

The Sirius Affair

by

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[Chapter 1: Information Underload at Narima](#)

[Chapter 2: Cerberus Unleashed](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Sirius Rampage](#)

Chapter 1: Information Underload at Narima

Admiral Strandel summoned Commander Alia to his quarters aboard the *Excellent* in a foul temper. He was having a truly awful day and so were thousands of others in the combined military fleet orbiting Narima. Their day was an absolute pleasure compared to thousands more on the surface of the planet, however, thousands who were dying in the frozen mud and craggy rocks of one of the more inhospitable systems that was generally inhabited. Narima in fact was of huge strategic significance, close to the core worlds and well equipped with defences and shipyards but of ugliness it had an almost limitless supply.

Alia knocked and entered, "Admiral?"

Strandel turned his head to stare at his subordinate over his left shoulder, "Commander, what is going on out there?"

Alia relaxed somewhat, if Strandel wasn't shouting then he wasn't angry with her, not yet anyway. "Another corvette has been lost, also the battle on the surface for the generator at Frisintal appears to be over, not in a good way. Our Marines are starting to call for closer and closer fleet support but obviously

that's simply too dangerous." That was a lesson learnt with cost, in endeavouring to provide close protection to troops on the ground two destroyers had closed as low as they dared to the atmosphere of the planet, both had been destroyed from the ground by weapons smuggled onto the surface over the last few days or weeks, an intelligence failure it was generally called. Alia had thought for some time that rather too many tactical errors were blamed on bad intelligence but now was hardly the time to make that point. Strandel's little flotilla was undamaged as yet but who knew when the next 'intelligence failure' might occur? Wars hinged on who kept a steadier nerve, who made fewer mistakes, and too many mistakes had been made at Narima already. The battle shouldn't be happening right now, of course, it should have been futile for the enemy to even attempt landing on Narima, and yet they came.

A year or so earlier another prediction had missed its mark. Predictions that the main group of allied perimeter worlds would never be attacked because of the spectacular fortifications on Ebendale, one of those worlds, were just slightly off the mark. In fact the enemy just attacked Ebendale itself, crushing the most heavily defended point in the galaxy in a matter of hours, and doing so using just a few troops and some antiquated equipment. After the group had fallen expectations were that the core worlds would come under attack next and a huge fleet was recalled to defend them. This was the reason that the defence of Narima had essentially been left to the locals, tough and loyal allies but too few in number to resist a concerted effort. Actually this was trumpeted as increasing the security of Narima before the invasion made all such predictions look ridiculous, the theory was that since Narima could now be taken with a standard naval operation then that is exactly how the enemy would behave, the time required to execute such a mission should give sufficient time for a fleet to travel to Narima and prevent the landings. Of course the enemy didn't reason that way at all, they attacked stealthily, installing secret weapons on the surface

and hiding their actions, then when ready they began a surface offensive. Expecting an allied fleet response they had ensured that some of their weapons were suited to killing ships in orbit, others were suited to bringing down attacking fighters, an effective combination if you didn't know where they were sited in advance. The standard 'fly-by' tricks, trying to fool the weapon operators into firing at trivial targets so as to identify their positions, had largely failed; the enemy was disciplined and well trained.

Strandel's group of cruisers was a relatively late arrival to the party and with each flotilla commanded by a different officer and no clear chain of command the entire affair was descending into farce. Initially there had been positive reports, some marine landing ships had made the descent uneventfully and the soldiers carried into action that way were now heavily engaged, it now appeared that the marines had been permitted a safe landing by the gunners on the surface, however, attempts to reinforce had gone very badly and the soldiers on the ground were outnumbered and lacking support. Strandel was beginning to feel that the day couldn't get worse, he wasn't often wrong but even as he received his update from Alia the enemy was executing the next phase of their plan.

