

# The Battle Of The Mari Roads

by

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## Chapter 1 - Preparation

Strandel was somewhat irritable. He was carefully reviewing reports on the console in his cabin and the detail of the reports was unlikely to improve his mood. Since the loss of the old battlecruiser Lion his career had stagnated somewhat. Strandel was now 27 years old, he was a Commodore, moreover he had a flotilla of his own and had commanded it for five years, no such position had ever been achieved at his tender age in the entire fleet history. Many would see this as evidence for a bright future and a stellar past, but not Strandel. By the time Strandel was 22 he had reached the rank of Commander, he fought a battle with his ships at Prala leading to a Captaincy and he had been placed in charge of the operation to corner and destroy the gigantic Huntress. During that pursuit, however, an old Admiral aboard an old ship had fought the old-fashioned way. Lion was lost to a stray shot from an escort cruiser and the 'Pride of the Navy' was on Strandel's conscience constantly. Strandel had never been blamed; in fact he had been promoted almost immediately to Commodore. It was clear to Strandel that the rank should have carried with it additional responsibilities, it did not. His flotilla of six ships was actually thinned, the destroyers Adventure and Falcon being removed to home fleet duties while he took the cruisers to form a roving operational fleet.

A few months ago, war had been declared. Strandel did not look forward to war, but he didn't run from it either. He wasn't one to misunderstand the role of a combat fleet and it was clear to him that if war came he would be in the very thick of it. He was mistaken. His flotilla was moved almost as far from home as it was possible to be and still have a role to play. Certainly there were duties to be performed, the Mari Roads were very busy commerce lanes and the enemy Coalition had deployed fast and deadly cruisers to destroy such merchantmen and cut off supplies. One of these raiders had, on several occasions,

approached the Roads but each time had moved off without closing with the busiest part of the commercial space there. Strandel was convinced that the reason for the tentative nature of the approaches was due to his presence, in itself a valuable reason to protect the area. Unfortunately Strandel was an aggressive commander, hating the thought of waiting until the enemy decided to overcome their fears.

On this particular morning two other issues were particularly grating at his calm. One of his cruisers, Implacable, was running dangerously poorly, an overhaul in a proper dockyard would be required, in any event all his crews were bored and sullen after months of confinement in the ships, they needed leave. The second issue particularly annoyed him. He had received word that the same elusive raider he was supposed to interdict had swept past a fleet forty light-years away. Not only had the fleet failed to bring her to terms, they had lost a destroyer in the process. The destroyer was Falcon, one of Strandel's old ships, and he felt the loss acutely. He knew most of those aboard her by sight, many by name. Strandel was not a grieving man, however. Though the Admiralty may have elected to give him a remote posting they had also given him an opportunity, an opportunity to wreak revenge upon the sleek enemy cruiser Admiral Galer Sint.

The small outpost of Mari might seem an unlikely place for a strategic confrontation; Mari was independent of all the major powers in the area and had declared herself neutral in the current conflict. Mari was, though, sited in a very important position. Two giant gas clouds had formed in the region, the two overlapped somewhat and gas clouds, though not in themselves dangerous, interfered with sensors and communications equipment aboard space ships. Accordingly commercial vessels avoided them and aimed for the gaps wherever they clustered. The beautiful but barely habitable world of Mari sat neatly in one of those gaps. The planet had carved out a successful role in the galaxy by building and maintaining beacons for easy movement through the region of space, running a substantial shipyard and port in orbit over the planet and providing facilities for shore-leave that sometimes verged on the scandalous. Mari was a popular layover with merchant crews.

In war situations change, but not for Mari. While the trade was a little more intermittent it was generally more expensive; sailors after a tense cruise party just a little more lavishly. Many of these sailors also had additional risk payments to spend.

Strandel knew the layout of this part of space quite well, he had studied it intensely on receiving the assignment and two months of patrolling had improved his knowledge immensely. He knew the Mari system and the beacon lined roads each side of the planet

almost as well as he knew the layout of his cabin aboard the Excellent. He pressed a contact on his desk to summon his aide. Knowing his mood, Commander Alia arrived almost immediately.

"Sir?"

Strandel waved her to a seat. "I have some orders that need drafting, Alia. Implacable needs an overhaul so contact Captain Renal and ask him to make best speed to Carador. Contact Carador personally and ensure that a berth is prepared for Implacable and that the shipyard knows how upset I'll be if there are any delays."

Alia took a few moments to finish making her notes, then looked up. "Is that all, sir?"

"No, if you have a few moments this afternoon, I'd appreciate some time to discuss strategies with you, say sixteen-hundred?"

Alia nodded and stood, "Of course, it would be a pleasure." Mentally she was working out how to cancel the scheduled 'postcard' session that afternoon and quickly decided she'd pass it over to another officer rather than risk losing it altogether. Postcards were recordings made aboard and highly compressed for transmission to family or friends, it was often necessary to book time for them weeks in advance.

When Alia returned to Strandel's office she found him gazing through the viewport at the rapidly shrinking form of the cruiser Implacable. He was so distracted, in fact, that she was considering whether to announce her presence when he spoke.

"Close the door, get comfortable. Would you like something to drink?"

"Thank you, sir." Alia poured a small drink for each of them and put them on the desk. Strandel's office was decidedly spartan; the only item that wasn't issued to him by the navy was a holograph of his sister and even that sat atop a navy-issue frame. There was another long pause before Strandel turned, but when he did his entire focus was on the matter at hand.

Strandel sat quickly, noticed the drink in front of him and smiled his thanks. He stopped for a heartbeat to gather his thoughts, then began. "It seems I frighten my enemy. The Galer Sint is a powerful ship and the Mari Roads are a tempting target, yet he doesn't approach. Why do you think that is?"

Alia took a sip from her glass. "Galer Sint is powerful, but not as powerful as she is sometimes described, she's slower than your fleet so if action is initiated she will be unable to run. She is also not particularly well defended, not much more than any of our cruisers. She has but one advantage, her huge main beams. She is capable of hitting harder and from further away than we. Her captain obviously feels that committing to a straight fight with you is inadvisable, after all there's no hurry, there are merchantmen to sink without entering the Mari Roads."

