy Huntress, he was acutely aware that

in the time the main strike could be ready again, Huntress could be over the border and beyond reach. Strandel was determined that he had to stop her, and furious that the urgency made a difficult decision still harder. He pressed the comms button and called his fighters still circling the Huntress. "All Daggers, the proposed carrier strike will not be happening as planned, Huntress must be slowed, begin an attack with the aim of preventing her from reaching the safety of her own space." To the other bridge officers it seemed as though Strandel deflated as he finished the message.

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Twelve Daggers launched their missiles into space, the missiles beginning to pursue Huntress from different angles so as to permit no escape. Four were destroyed by the weaponry aboard the giant Battlecruiser, two more missed outright, four were harmlessly absorbed by the shields but two happened to strike at the same place against the hull side. The first was absorbed by the shielding, but the second, striking the already weakened defence, smashed through and slammed into the side of the hull. It could have struck any one of a dozen vulnerable areas on the hull, bulkheads covering weapons, engines, crew compartments. It struck the side of the main hangar bulkhead. The explosion ripped through the hull, destroyed the fighter launch mechanism and all twenty-four fighters inside the hangar bay. The expanding fireball ripped a hole in her hangar maintenance pod and several engineers working there were killed. The remainder of the force was absorbed, as the Huntress' designers intended, on the bearing members each end of the hangar. Huntress had lost her fighters but she wasn't slowed at all. The twelve Daggers formed into a line, each following the one in front as closely as possible, the lead Dagger accelerated to full speed and flew at the rear of Huntress, all the others in tow. Within moments the first fighter was destroyed, the debris destroying the second as well, but the third kept flying unimpeded. Miraculously avoiding two more salvos the fighter was disintegrated by a third. Gunners on Huntress could only see the leading fighter at any one time and their defence was hampered by the great destructive power of their weapons, because the beams were utterly obliterating the leading ship, the others were encountering little resistance from debris. Accordingly the pilots stared down the gun barrels and, unfaltering, lined up to die. The losses were horrendous but the seventh Dagger, crusted with the freeze-dried blood of six brave pilots, carried a seventh into the rear of the Huntress where the main engines vented into space. Four more followed perfectly down the same path, aiming to hit the same, weakened spot. Five died on that freezing bulkhead, hoping that their sacrifice would buy the time needed for the fleet to catch Huntress, hoping that the dead of Lion would be avenged.

Seven years before the battle, a team of designers sat in a clean open-plan office and debated all the possible ways in which a large ship could meet her end. Late in the evening one sat up straight and said, "What if someone crashes a ship into the engines?" The designers made changes.

The main exit routes for the high-speed mass engines were small. They were small holes, cut in a bulkhead, connected with the engine reaction chambers. They were far too small for a ship to fly down and they twisted through the bulkheads to prevent missiles from making it through. There were three bulkheads in all, each more than a metre thick, each reinforced and buffered against shocks. In the entire history of warships, none had been designed with anything like such a defence over the engines, the pilots who flew into the stern of the ship didn't know that their unflinching sacrifice was futile, but futile it was. Moreover on the stern of the ship two small defensive turrets added since commissioning and one of those struck a glancing blow on the last fighter and it spiralled away from the path chosen by the dedicated pilot and crashed into the armoured surface of the other turret. The designers had not included turrets since they felt they weren't needed but they had been added subsequently, this was to prove something of a mistake. The turret was armoured but much less so than the massive bulkheads around it and the fighter crashed through and destroyed it. Turrets need more than a place to sit, however, they need power. The conduit was run through a tunnel cut right through the main bulkheads and into one of the six reaction chambers far within. As the turret exploded the shock wave poured through this hole and detonated the engine at the other end of this conduit. As number five engine blew to pieces the blast was prevented from damaging the forward part of the ship by another huge bulkhead, but that pressure had to go somewhere and it blew the two bearing members on each side of the engine compartment to pieces. Beyond them, were engines four and six. Neither were completely destroyed, and the blast went no further since it would have had to penetrate either the main axial armoured bulkhead or the hull itself, but nonetheless, Huntress lost half her power instantly, more seriously she lost all her starboard engines. Huntress was not stationary as Strandel had hoped she would be but she was only able to circle, it would take five hours to repair the two salvageable engines, five hours Huntress might not have.