Captain Deltin was not having a bad day. His ship, the *Elegant*, had escorted Huntress on her first, and last, cruise years earlier but she was still a modern and efficient fighting ship, one of the most effective cruisers ever built. She was fast, had an experienced crew and while her weaponry was not especially powerful it wasn't bad enough to be considered a weakness. She had spent the last two days creeping towards Narima as stealthily as she could, hoping to surprise some unattended landing craft or a small carrier away from her

destroyers. Elegant had the nominal ability to outrun anything she couldn't outfight, an overused phrase but roughly true in her case, the only more powerful units that were also capable of nearly keeping up were the two sisters of the Sirius class, and they were part of his own navy, not of the Alliance fleet. With his sensors set to passive, not emitting any power at all, his ability to see around him was much reduced but he was periodically picking up the stray signals from other ships' sensors and this was enough to give him confidence that he remained undetected for the time being. Steadily he crept closer, looking for the telltale sensor pattern of a carrier transmitting a landing beacon to her fighters or a landing ship communicating with her boats. Tension aboard Elegant was high, it had been high for long enough that the crew were beginning to get fatigued and jumpy, no sailor liked the wait before battle much and these men and women had been waiting for days. A soft tone from the console in front of Deltin drew his attention, a stray signal had been detected again but this one was much more powerful, maybe powerful enough for the reflected pulse to travel back to the distant ship and put a small dot on their sensor console, enough to get them detected. Deltin had already decided what he would do in this situation and he quickly put his plan into action. Seconds later a second sensor pulse struck the Elegant, immediately all the sensors on board fired up at once, power was distributed to weapons and shields, then engines began to accelerate the eighteen thousand tonnes of cruiser towards the unknown enemy. It took just seconds for Elegant's sensors to identify what was out there and Deltin was extremely disappointed.

On the destroyer Gallant the bridge crew were largely relaxed, casting an occasional eye over the consoles in front of them. When a small dot appeared on the sensor-station screen the operator looked carefully but without much interest, it could be anything, a piece of junk or rock floating in space, nonetheless he was a professional so he increased the power of the sensors

slightly and focused the console on that part of its sweep that had generated the echo. It would be a few seconds before the next pulse so he took a sip of his drink before looking back. As the next pulse returned it was accompanied by a huge catalogue of signals, so many that the computer was still trying to separate and analyse them, he hit the alarm button beside his console and watched carefully as the information poured into his station.

"Damn it!" Deltin yelled. Two lousy destroyers and not a valuable target in sensor range, the Elegant must have blundered into a couple of pickets before reaching the main fleet. Still destroyers were ships too and the lovely Elegant had only one enemy ship painted on her hull, it was time to add more. "Open fire, all weapons, target one!"

'Target one' was actually the destroyer Caldera, and her bridge was reacting even more slowly than the Gallant's. Alarms rang through the ship, her captain ran to the bridge and leapt into his seat, he got there at the same time as the first salvo from Elegant. Elegant's weapons were designed to hit targets much further away than the distance between the two ships, moreover they could hit targets that were moving at great speed, Caldera was not moving at great speed and when the weapons reached the destroyer all eight main beams scored hits. Caldera didn't have much in the way of shields, nor did she carry any armour, the impacts were impressive. One of the incoming beams struck the slender shields at such an acute angle that it was entirely deflected, all the remaining seven slammed into the hull. One blew the main engine compartment to pieces, another tore through the fighter bay destroying everything there, another four hit the central hull, turning hull into molten droplets, killing all who were there, it was effectively complete destruction and a horrible thing for any captain to witness. Caldera's captain did not witness his ship's death though; he was still

getting into his chair as the eighth beam utterly destroyed the bridge. In two seconds Caldera was dead, not a sailor survived.

Without missing a second, Deltin ordered all weapons to fire on target two.

Gallant was rather luckier; she had time to begin rapid manoeuvres to evade incoming fire and time to begin firing her own weapons. Her weapons were unlikely to do much damage to the huge cruiser before her though. The communications officer on the bridge sent out a hurried message indicating the situation, he then transmitted the last position of the Caldera in case other ships could attempt a rescue, he didn't know quite how badly she had been hit. As the first beams from *Elegant* missed *Gallant*, Captain Forten plotted an evasive course, twisting and turning but always towards *Elegant*, trying to get to the range where his small battery of anti-ship missiles could be deployed, sweat poured down his face and the sudden changes of direction made focusing on the job at hand extremely difficult. Amazingly one of the bridge crew was singing an obscene song popular amongst sailors and revolving around the adventures of a young woman visiting a destroyer for a day, steadily all the other bridge crew joined in, even the women.