Strandel agreed. "We are now three ships, instead of four, our enemy is likely to know this so this is the most likely time for an attack, all we need is an excuse to abandon our post for a while, and to do so obviously. Then I think the Galer Sint will strike."

Alia smiled, "And do we have this excuse?"

Strandel looked across at her calmly, "No, not until ten-hundred tomorrow morning."

Alia took another sip, "Have you taken up fortune telling, Sir?"

Strandel laughed, "I believe we each make our own fortune."

It was far from uncommon for Strandel to be on the bridge of the Excellent so none of the regular crew thought anything of it. In fact it was a somewhat unusual day but unless you knew what was going to happen it didn't seem so. A few minutes after ten hundred the communications officer put his hand in the air, normal procedure if receiving an emergency transmission, the bridge fell silent and Strandel and the helmsman walked over to the comms station. After a few seconds the young comms officer turned in his chair and handed Strandel the notes he'd taken. Strandel read them carefully, twice, before he spoke.

"We have received a distress call from the merchantman Caris Dar. She is under attack by a large warship, possibly Galer Sint. Helm, signal flotilla, make for these co-ordinates at once."

The three cruisers turned as one and moved away from the Mari Roads.

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Twenty hours from Mari Strandel was woken by Alia touching his shoulder.

"Sorry to wake you sir but we've received another message from the Caris Dar. It seems they came under attack from a small beam-mine, not a major vessel, unfortunately the attack damaged their comms gear so they weren't able to tell us sooner."

Strandel smiled and hopped out of bed. He quickly threw on his uniform and made his way to the bridge. The First Officer, Commander Velis, was seething with anger and tension. He immediately turned to acknowledge Strandel and Alia and reported.

"Sir, I've turned the flotilla around and we're making best speed for Mari, unfortunately those mud-sucker idiots have dragged us off our station so far that it will take till mid-tomorrow before we're back in position."

Strandel nodded and eased himself into the command seat. "I think it is time for me to confess. The Captain of the Caris Dar issued a false distress call; in fact he did so on my instructions. I believe that Galer Sint will even now be preying on the traffic in the Mari Roads and that we shall, moreover, catch her at it. Time is now important, we need to make the best speed possible."

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The Afra Seel was a medium-sized merchantman, not large enough to make the huge 'provision runs' across the galaxy but quite sufficient to be a highly profitable bulk-transport when plying the common trade routes. Her master was a middle-aged woman called Dista Poole, highly experienced and known among her crew for calm under pressure. Pressure was about to be applied. A quiet bleep from her console indicated the presence of another ship picked up at the edge of sensor range. The sensors aboard Afra Seel were excellent, much better than was common for merchantmen of her size and they quickly picked up information indicating that the approaching ship was the cruiser Admiral Galer Sint. Poole was surprisingly calm. She sent a routine 'check-in' message to the Mari control and at the end of it attached a note, encrypted in Admiralty Merchant Code 3, to the effect that she was being shadowed by Galer Sint and would try to lead the cruiser into the Mari Roads themselves. There was a chance that the intercept officer on Galer Sint wouldn't check the entire message and therefore wouldn't know they had been spotted. Poole then thought carefully about the situation. If she accelerated then Galer Sint would know she'd been spotted and would attack at once, alternatively it would take a further twenty-four hours to reach the Mari Roads at the present pace and however cautious or patient the Galer Sint's captain, that was way too long. The obvious question was why the attack had not yet

happened in any case, what was the cruiser waiting for? As soon as Poole thought of the question the answer became obvious, the Galer Sint was unsure whether Afra Seel was travelling alone or in convoy; they were being stalked to find this out. If that was the case then she could buy some time with a small subterfuge. Using the low powered local transmitter that would only reach ships if they were extremely close Poole transmitted, in the clear, a cheery message to the Doro Shiel, offering a wager on a game of chess between the two skippers of the vessels. It was a good plan and it should have worked, the Galer Sint should have started looking for the other ship before attacking. Poole wasn't to know that the crew of the Doro Shiel were currently guests aboard the Galer Sint; the cruiser had destroyed her just twelve hours before.

Strandel glanced at his console, there was a new transmission appearing. He studied it carefully then spoke to his bridge crew. "A merchantman outside the approaches to the Mari Roads has just reported that she is being stalked by the Galer Sint, we are altering course to intercept, I expect to arrive in seven hours." The bridge crew bent to their tasks at once except for one young woman who stood and walked over to Strandel, he looked up curiously.

"Sir, if I may, could I ask which merchantman reported the Galer Sint?"

Strandel looked a little surprised. "It was the Afra Seel. Why do you ask, Commander Poole?"

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Aboard the Afra Seel a brief message had just been received. It was perhaps a little brusque but it made its point admirably clearly:

AFRA SEEL THIS IS ADMIRAL GALER SINT. STOP ALL ENGINES AND ABANDON SHIP AT ONCE, WE WILL RETRIEVE LIFEPODS AND PRISONERS WILL BE WELL TREATED. ANY ATTEMPT TO EVADE WILL BE MET WITH IMMEDIATE DEADLY FORCE. YOU HAVE TEN MINUTES TO COMPLY.

It took less than five minutes for the Afra Seel to be completely abandoned.

When Dista Poole arrived aboard the huge cruiser she really didn't know what to expect. She knew there were rules governing the treatment of prisoners but she also knew how

frequently they were flouted. What she didn't expect was to be met in the docking bay by the captain of the Galer Sint. Captain Leyman was a very tall, slender man. He was just beginning to turn grey at the temples and lines creased his face. He was actually rather handsome, in a stiff and proper way. When he noticed Poole he strode towards her and extended his hand, rather in a daze, Poole shook it.

"Welcome to the Admiral Galer Sint, captain." He spoke formally and with respect, Poole couldn't detect any gloating or smugness over their relative positions.

"Thank you captain."

"I have to ask you for a favour, Captain Poole."

Poole studied his face for signs of ulterior motives. "A favour?"

"All the crew of your ship that we recovered are assembled in this docking bay, could you please ensure that all are safely here. I'm afraid I am about to destroy your beautiful ship and I would hate to kill any of your crew at the same time."