Strandel silently mourned his lost pilots even as he moved his ships into place around Huntress. He had his own ship, followed by Tiger and Invincible, now leaving Ardent with only the two destroyers for company. He had the two cruisers under Marik's command and now fast approaching, the battlecruiser Resolution. They would all arrive at about the same time since Excellent was now slowing to allow the two ships behind to catch up. Since he

didn't know that Huntress was stopped he was actually directing his fleet to the wrong location, but he was close enough to find her when he got there.

Captain Freese was moving so fast in Tiger that even Invincible was struggling to keep up, the distant enemy had destroyed Lion, Tiger would avenge.

As the fleet converged it was Daggers from Implacable who sighted Huntress first, Renal couldn't keep the excitement from his voice as he relayed the news to the fleet. Strandel, aboard Excellent, formed up his ships for an orderly attack. There was to be no beauty to this, no glory, this wasn't a battle, it was an assassination.

As one, the huge beams on Resolution and Tiger opened up at the distant Huntress. Huntress responded with her impressive weaponry. The battle was unequal and the result, finally, inevitable. After an hour the Huntress fell silent. Despite no order being given, the two giant battlecruisers ceased fire at the same time. Strandel placed his hand upon the comm system and called out across the fleet. "All ships, prepare to leave for peacetime stations, thank you for your time. Invincible, would you stand by to take survivors and finish the job please." He touched another contact. "Huntress, this is Captain Strandel of the Excellent. We are prepared to offer safe conduct to survivors leaving your ship. Huntress will be destroyed as soon as that is completed. You have fought hard and well, there is no dishonour in defeat, only waste. Please think now of your families, your friends and your duty to them. To the command staff I say this. Please relinquish command and leave the ship, you serve no purpose with needless sacrifice." Huntress did not reply, but lifepods did begin to leave the huge vessel. Strandel returned to his cabin, deciding not to watch.

As Captain Salin of the Invincible pressed the firing switch to launch his missiles into Huntress his bridge crew stood in silence around him. They held the silence for a long moment, then Salin left the bridge to welcome his new passengers aboard. Behind him, Huntress died in the night and not a single person watched it happen.

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Captain Strandel met Alia at the docking bay on Excellent. She saluted then they shook hands. Neither discussed the events of the recent past at all. In fact it wasn't mentioned until the following morning when the Commander went to Strandel's office to provide a formal report on the loss of Lion. It was difficult for both of them, and Strandel was uncharacteristically humourless. Commander Alia, decided he needed cheering up.

"There is just one more thing that requires your attention, sir."

"Oh?"

"I believe you promised a dinner to your FCO this evening, sir."

Strandel thought for a moment. "Do you know Commander Kael, a senior Dagger pilot on Ardent?"

Alia was slightly startled by the change in topic. "Yes sir."

"I have never seen her myself, is she attractive?"

"Yes sir, she is very beautiful."

"Then I feel I can kill two birds with one stone. Her penance for incompetence will be to stand in for me on that dinner, and to pay for it." Strandel smiled.

Alia laughed and walked to the door. "But what if she enjoys the experience sir?"

"Then she has problems beyond my abilities to resolve."

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The wreck of Huntress floated in space, drifting slowly, dark and silent. Perhaps the occasional merchant ships or liners passing pointed her out to interested passengers. Perhaps they looked curiously at the huge metal tomb and wondered what she looked like when she sailed. Perhaps she was beautiful, perhaps ugly, maybe she looked sleek, maybe lumpy and irregular. If you asked Strandel, years later, how she looked, he would look into the distance and say, very quietly, "Terrifying."