Three salvos had been fired at target two and still no hits achieved, Deltin didn't like to do it but he ordered his weapons to fire a spread pattern, it would increase the chances of a hit much as a shotgun outperforms a rifle, but similarly it would make the hit much less potent.

Gallant jerked sideways with a shuddering spasm, throwing half of the bridge crew from their posts. They picked themselves up hurriedly and began repeating damage information to Captain Forten. They were hurt, but not stopped and the shaded line on Forten's console indicating when they could fire their missiles

was getting closer every second. Another hit was received and yet they kept going, the destroyer was becoming difficult to control. The moment they were in range Forten turned the ship to unmask his first battery of missiles. The hum running through the ship as each missile fired was unmistakable to an experienced crewman and a small cheer accompanied each launch.

"Missiles Sir!" A crewman yelled as soon as the launch was made. Deltin stared at the console before him. Not enough missiles had been fired, the destroyer had only fired half her payload, either she had fired to give her time to escape while Elegant dealt with the new threat or she had fired at extreme range and needed to turn before firing her next batch to maximize the fuel carried within each lethal weapon. As Deltin watched for developments a second group of missiles left the destroyer.

Deltin nodded to himself, "Helm, increase the distance between us, those missiles are on the extreme edge of their endurance." Elegant may have been big but she was agile, it took just moments to get a respectable speed up.

Aboard Gallant there was cheering on the bridge. "She's running away!" Someone yelled. Forten knew better, those missiles were unlikely to hit now. It was time for a decision; with the distance stretching between the ships Gallant had a chance of getting outside Elegant's range and reaching the safety of other, larger, ships. Doing so would leave Elegant on the edge of the fleet, unopposed and unharmed, free to change course unnoticed and approach the fleet from another side. Elegant had the speed and the weapons to make another attack somewhere else and next time she might get lucky and hit a really important target. No decision at all really.

"Chase her! Full Speed! Let's get as close as we can while she's busy with the missiles!" The bridge crew knew what the order meant but they jumped to obey, there was a chance, just a chance that they might destroy the larger ship and become heroes to all those at home.

Deltin watched with heart racing as the missiles, one by one, disappeared from his console as they ran out of fuel and sped past the cruiser, unable to steer. As the last one vanished he turned his attention back to the destroyer, now closing fast. The two ships fired at each other, both scoring a hit. On Elegant the impact was easily absorbed in the shields, Deltin hoped his shot had achieved more.

The extractors slowly cleared the bridge of smoke but even a casual glance across the bridge of Gallant would indicate that the ship was terminally ill. There was a whistling sound as vital air escaped from somewhere nearby, venting into vacuum. The crewmembers that were still moving closed their suits and bent to their task. Forten's number one looked up at him. "Sir?" Forten coughed slightly, adjusting to the sudden change in pressure. "Can we steer at her?"

The young officer, barely twenty years old grinned across her face. "My life on it sir!"

Without waiting for a formal instruction she programmed the helm and unnecessarily shouted across the bridge, "Ramming speed!"

Deltin watched the destroyer close in. "Fire at will, soften the shields, brace for impact!"

The shields were extended so their influence began much further from the hull, while this reduced their effectiveness at absorbing energy it would permit them to resist much more momentum before they broke, they were now tougher than they were hard. Several more hits were scored on the destroyer before impact but none stopped the collision and a collision it was. As the shields parted the bow of Gallant struck the armoured hull of Elegant with a force that still no lightweight warship could match by any other means. The impact shuddered along the hull for a distance vibrating the compartments inside the cruiser and causing hundreds of minor injuries. Still, the armour held. As the destroyer buckled and split pressurized cabins blasted outwards peppering the cruiser with high-speed debris and still the armour held. It was soon over. Amazingly there were a few survivors from Gallant, they were picked up and taken to be treated aboard Elegant. Deltin had a decision to make. Should he proceed in, try and catch a larger prey, or should he withdraw. He knew his enemies were coming for him; perhaps he could do more good by running than by fighting.