Poole looked around the bay, mentally counting off the familiar faces. "They are all here, captain."

Leyman smiled, seemingly with genuine relief. "I now have an unlovely duty. Would you prefer to watch?"

Poole thought hard about the question before deciding that she would, indeed, like to see her ship's last moments.

"How long now, sir?" Alia looked at Strandel.

"Four hours, commander."

"Galer Sint will be long gone back into uncontrolled space when we arrive."

"No, commander, Galer Sint will move closer to the Mari Roads."

Alia thought about that for a moment. "Why?"

Strandel didn't look up from his console. "Because you don't think it's a very good plan and that cunning captain out there thinks that I will agree with you."

The hum of weapons fire was impressive on the bridge of the Galer Sint. Her main weapons fired three times and there was only wreckage where moments before there had been a merchant vessel. Dista Poole found her eyes moistening. When she glanced at Leyman he was looking at her, sympathy in his eyes.

Strandel was carefully examining his console for signs of the merchantman Afra Seel; eventually he found them. "Lieutenant Poole, may I have your attention for a moment?"

Poole walked briskly up the bridge to where Strandel sprawled. "Sir?"

"Lieutenant, I have now located the Afra Seel, I am sorry to have to report this news but the vessel is destroyed."

The lieutenant took the news with the calm and dignity that Strandel would have expected. Nonetheless it was gratifying to see such a young officer take such news with barely a flicker of the eyes. Strandel had not ordered a change in course, nor had he slowed the Excellent as his flotilla swept past the twinkling debris of the Afra Seel. He thought of the battle ahead in ways that other, lesser, men do not. If he tried to explain his feelings most would interpret the description as a thirst for revenge. Nothing could be further from the truth, Strandel didn't believe in revenge, he believed in the strong protecting the weak. Since Strandel was an intellectual individual he equated 'strongest' with 'most intelligent'. Naturally he felt he was easily the strongest naval force ever assembled. He felt that way, moreover, irrespective of whether he sat in a battlecruiser or a rowing boat. Now Strandel was taking a gamble, guessing which way the enemy would flee. Though he was entirely confident of his analysis he was nonetheless relieved when the call came from the FCO.

"Sir! Dagger has stripe green at thirty-two!"

Strandel came instantly alert. "Identify the stripe target."

There was a pause while sensors, computers and officers collated information. "Sir! Target is identified as a heavy cruiser of the Admiral Zeylov Class. Almost certainly the vessel is Admiral Galer Sint."

Strandel stood. "FCO, keep contact with the target, I will have senior and tactical officers in my cabin now."

Captain Leyman walked into the packed but comfortable quarters set aside for his prisoners. "I have to report that we have been discovered by fighters from enemy cruisers. I must secure the entrance to your quarters and I will be unable to see to your well being for the immediate future. For this, you have my apologies."

As Leyman walked from the compartment his 'guests' stared at each other in silence.

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## Chapter 2 - Conflict

Strandel walked to the display screen behind his desk. "Admiral Galer Sint." A schematic image of the enemy cruiser appeared behind him as the assembled staff looked on. "She is a powerful and dangerous foe, commanded by a thoughtful and experienced captain." The schematic changed to highlight weapons aboard the enemy ship. "As we approach her, I want to briefly explain my strategy for defeating her. She is slower than our ships, but not by much, a stern-chase would take a long time. She is slightly better armoured than the Excellent, significantly better armoured than our other cruisers. Her weapons are truly impressive, far stronger than ours, giving her more punch and greater reach." Again the screen changed, this time displaying a tactical map. "We will need to close on her and we will need to do so quickly. She has a weakness, however. All her heavy weaponry is placed in only two turrets. She can only engage two of our vessels at any given time. Accordingly I am splitting our forces. Excellent will stay this side of her, Invincible and Formidable will approach from behind her and pull alongside on exactly the opposite side. This will leave her no avenue of escape from the Roads and will hopefully limit damage to our lighter ships for as long as possible. Is everyone clear?" There were general nods of assent.

Aboard the Galer Sint Captain Leyman paced his bridge. He had no illusions as to the danger he was in, he couldn't run, he couldn't hide and he was unable to resist the weapons of his enemies for any length of time. His only option was to fight, to try and punch his way from the trap into which he had so blindly fallen. He stared at the tactical display watching as his pursuers split into two formations. Thankfully intelligence had been correct about the absence of the fourth cruiser, presumably she would try to get here but Carador was many light years away, this battle would be fought with only those forces already deployed.

Leyman was aware that he was going to become very busy over the next few hours so he paid a visit once again to his captives. When he arrived they had been quiet, tension mounting as they all feared both for themselves should Galer Sint be destroyed and conversely for their allies should Galer Sint win the day. All faces looked at him as he entered and there was no sound from the group as Leyman cleared his throat. "This ship is about to come under attack from Drael Strandel's cruiser squadron. The outcome of the battle is decidedly unclear as both sides can point to substantive advantages over the other. I am ordering that these quarters be unlocked and that instructions be given to you all on the most suitable escape route should this ship be stricken. I will station a guard outside these quarters, but I am not a fool. In endeavouring to provide you with some hope in case of

disaster I am opening myself up to an attempt to sabotage my ship. I will, therefore, only release the door if I have your collective word on the matter. What do you say?"

Captain Poole looked around for some feeling from the room before she spoke. "Captain, we appreciate the gesture, we are not warriors, but merchant sailors. We will take advantage of your offer in the spirit it is intended, until we believe our lives are in imminent jeopardy or until we hear from you we will remain in this room." Leyman nodded. "And Captain? Thank you."

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Aboard Excellent, Strandel was watching his screens impatiently. He listened to the soft noises of professionals at work, straining every nerve for the inevitable release of tension to come. On the tactical display there was a dotted line marking the maximum range of the Galer Sint's weapons, Strandel held his breath as Excellent crossed the line just seconds before the other ships of the squadron.

"Incoming heavy fire, sir!" Strandel braced himself but there was no effect. Galer Sint had missed with her first salvo. Strandel knew that they were on borrowed time until they could get within range of their own weapons.

Aboard the Formidable, Captain Marik was staring at very similar screens. One of Galer Sint's turrets had swung towards her and fire was expected. Without warning the bridge rocked as a hit was scored from the invisibly distant Galer Sint's weapons. One of the displays in front of Marik's wavering gaze showed some minor damage, Marik knew it was luck that had saved his ship from greater harm, he immediately ordered the engineering crews to accelerate the ship as much as possible.

Captain Poole could see nothing of the battle but she could hear one side of it, at least. Every time the big weapons aboard the Galer Sint fired she winced in sympathy for the damage downrange. She clutched in her fist the hard copy of the message from her daughter. 'It's so exciting to be on a real combat bridge ..... Commodore Strandel is magnificent ..... I can't wait for action.'

Captain Salin was riding his bridge like a racehorse, a quiet, clinical man, he had earned his command the same way as Renal, by being good in a flotilla commanded by a meritocrat. His men respected him, his humour was legendary and his utter unwillingness to

countenance anything less than total commitment had ensured that his ship was better prepared for action than any other vessel in the fleet. Slowly Invincible was overhauling Formidable despite Marik's urging. With each minute his crew were prouder, with each minute they were becoming a more tempting target for the Galer Sint.

An infectious grin began to spread across Salin's face as a third salvo missed his ship. He was shouting instructions almost in song, the glory of the moment nearly overwhelming him. The fourth salvo didn't miss. Picking himself off the deck of his bridge he looked around, there seemed to be few injuries and everyone was moving. "Up you get!" He yelled. "You can all catch up on your sleep after we kill the Sint!" Even through the confusion of sudden impact there were a few laughs.

On the bridge of the Excellent, Strandel was being briefed by his Operations Officer. "We have only taken blister damage, Formidable has been slightly slowed by a second hit."

"And Invincible?"

"Captain Salin seemed to take the question as an insult, sir."

Strandel began to chuckle, "I'll just bet he did."

Strandel turned his attention to the tactical display, Excellent was almost in range of the Galer Sint, there were soon going to be opportunities for revenge.

Captain Leyman was watching the ships converge on his own displays. As Excellent approached the range at which she could open fire he ordered all beams to bear on her.

Strandel had just finished ordering all weapons to fire as soon as they were in range when a huge salvo from the Galer Sint smashed into Excellent's flank. The tactical display went red as damage information flashed before his eyes. Speed was hampered, agility more so, and Excellent had lost a turret. Commander Alia stepped before him on slightly unsteady feet, a trickle of blood escaped a cut above her left eye. Alia decided to steady herself on the arm of Strandel's chair before beginning her report.

"We have taken serious damage, essentially we can continue the pursuit in the hope of inflicting harm, or we can attempt to withdraw and lick our wounds. It's your decision Commodore."

Strandel carefully considered the options for a heartbeat. "Open fire when ready Commander, I'll try to get us as close as possible."

Still in the prisoners quarters aboard the Galer Sint, Captain Poole listened intently to the sounds of the salvos being fired from the ship. She knew enough about starship combat to be fully aware how quickly the chasing cruisers would be trying to get within the range of their own weapons. As the ship around her hummed with the sound of recharging cells there was a reverberating crash, so powerful it made the dust jump from the floor of the cabin. All the prisoners looked at each other with blank expressions, then, as one, they began to cheer.

"A hit, sir!" Commander Alia yelled across the bridge of the wounded Excellent.

"Damage?" Strandel was scanning his own display for signs of weakness in his implacable enemy.

Alia studied her information closely, "None visible."

"Don't worry commander, better luck next time."

Captain Salin was in his element aboard Invincible. As his ship passed the virtual line on the map indicating his maximum weapons range he sang out, "Open fire, all weapons!" His reward was instant as his tactical display indicated several hits. His excitement was infectious and his crew became exhilarated along with him. When he tapped his display and yelled at it, "Come on Formidable, you're missing all the fun!" there was a cheer from the bridge crew. Formidable was scant minutes behind.

The tactical display was still indicating that Invincible was not coming under fire, Salin was seeing his own beams strike time and again with no response from the enemy, the tactical display also showed the status of the other ships in the fleet. There was glee on the bridge as Formidable opened fire for the first time, signalling that all the squadron's ships were now in range. Only seconds later, however, the Galer Sint scored an almost complete salvo hit on the Excellent. Salin was undismayed, at once encouraging his crew to greater exertion, but some of the bridge crew cast sombre glances at each other; all knew that Excellent had not been built to resist weaponry of the class that was now striking her.

The bridge of the Excellent was darkened, lighting had been lost along the port side, throwing shadows into lunar crispness across the deck. Strandel was wincing and gritting his

teeth as Alia quickly bound his arm, broken with the force of the beams from Galer Sint. He was waiting for the damage report to come in when another blast shook the ship violently, Alia grabbed his broken arm instinctively as she fell and Strandel's yell stood a fair chance of being heard on the enemy cruiser, thousands of kilometres away. As Alia picked herself up and bent back to her task, Strandel looked around him for evidence of further damage. His tactical screens were black and lifeless, one of them broken across a corner. There were sounds, of course, but none of the usual kind. Only sparking and groaning formed the background to the strident alarms.

"Helm, change course directly to the Galer Sint," Strandel attempted to sit up straight and immediately had the horrible feeling that something was wrong with his back, extreme pain ran along the bottom of his spine. Feeling gingerly round with his good hand he discovered that the pain was due only to a jagged edge at the back of his command seat, left when the chair broke under some unknown impact. When Strandel didn't get an answer from the helm he squinted through the murk to the middle of the bridge. The helm position seemed undamaged, miraculously so given the damage to the rest of the bridge. The helmsman hadn't been so fortunate; he was lying on the floor beside his station, his skull split by the terrible impact. Strandel looked around to get some idea of the situation, "Alia, stop torturing me and get to the helm station. Tell me what is working on my ship, in fact tell me what's working on all my ships."