Strandel's flotilla of four ships had left the main fleet at Narima and was travelling as fast as they could to intercept Elegant. His crews remembered the loss of the huge battlecruiser Lion to that very ship and they would dearly love to make amends. As always Captain Salin's Invincible was the fastest of the four, stretching out ahead of the other ships and cheerfully calling his crew's parentage into question as he urged them to work harder, faster, better all the time. On the Formidable, Captain Marik was a different character altogether, quiet and thoughtful, always thinking ahead, he was communicating with fleet headquarters to announce their rate of movement and expected arrival time at the position where Caldera died. Renal, new captain of the Illustrious, was different again, quick and decisive, scientific in his method, understanding to

his men. Admiral Strandel commanded his own flagship, Excellent. Still probably the finest cruiser in the Allied inventory she was far smaller than the Elegant but packed a not dissimilar punch. As the four ships swept past the wreckage of two Allied destroyers they were not to know that they would not catch the Elegant, only Invincible was even going fast enough to do so and they were much too far behind.

A conflict of a different sort was coming to a head aboard one of the Allied carriers at Narima. After losing a few of her fighters, the captain of the Guardian had suspended flight operations, overruling his FCO in the process. He argued that without sufficient fighter complement his ship was in danger and that they couldn't risk committing more to the battle below. The disagreement became acrimonious and the FCO was sent to his quarters under guard as the fighters were reclaimed. As she was now useless for the battle itself, the fleet commander ordered Guardian home, providing two destroyers, Terrific and Tangent, as escort. A carrier actually had more than enough ability to protect herself usually using only her fighters but carriers were valuable so the escort was sensible. If it surprised either of the destroyer captains when setting out that no fighters were operating outside the Guardian then they didn't mention it.

The battleship Sirius was not huge by battleship standards, she and her sister massed just thirty-six thousand tonnes, but she was fast. Her main weakness was armament, carrying weaponry that was too light to be considered of the latest type but her speed and impressive armour made her a serious foe. She and her sister were approaching Narima on a course between the battle and the Allied core worlds. Hopefully they might see some troopships or easy

transports. Practically nothing could kill the sisters and of those few that could, absolutely nothing could outrun them. When the report came in that a battlecruiser, escorted by two destroyers, was coming into range a tough choice needed to be made quickly. A battlecruiser was a risk, often carrying powerful weapons and the Sirius was far from safe space. Moments later the call came through. No battlecruiser but the carrier Guardian was their opponent. Immediately Sirius and Gryphon prepared to attack.

Terrific noticed it first, a tiny spot on the sensor console. Her sensor operator informed the other ships of the fleet as a matter of routine. The captain of the Guardian ordered a fighter to investigate, only then did he realise that he had not ordered any launched. Frantically he issued instructions to the fighter bay.

The moment Sirius had enough data for an accurate shot she opened fire. Never in the entire history of warfare had such a long range shot succeeded, not only was this a success it was a stunning one. Six of Sirius' nine main beams found their target. One of them destroyed part of the fighter bay on the carrier. Guardian wouldn't launch fighters this battle. While Sirius hammered Guardian with shot after shot, Gryphon fired on the two destroyers. The two smaller ships charged with all the spirit shown by Gallant just hours earlier, but a cruiser was a very different proposition to a battleship. Both destroyers were obliterated before they got within range to fire their missiles. The relentless thundering of weaponry into Guardian at once intensified as both battleships could focus their attention upon her. Guardian was lost with all hands faster than anyone would have believed possible.

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Commander Alia knocked tentatively on Strandel's cabin door and entered. Strandel listened to the reports from Narima with a fixed expression then nodded silently and waved Alia away. It hadn't been the Navy's day and Narima was now lost as well.