Alia tied off her makeshift bandage and strode to the helm. Before anything else she strapped herself securely into the chair, then took a deep breath and began to check the systems. It wasn't good news. All central fire-control was destroyed, the engines were in terrible shape, the fighter bay had been destroyed, dozens of compartments torn open to the chill of vacuum. Worst of all, Excellent had no secondary weapons remaining, no missiles or lighter beams, only one turret worked aboard the ship, and there was no fire-control to aim it. She turned the chair to face her captain and began to relay the bad news.

Strandel listened intently. "So we can still chase her and we can still shoot her with some heavy weapons. That's marvellous, for a moment there I felt we might be badly harmed." Alia found that her mouth was open, she couldn't remember opening it. "To work, commander, steer to the Galer Sint. Our gunners won't be able to hit her until they can see her with their own eyes." Alia turned back to try and wrestle some function out of the engines. As she did so the ship surged as the single remaining turret unleashed a salvo. If the gunners couldn't be sure of hits, at least they could distract the enemy, force her to still consider the Excellent a threat.

Captain Marik was delighted with the performance of Formidable's gunners, they were scoring hit after hit on the enemy ship, if only he could feel more confident that the beams were inflicting real damage, not just bouncing from the armour of the heavier cruiser. Even more impressive, Salin's Invincible was firing faster than Marik would have believed possible and hitting almost every time. Marik felt that, should they both survive, he should take Salin for dinner some time soon and quiz him on his engineering strategy; there could be much he could learn from the younger man. Less encouraging was the report on his screen of the status of the Excellent, no updates were now coming through, suggesting fairly major system problems, and the last report to be sent was dismally bad. Amazingly the Excellent was still firing, but Marik was very unsure how long that could last, maybe he was imagining it but Excellent appeared to be slowing.

Captain Poole paced the noisy prisoner's compartment in silence. She had felt the difference in impact between the heavier weapons carried by Excellent and the lighter ones carried by the other ships of the flotilla and she had, therefore, a reasonable grasp of the battle so far. She hadn't felt the heavier impacts for some time though and she was beginning to worry that her daughter's ship might have been destroyed. Still the Galer Sint's weapons seemed to fire without pause, whatever else was going on she felt sure that Captain Leyman must be very much in control.

Leyman was very worried. He was carefully scanning the sensor readings for the Mari Roads directly ahead of the Galer Sint. He had engaged in a battle with the Excellent, a fine ship but much weaker in offensive capability than his own, and yet he had been unable to silence her weapons. She was firing irregularly now, so it was possible a power issue was affecting her ability to fight, even so, power problems usually had rapid resolutions. The other two cruisers had shown remarkable accuracy, and the constant impacts were impeding the efficiency of his crew as well as damaging systems aboard his ship. Worst of all, the Excellent appeared to be breaking off the chase, while this might be seen by some as a cause for celebration, Leyman was convinced that the reason was to block off the only good exit from the Mari corridor. Those infernal gas clouds were making it very hard to see what was the other side of Mari, it could well be a battlecruiser. If he couldn't go back since Excellent now blocked his path then he might simply have to chance the central part of the Mari Roads. At least that was neutral space, while any ship could follow him they would not be permitted to fire upon him until he cleared the immediate vicinity of Mari on the other side. Of course it could be a feint, maybe there was nothing on the other side of Mari, but if so then why would Excellent be breaking off the chase?

Alia turned again to give another report to Strandel aboard Excellent. "I'm very sorry sir, we simply can't keep up, our engines are a mess and the engineers are in no condition to repair them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Strandel slammed his good hand down on the arm of his chair. "Damn the luck! We came so close. Can we communicate with our other ships, tell them to get ahead of the Galer Sint and chase her back towards us?"

"No sir, I'm sorry, we have no communications at present. I'm working on that now."

Strandel closed his eyes, "Then we'll just have to hope for the best."

Marik was discussing tactics with Salin. Salin was, by any standards, an extremely aggressive captain. He was beginning to speak with the clipped tones of a man who feels he is being ordered to do something he doesn't want to do and can't be bothered to hide his annoyance.

"Listen to me Marik, we may never have another chance like this, we have to chase the Sint to Mari and when we catch her we have to kill her. There are no other possible strategies."

Marik spread his hands in a placating gesture. "Salin, you're right, that is the way to proceed, if we happened to be in open space, but we're in the roads." Marik displayed a map between them. "We can't fight in the vicinity of Mari. If she enters first and opts for travelling right through then we have merchant laws to worry about. There may be neutral vessels in the roads that both sides will have to give way to, we could wind up too far behind her to come to blows again. In any event, I think we may be unable to overwhelm her with only these two ships." "So I assume you have an alternative plan?"

Marik nodded. "We sent in our report about the Sint some time ago, it's entirely possible that there could be a battlefleet waiting to destroy her on the other side of the Roads. If so all we have to do is shepherd her through. We can block off this end, so if she wants to come out she'll have to do so through us and we can use the time to offer assistance to the Excellent, I have a feeling she may be grateful for the help."

Salin nodded assent, but he didn't look happy about it. Minutes later the two cruisers had begun to fall back from the Galer Sint.

Leyman went to his cabin aboard the Galer Sint and stared bleakly at the wall for several minutes. The pursuers had broken off the chase, but he was now committed to Mari. He had few options available. He could continue through the Roads and hope that there were no major units on the other side, he could turn and attempt to fight his way past the three cruisers, but their stance of holding station on his escape route implied that they, at least, felt confident in the ensuing battle. He had a third option, he could layover in Mari, effect repairs to the damage done to his ship and allow his crew to rest, then when he was in better shape for the battle he could break past the tired crews on those cruisers and escape.

Strandel was speaking quietly to Lieutenant Commander Poole in the medical room. She was a low priority casualty, stable and healing, so she was afforded only the luxury of an improvised mattress stretched on the floor in the corner of the critically overcrowded room. She was, in a manner familiar to Strandel, concerned that the damage to the Excellent might make the pursuit of Galer Sint a serious problem, she seemed entirely unconcerned about her three broken ribs and torn shoulder ligaments. Strandel smiled tolerantly at her questions but refused point-blank her request to be returned to duty, the duty paramedic had informed him that she was likely to injure herself further without some time to rest. Strandel would have requested the surgeon's opinion, but the surgeon had not survived the battle, one of dozens of fatalities aboard the Excellent. As he discussed the battle with Poole, getting her impressions to add to his own recollections, Alia walked in and cleared her throat.

Strandel looked up, "Yes, Commander?"

"We have communications back on line sir, there are a couple of anxious captains who'd like very much to hear from you."

The news that Excellent was still spaceworthy and that Strandel was intact, if a little tender, was rapidly known by every crewman on the other two cruisers, Captain Salin switched the Invincible's intercom over so that Strandel could hear the cheers that rang out through the ship. Invincible also had the most intact scanners in the squadron so she was providing reports on the progress through the Mari Roads of the Galer Sint.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few hours later, on Excellent's bridge, Strandel surveyed the damage. "She fought well, Commander."

Alia nodded slowly, "Yes she did sir."

Strandel looked sadly at his battered command chair. "I feel I'm deserting her, when she never deserted me." Alia wisely stayed silent. "Still, sentiment aside, she needs an overhaul and she'd be a liability in combat. I am handing over my cruiser to you Commander, I will transfer my flag to Formidable as soon as possible." Alia nodded, though it was hardly the way she would have planned it, she had her first command. As an intelligence officer, probably her last command as well. "I should call you captain now, Alia, so captain, can your ship make Carador?"

Alia was glowing with pride, "She can make the core worlds if ordered, sir." Strandel laughed quietly, then left her bridge with a last fond look around.

The welcome Strandel received when he arrived aboard Formidable was rather comical. The reception party had been hastily assembled, many of them should have definitely had a shower before arriving, but there simply hadn't been time. They were also excited, and proud that they were now the squadron flagship.

When finally Strandel stretched out on the couch in Captain Marik's quarters he was able to watch through the large observation port as Excellent began her steady journey to Carador. Despite the solid construction of the cabins on Formidable he could also faintly hear the three cheers given by the crew to the departing ally. He smiled gently. "I wish Excellent's crew could have heard that."

Marik glanced across, "They did, I'm not above copying someone else's idea, especially if it's a good one."

Strandel leant back and closed his eyes. "So tell me, Marik, is the Sint going through or coming back this way?"

"Neither, sir, I have the latest report from Invincible in front of me. The Galer Sint has requested a berth at Mari, and the port authorities have granted her the legal minimum of seventy-two hours."

Strandel's eyes snapped open. "So now we wait."

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### Chapter 3 - Resolution

Captain Leyman walked slowly into the quarters occupied by his captives, they looked expectantly towards him. The mood among the occupants had been dismal, the battle appeared to have ended and little damage seemed to have been caused against this mighty cruiser.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, "I have to tell you that the battle is over for the time being. There was no decisive victory for either side. For some hours we will be berthed at Mari, to effect repairs. When we have docked you will all be released. I am sorry to have put you through this experience, I hope you will, at least, understand that I took no pleasure in destroying your vessels, it was my duty, never my joy." Without looking back he turned and swept out of the room, leaving a stunned and excited crowd behind him. Captain Poole, in particular, seemed relieved, after all he might well have mentioned the destruction of a ship in his brief description of the battle.

Three hours later, the prisoners assembled by the docking bay to depart the Galer Sint, Leyman came down to see them off and as the doors were opened they began their walk to freedom. Captain Poole walked over to Leyman, she cleared her throat several times before he acknowledged her presence.

He turned, "I'm sorry, Captain, I seem to be somewhat distracted today, can I be of assistance?"

"Firstly, may I take this opportunity to thank you for your hospitality, you have been extremely kind."

Leyman smiled, "You're welcome, we need not behave like barbarians, after all. But you said 'firstly', there is another matter?"

"I don't wish to learn anything that you would rather keep private, but you see my daughter is a bridge officer aboard the Excellent and I wondered." She petered out.

Leyman smiled, "Of course. To my knowledge, Excellent broke off the engagement in good order, she had received substantial damage but I don't know where in the ship the damage was caused. If I had to guess, I would think that engineering was worst hit. The ship was certainly not crippled. You have every reason to believe that your daughter may be in excellent health." "Thank you, Captain, for everything."

\* \* \* \* \*

Life at Mari was full of contrasts. The bustling and impressive spaceport was exciting and cosmopolitan, step just minutes from its heart, though, onto one of the shuttles down to the planet surface and life in the domes was very different indeed. Mari was an independent world and as such the Alliance had to have a local representative. The embassy actually consisted of just three people. The Ambassador was an ageing man, futilely trying to enjoy the last few years of his service to the Alliance, widely known to be incompetent, almost invariably drunk and with a lack of interest in personal hygiene that made even other drunk Ambassadors shun his company. The Civil Attaché was a young woman who seemed ridiculously competent, formerly a crewman on a merchant ship before joining the Foreign Service, she was a natural choice for a location such as this where civil relations mainly consisted of bailing drunk sailors out of local gaols. Colis Frane was the Military Attaché. He was an experienced man, knowing his way effortlessly through the often-contradictory worlds of diplomatic and military interests. He was only here for a short time, to get the words 'Military Attaché' on his record before being shipped to a real embassy where he could take up the same post and not be embarrassed about it. Frane was convinced that nothing important would ever be likely to happen on Mari, so he was somewhat surprised when the local news indicated that a battle had been fought in the Mari Roads and moreover an enemy warship was berthed for repairs at the shipyard. He immediately went to the spaceport.

The berth was secured, he couldn't convince the local police to let him past their cordon, even after explaining to them that as a man with diplomatic immunity he could, if necessary, lodge a complaint about their interference. Unfortunately the police insisted on speaking to their superiors before permitting him access and he knew that the paper-thin justification he had invented would never stand scrutiny by a senior officer.