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Chapter 2: Cerberus Unleashed

Two years after the loss of Narima and the war in space was going well. Once fighting took to the planet surface the enemy were easily holding their own but Allied forces dominated the space-lanes. Not that it was all one sided, small raiders were still sneaking into the convoys of merchantmen vital for the Allied war effort and larger ships were threatening despite being rarely used. In particular the huge sister of the long defeated Huntress still remained, berthed at Narima and heavily defended. More pressing every day, though, was the pair of Sirius class battleships remaining at Baresti, one of the former Allied perimeter worlds. At any moment they could decide to move into the shipping lanes and if they did there wasn't much that could stop them. Strandel's cruisers had just finished three months of duty watching Baresti in case of a sudden departure. Not that his ships could genuinely stop the battleships if they decided to move. Soon after relinquishing the repetitive monitoring job to another flotilla word had been passed around the fleet that the enemy cruiser Elegant had joined the two battleships at Baresti, brushing past the blockade designed to interfere with such moves. It must have seemed suicidal to the local flotilla commander that his fleet was designed to stop two battleships but in reality couldn't stop one cruiser. Still no concerted movement was detected from the enemy at Baresti and shifts changed several times before Strandel's group were back in position taking their turn.

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Commander Alia had found her Admiral increasingly subdued over the few days they'd been guarding the approaches to Baresti. Strandel had argued that this was a foolish way to run a war; he favoured either striking hard at Baresti to destroy the ships where they were or simply ignoring them and dealing with them when and if they made an appearance. His comments had been rejected by Fleet Command and the experience didn't help his mood. When Alia entered Strandel's quarters he waved her irritably to a seat and continued scowling through the viewing port at Baresti.

"It's like watching a kennel, Alia, don't you think?"

Alia nodded, "Some dog!"

Strandel snorted. "Cerberus, in fact. Three heads and vicious as they come."

There was silence for a while before Strandel tore his eyes away from the scene outside and sat scowling in his seat.

Alia began her report, trivial details easily handled by the officers on each ship, a few items of news that were irrelevant to their mission, a whole lot of nothing. Alia usually managed to find something light-hearted to finish her briefings, this time it was the winner of the limerick writing competition on Invincible, one of many strategies that captains, especially Salin, used to keep morale up in their crews.

*"An Illustrious roll in the hay,
was wearing Invincible stays,
with Formidable pliers,
I sliced through those wires,
and had quite an Excellent day!"*

Strandel chuckled, all the tension leaving his face. "Very good indeed. I understood we were going to have a similar competition on Excellent?"

Alia nodded, "We were, but it seems that all the entries are, how did the bosun put it, 'unconducive to morale improvement'. We didn't want any of them read aloud."

"Were they anarchistic?"

"Obscene, mostly, especially those submitted by the female members of your crew, Sir. My effort was considered particularly twisted."

At that second alarms began to sound throughout the ship and without a word both officers charged towards the bridge.

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On board Sirius the captain was concentrating on keeping his three ships together as they left Baresti at speed. On the face of it this was a poor time to attempt a breach in the blockade, four quality cruisers with experienced crews were waiting outside commanded by one of the very best in the business, however it was felt that this very fact would play into the hands of those waiting to break out since it seemed likely that other forces would be on their lowest alert for precisely this reason. If the blockade could be run then there might be little further resistance. Careful preparations to ensure surprise seemed to be paying off but those cruisers had been blooded in some major battles and they wouldn't remain sluggish for long.

Strandel was delighted as he entered the bridge to see that the necessary preparations for combat were already well underway. As he strapped himself into his seat a senior officer began briefing him rapidly, standing to one side so as not to impede the Admiral's view of the console in front of him. Strandel watched the enemy rapidly approach and then veer off onto a course that would roughly take them back to their own territory and outside Strandel's reach for the time being at least. Strandel opened his mouth to order weapons fired but even as he did so the first salvo left Excellent heading for the closest enemy ship, the gigantic Gryphon. As the first hits were scored Strandel looked at the console, smiling slightly as he saw that Salin's Invincible had once again beaten everyone to the punch and fired first of the flotilla, achieving some hits on Elegant. Strandel was the first to notice the peculiar way in which the enemy turn had been carried out, like a special formation was being attempted, he was also the first to spot the consequences of that turn. He yelled across the bridge, "Evasive action, now!" It was too late.

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In Sirius the weapons officer had completed his move to unmask the main battery for a maximum power shot, he knew his gunners were good and he also knew those on Gryphon and Elegant wouldn't let the side down, for a brief instant every main weapon on all three ships lined up to fire at the largest of the enemy cruisers.