Frane walked over to a nearby berth and paid an exorbitant sum to hire a small yacht, with pilot, for a 'sightseeing tour' of the shipyard from spaceside. The pilot steered the yacht close enough that he could make out the damage to the hull clearly. The Admiral Galer Sint was a hurt vessel, without seeing inside he had no idea how hurt she might be but he did know that armour was supposed to be matt black and smooth, not cratered, burned and split in places with rather beautiful fracture lines. Obviously Galer Sint had been in space for long enough since her last refit for cosmic radiation to begin the long process of de-tempering her hardened armour plates. Once he was convinced he had learned all he could he travelled back to the main deck of the spaceport and walked to the communications centre. He had a

private code, for use when communicating with military personnel. In theory the officers aboard any nearby ships would be able to read a message he protected this way. It wasn't a great code, but it had the advantage of having never been used before. If he kept his message brief, avoided stereotyped opening and closing remarks and only used it once then there was a good chance it would never be read by unfriendly eyes. In any case, the only secure code the Embassy had was in the control of the Ambassador, Frane would rather stand on the observation deck of the spaceport and wave flags at the distant allies than converse with a drunken braggart over the issue.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aboard Formidable, Strandel had been handed an extremely interesting message, sent by someone who clearly understood the situation. It read:

DKRIOOANFYUDHRUHDJ GALER SINT BERTHED MARI. VISBLE DMG OTR HULL.  
DONOT NO BATTL READNESS. INSTRUCTNS PLS. FRANE  
DHSIIUEUTRYGHSUSHKCKDFW

It took just moments to identify Frane as the local Military Attaché, there was unanimous consent about his competence, as demonstrated by his actions so far. A set of instructions had to be sent to him at once, but without compromising the code he had used. The solution was to encrypt the instructions using Frane's code, put a line in clear text at the top indicating that the message was for Frane and send it to the Ambassador in the official code. No thought was given to the Ambassador's reaction.

The Ambassador was furious, he had received, for the first time in weeks, an encrypted message. Such things made him feel important and status really mattered to the Ambassador. Once he had deciphered it it still appeared to be garbage, except for the blunt instruction at the top 'EYES ONLY FRANE'. He immediately demanded an explanation from the Military Attaché, Frane managed to get permission to decode the message privately on the sole condition that he would immediately return with news of its contents. The Ambassador was extremely unhappy about any of his staff having secrets from him.

As Frane decoded the message in his office his heart was racing. This was what he had always longed to do, to be involved in the real issues of the galaxy, to have a hand in the fate of thousands of lives. He carefully read the document several times then thought carefully about what to do. After just two minutes he was summoned back to the

Ambassador's office, as he walked along the short corridor the solution to his problem leapt into his mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Strandel was watching Mari's wonderful gas clouds from Formidable's bridge when Marik approached.

"Commodore, we have company, fast approaching from behind."

Strandel looked at him in surprise, "Really, who?"

Marik smiled, "It appears that Implacable has made the trip from Carador in record time, she got underway as soon as she heard."

Strandel laughed quietly, "Remind me to have a stern word with Captain Renal about proper care of starship engines. I wonder if Mr. Frane has managed to convince the Galer Sint not to continue through the Roads. I have been checking fleet movements and the closest significant unit is the Resolution. She can't be on station for another five days. If the Galer Sint departs on schedule and leaves by the back door there will be nothing to stop her."

Marik digested the news. "I have confidence in Frane, I'm sure he'll do the job."

Strandel grunted and turned back to the view.

The Ambassador was in high spirits. He had never had the opportunity to welcome a senior naval party to his residence, there were many things to be organised. Food had to be prepared, drinks in abundance, after all, even officers were sailors. Since they were arriving the 'long way' through the back of the Roads, there would need to be clearance arranged for them with the port authorities. The imbecile Frane had thought it necessary to tell him to keep the visit secret, not to book the clearance until hours before they were due to arrive. The Ambassador wasn't an idiot, he knew not to tell the local authorities anything, they were extremely corrupt. He went instead to his local hostelry to arrange the food. He explained his requirements and the schedule, apologising for the short notice, after all they were due the day after tomorrow. The caterer thought he could manage something suitably naval and of the required quality for senior officers. Knowing how small a staff the Ambassador had the kind caterer even offered to collect the visitors and shuttle them to the residence. The

Ambassador explained that they would be arriving at the long terminal based on the direction of their approach. It wasn't until after he left that it occurred to him that he had given away to a civilian the one piece of information Frane had begged him to retain. Still, nobody would ever know.

Back at the Embassy an irate Civil Attaché was screaming abuse at Frane. "You cretin! You can't trust information like that to a drunken, vain idiot! If you couldn't make the arrangements yourself you should have let me do it. I can keep a secret."

Frane sat down wearily, "Which is exactly why I told the Ambassador."

There was silence for a long minute while she digested the information, then a big grin spread across her face. "I know the Ambassador has a big appetite, but I have grave doubts over his ability to eat thirty place settings at a single sitting. He is going to be so disappointed when they don't show up."

Frane nodded, "And he won't be the only one."

A quiet, tense, night passed uneventfully. An unimportant Ambassador carefully rehearsed a welcome speech, many uniformed men slept fitfully.

\*\*\*\*\*

Leyman was extremely upset. He sat in his elegant cabin on the Galer Sint and stared moodily at his desk. He had received word from his Embassy that an Alliance battlecruiser was now on station on one exit from the Roads, an incoming merchant from the other direction had reported that the cruiser Implacable had joined the forces at the other end. Interestingly he hadn't mentioned the Excellent at all, maybe she had been withdrawn for repairs, maybe she was hiding in one of the gas clouds.

At lunchtime Leyman walked up to his bridge and ordered moorings to be slipped, the Galer Sint was moving into the Roads.

Strandel was trying to catch up on some sleep, despite the hour, when he was shaken awake by Marik. "Sir, we have a message from Salin. The Galer Sint is moving."

The Formidable's bridge was quiet and tense as everyone watched the screens. Strandel said calmly, "Let me know as soon as we are sure which way she's going." It took an agonising twenty minutes before there was confirmation. The Galer Sint was coming back out the way she had gone in, straight down Strandel's throat.