As the engines on Excellent began to turn and accelerate the cruiser the salvo arrived. Every shot found its target, eighteen battleship and eight cruiser beams slammed into the hull at the same moment destroying everything in their path. A variety of lighter beams were fired at the same moment taking advantage of the destroyed shields and wrecked armour of Strandel's flagship.

Captain Marik looked on in horror as Excellent seemed to glow bright blue in the darkness ahead, he knew the ship had nothing that could resist such an attack and though all the other Allied cruisers were still firing there was little evidence of real damage caused. In less than a second the Excellent had stopped being a warship and become a lifecraft for any survivors instead. The enemy ships were still accelerating, confident of their escape now,

Salin was transmitting a request to Marik and it took several seconds for the question to sink in, let alone provide an answer.

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Aboard Invincible, Salin opened up the intercom as soon as he'd finished issuing new orders. "Crew of the Invincible. Our flagship appears to be badly hurt and it is our responsibility to pursue the enemy along with Illustrious. We all feel sadness at the inevitable losses among our friends but our best hope is to stay in contact with the enemy and direct all the power at our disposal against them until revenge is ours. I know you won't fail."

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Marik breached several of the rules governing safe ship manoeuvring in getting Formidable alongside Excellent as fast as possible, grapples were fired, rescue teams suited up and the grim, unlovely business of rescue began in earnest. Excellent looked in terrible shape even to the most casual observer, huge holes had been torn in her flanks, she was dark and tumbling slightly making her look truly dead, still as details became clearer hope began to surface in the minds of the rescuers as the hits on the cruiser seemed to have been extremely precise. The gunners on the three enemy ships had a reputation for accuracy born from the remarkable shots achieved in previous battles and they had struck Excellent precisely where they wanted to. The engines were destroyed, so were those weapons housed on the attacked flank, shields had been utterly eliminated but the main crew compartments and the bridge had not been targeted. Working with great speed, the rescue parties crossed the gap between the ships and began attaching umbilicals to the hull of Excellent. Inside the umbilicals hatches were popped and relieved crew scrambled across to safety. Marik went down to see the survivors as they came across, clapping the uninjured on their shoulders, helping to hand out the drinks and blankets. It was some minutes before Commander Alia appeared at one of the entrances and she had clearly been through the wars. Her uniform was torn to ribbons across her back, her face and arms cut, bruised and burned, her hair was halfway between dishevelled and destroyed, she was limping with blood gently seeping from a wound on her right knee but she was not only alive but smiling. As soon as she reached safety she shrugged off attempts to help her and instead joined in the task of helping the other survivors. Marik thought she had never looked uglier, never looked more magnificent. He wandered over to ask her about Strandel, she knew nothing of him, worry must have crossed Marik's face because with a brilliant grin Alia thumped him on the arm and said, "He'll be the last man off anyway, I didn't expect to see him yet."

Sure enough Strandel appeared, the very last man rescued, entirely unhurt though wearing an expression of someone who had been slightly offended. He ordered Alia to the sickbay when she was still claiming perfect health and walked past his sombre crew scattered through the passages talking quietly to many of them on his way to Marik's quarters. Once in the quarters he asked to use the ship's intercom to make an announcement.

"Firstly, on behalf of myself and my crew, I wish to thank the crew of the Formidable for their most timely and professional aid. All my crews know they belong to a family, they know that we fight, work and play as a family, they know that in time of trouble we help each other like a family. Our family would never abandon us, never shrink from a duty, however dangerous, our family honours us, today and every day." He paused. "Crew of the Excellent. For today, our ship is spent. I swear she will be repaired, she will be ours again and there is not one member of her crew I would not unfailingly defend as essential to her performance once she needs us again. She is also family. Sadly she cannot avenge her own injury, she is hurt too badly for that, today we have to leave it to our family to avenge our loss, as I speak the Invincible and Illustrious are chasing down the enemy, I know we all wish them every success. Right now many of you are despondent, unhappy, depressed. I understand. We lost our beautiful ship, we have lost many of her crew as well today, we feel lost and want to find a hole to crawl into and lick our wounds. Remember you still stand upon a warship, one that even now is following her sisters hoping to catch the battle to come. We cannot hide ourselves in misery, our family still needs us. We have no duty stations on this ship but many of us can relieve those who do, those of us who are uninjured can take over the responsibilities of caring for the sick to release Formidable's crew to their jobs. We can man weapons, repair equipment, fuel vehicles. We can do everything in our power to make this ship even more efficient, even more smoothly run, even more formidable. If you are hurt, seek treatment, if you are unhurt, offer treatment, we sail for battle, flank speed!"

As the intercom was turned off, the muffled sound of cheering could be heard from all parts of the ship. Marik smiled, "Good speech, they'll attack the Sirius with their teeth given half a chance."

Strandel looked back out of tired eyes. "It's manipulation, pure and simple, I need them to be warriors for a while yet. I will pick them up, brush them down, put fire in their hearts and send them to die. It's what I've always done."

There was a knock on the cabin door; it opened to reveal Commander Alia, slightly bandaged, mostly grinning. "Reporting for certain death, sir!" Strandel patted her gently on her least damaged shoulder. "I can use you here, calculate strategies that allow three light cruisers to fight two battleships and a heavy cruiser and win without any loss of life."

Alia thought for a moment. "I can do this one, one of the battleships is a fish and the other one's a cat, am I right?"

Marik laughed and handed her a drink.

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They caught the other two cruisers just five hours later. Invincible had taken a heavy blow making her unable to pursue and Illustrious had reluctantly broken off the chase. Salin, his arm immobilised and speaking oddly through a broken jaw sat with Strandel and Marik aboard Formidable as report after report came in from other units. No sighting, no sighting, no sighting. After a few days it was clear. The three enemy ships had slipped clean away.

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Chapter 3: The Sirius Rampage

Two years had passed since Excellent's loss at Baresti. With a smile twitching across his face Strandel walked her decks once more. She was ready, freshly repaired for command once again. Followed by a small entourage of ships personnel he walked into the Captain's cabin breathing deeply as he did. He was surprised to see another man there.

The man jumped to his feet, dropping the report he'd been reading. "Admiral, I apologise, I was unaware you were aboard."

Strandel smiled indulgently. "Not at all, Captain, I thought you hadn't arrived yet. How do you like your command?"

Captain Dervis quickly responded. "She's magnificent, sir. Beautiful, well designed, well maintained. I've met my senior officers and they seem an extremely good group, on a ship such as this the step-up from frigates doesn't seem so hard after all."

Strandel nodded. "Some of your crew are throwbacks to when she was mine. I found those men and women to be some of the best I ever commanded. I just have one piece of advice. The Excellent handles best when attacking. Throw her at the enemy with vigour and panache and she will never let you down, if you skulk around the edges of battle she becomes disillusioned and crotchety, like a cat denied her kill."

Dervis clearly knew such comments were figurative, after all ships don't have opinions, but the point was well taken, he had developed a reputation for cautious aggression in frigates that seemed well suited to the tactics of cruiser battles, he would ride Excellent like the warship she was meant to be, not hide and protect her from the ravages of war. "Thank you sir," he said.

Strandel refused the offer of a meal aboard his old ship and quickly crossed the terminal to his new command. The Dragon was a magnificent vessel, brand new and a battleship in every sense. Armed with ten extremely powerful main beams and a huge array of lesser weapons she would easily be the most impressive ship he'd ever commanded. Still as Dragon slipped her moorings and threw herself into space he found himself watching the shrinking form of Excellent.

"Reminiscing, sir?" Alia stood behind him, a half smile on her face.

"Yes. We were a good team, that ship and I."

"With respect sir, you weren't a team at all, the ship was an extension of your will, nothing more. Excellent was you."

Strandel turned. "Does this mean you now believe that I'm a dragon?"

Alia looked thoughtful. "I think there's little doubt about it. You've always been a dragon. Now your personality has slightly more force behind it."

Shortly outside the dock Dragon was joined by her escort cruisers, Invincible and Illustrious. As the ships moved off in formation the Captains of the two smaller ships travelled across to the battleship to be briefed on their mission. As meetings went it was extremely high level. Kemel Tische, Captain of Dragon, Strandel and Alia, Salin of the Invincible and Renal of the Illustrious, the same man who had commanded the Implacable at Mari and in the Huntress chase.