Strandel began giving orders at a furious rate, disposing his ships into a triangular pattern to spread his net of weaponry as widely as he could. He watched as the enemy cruiser slowly moved closer, the Galer Sint was certainly in no hurry at all, barely ticking over her powerful engines. Moreover she actually appeared to be slowing. Just inside the end of the monitored, neutral, part of the Roads she came to a dead stop. Strandel was extremely frustrated, where she was she was in territory he couldn't attack. He felt that the space authorities on Mari wouldn't be entirely thrilled either, the cruiser was blocking the centre of the main spaceway through to Mari. After a substantial pause, during which nobody seemed to be breathing on Formidable, a vast number of small vessels departed the Sint, expanding like the fragments of a hand grenade; they all turned quickly and sped back down the Roads to Mari. Moments later the Sint began to move again, but instead of continuing down the Roads, she turned off her course into the edge of one of the gas clouds. Sensors on the watching cruisers immediately began to plot her course; missiles could be very effective if fired at a nearly blind enemy.

The Galer Sint stopped almost immediately she was clear of the roads, puzzled glances were exchanged among the Formidable's bridge crew. Strandel wasn't puzzled at all, he was entirely satisfied, if a little surprised. Another pause, then one more small craft left the cruiser and hurried back to Mari, it was barely gone from view when the sensors monitoring the Galer Sint began to rapidly change, displays altering as fast as the eye could follow. The Galer Sint suddenly exploded, a huge and impressive fireball rapidly dissolving into the vastness of space, only a disturbance on the edge of one of the clouds of gas even hinted that a ship might have once been there. Strandel opened up his intercom channel and informed the crews of all the cruisers that the Admiral Galer Sint had scuttled herself, after evacuating all her crew.

The following morning Captain Poole went to see Captain Leyman in his quarters at the Mari Spaceport. He looked a little dishevelled. "Thank you for seeing me, Captain." She began, "I have received news that my daughter is hurt but will recover, for some reason I thought you might like to know."

Leyman looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. "I am pleased, I regret every lost life even as the necessity of fighting seems ever clearer to me. Please convey my regards to your daughter." He bent and tapped out a message to be delivered to the young officer he'd never met and pressed it into the hands of his visitor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The three cruisers were moving fast, first stop Carador, to see the status of Excellent and to finish the maintenance work on Implacable. Strandel was summoned to the bridge and it's fair to say he was surprised at the summons. He was not the Captain of a ship any more and he had issued no flotilla instructions that would require his attention. When he arrived on the bridge, Marik walked to him with a stern expression on his face.

"Sir, I have the unpleasant duty of informing you that an official complaint has been made about you by a member of this ship's company." Marik scowled at Strandel.

"Captain, I have no idea.... I mean what...."

"Sir, the complaint was made by my first officer and it is my sad responsibility to tell you that I agree with his charge in full." Strandel looked confused, but Marik continued. "Specifically my bridge crew feels that it is important for senior officers to set a good example, and you, sir, are out of uniform."

Strandel looked down at his clothes; he appeared to be in his uniform as far as he could tell. He took pride both in his appearance and the uniform he wore. "Captain, I don't understand, I don't understand at all." "Sir, Admirals do not appear on my bridge in Commodore uniforms." Marik began to grin, as the rest of the bridge crew cheered Strandel found the grin infectious. "Congratulations, Admiral Strandel."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Ambassador sat alone in the dining room, starters for thirty laid out around him. He slowly pondered the note he held in his hand. He had been recalled to the core worlds, without warning, to depart the following day. A new Ambassador was due in the morning and there were to be just hours of transition. He couldn't decide whether the message was a good omen or a bad one. He poured himself another drink, another drink would make things clearer.

Carador was a busy military port, Strandel had spent more time than he cared to remember in such places and the sounds, sights and smells were completely familiar. He had visited the Foreign Service offices that morning in order to deliver a report on the exceptional conduct of one of their personnel, a young Military Attaché called Frane. He now walked to the extensive medical centre to see his injured crew. Those on the mend were buoyant following the news of victory, excitedly telling him of their part in the battle, fondly remembering comrades with a poorer turn of luck. Strandel truly liked his crew, he felt it was a signal honour to command them and his enthusiasm left him humming as he walked to the last of his visits in the hospital. Commander Poole had a room to herself, she was sitting upright and saluted as Strandel entered, a slight wince crossing her face.

"Good afternoon Commodore.. er.. Admiral, Sir. I'm afraid I have limited hospitality to offer you."

Strandel smiled and sat beside her bed. "Commander, I have good news. I have received a message from your mother, she is entirely unhurt. It appears Captain Leyman is a gentleman." Strandel paused while Poole overcame her rush of emotion. "There is another matter, she asked if I would be kind enough to bring you this message." He handed the Commander the pad in his hand. She read carefully then offered it to Strandel.

"Admiral, I believe this is as much for you as for me."

*Commander Poole,*

*It has been my pleasure to become acquainted, though briefly, with your mother. She has just told me that you were bloodied in the battle at Mari. I wish to extend to you my warmest regards and wish you a speedy recovery. I have decided, after much consideration, to take my life. I do not intend to leave a note, nor do I want your sympathy or understanding. I merely feel that as the captain of a destroyed vessel, the commander of a defeated crew, I should be listed among the dead. I ask only that you request on my behalf, that my name be entered on the rolls of those killed at the instant the Admiral Galer Sint was destroyed. I was not there only because I feared if I stayed my bridge officers would feel obliged to do the same. I offer my condolences for the losses you feel, I feel the loss of only my ship. If you need a character reference I hope that your mother may be prepared to speak for me, there is some similarity in our current circumstances after all and a captain feels the loss of a ship most keenly. If there is concern on your part about the falsifying of records then please do not take it upon yourself*

*to risk censure for me. I can only promise you that my remains will never be found.*

*In kindness, with respect,*

*Captain Predis Leyman.*

Poole waited till Strandel had finished reading then looked at him expectantly.

"Commander, this note never existed, do you understand?" Strandel fixed his gaze upon her.

"Yes sir, but why?"

"Because the man who allegedly wrote it had been dead for almost 24 hours at that point. He died with his ship, so he could never have written you such a note."

After Strandel had left, Commander Poole thought about that last remark. Maybe Leyman really did die with his ship after all. Leyman the warrior, Leyman the captain and Leyman the honourable foe all died that instant. Only Leyman the note-writer lived a little longer, and history would be unlikely to consider that Leyman at all.