After the usual chat and catch-up, Strandel brought the meeting to order. "Gentlemen, and Commander, most of us here are old friends. Captain Tische is new to our circle but I'm sure he will soon be as close to us as we are to each other. I have good news. A month ago a strike by our allies wrecked the enemy battleship Gryphon at anchor. She is so badly damaged that her main weapons have been taken off and are now being used to defend the dock where she rests. She is no longer a threat. In response to this action the battleship Sirius has been sent out and threatens our vital sea-lanes off Narima. We are the group tasked with catching and killing her."

There was a general change of mood towards the positive as Strandel spoke. He looked around at the excited faces and continued. "Sirius has a bit of a history, doesn't she? She destroyed the Guardian at Narima, wrecked my Excellent at Baresti and practically shot the Implacable away from under Captain Renal, here, without even asking for permission. Well I have a new ship, so does Renal. Salin has a ship that was at Narima and at Baresti. It's time for vengeance. We will shadow the east of our main space, just west of the open shipping lanes waiting for Sirius. When she comes we will destroy her, she is a target like any other and she can be beaten like any other. We have two cruisers, both faster than Sirius, and we have a battleship more heavily armed than Sirius. She is quick, well armoured and her skipper has a fine reputation. Well we have skippers here with fine reputations, and we have

the best our navy can provide. Intelligence suggests that Sirius will be unescorted when she attacks so I have asked Alia to draw up a strategy. Commander?"

Alia stood to explain. "Sirius will be hoping to avoid ships the size of Dragon, in fact even cruisers will make her think twice, she will hope to brush past destroyers protecting a convoy and destroy the merchantmen as fast as she can. We shadow the most likely convoys from the west, splitting our forces in a north-south line, spread over some distance, with Dragon in the middle. As soon as we get a contact report we all turn east. Dragon goes to the aid of the convoy, splitting Sirius away from her targets, as she flees the cruisers pass her on each flank and turn in to intercept. In the confusion we hope to get enough time to damage her and slow her. If she can be caught by Dragon it's only a matter of time."

That meeting seemed so long ago now, weeks of patrolling, following slow convoy after slow convoy were taking a toll on the crews of Strandel's flotilla. Strandel was impatient as well, more so every day. It would have eased his nerves had he known how close Sirius was.

Sirius had received intelligence from a fighter sweep about a convoy passing Narima. Seventy vessels with just six destroyers in escort, perfect. Captain Larser was watching screens intently looking for a trap as he approached. The destroyers were taking it in turns to activate their active sensors, the remainder listening passively for signals from outside, a sound strategy if the enemy didn't have much time. Sirius had shadowed the convoy for hours, plenty of time to pick up the location of every warship in the convoy. There was dead quiet on the bridge as Larser raised his hand. He dropped it in a chopping motion and the giant warship accelerated smoothly towards the targets ahead.

An alarm rang on Strandel's desk. Alia entered to explain what was going on.

"Sir, the convoy is under attack, it's early to say but the suggestion is that the Sirius is the likely aggressor."

Strandel nodded. "Your evidence for that assertion?"

Alia glanced at the report she held. "Three destroyers are already lost, another two badly damaged, I can't imagine anything other than Sirius making such an entrance."

Larser watched another graphic on his console flash red and disappear. Half the convoy and all the escorts had been engaged and destroyed in minutes. He smiled grimly as Sirius

changed direction to pursue two merchantmen trying to escape west. They wouldn't make it; it would only be moments before the battleship could open fire. Suddenly a new contact appeared on the edge of the screen to the west, based on its sensors it was quickly identified as the battleship Dragon. It was too far away and too slow to catch Sirius. Larser ordered a fast retreat to the east. He knew he was faster than the battleship behind him and he was well outside useful weapons range.

Strandel watched the fleeing Sirius on his screens. The entire trap depended on the two cruisers getting within launch range before Sirius escaped the sensor range of Dragon. Seconds counted by slowly, the cruisers didn't appear on the sensor screen because they were smaller than Sirius, produced a smaller echo, and Sirius was almost at the maximum detection range even for her great size.

As well as the pursuing Dragon, the screens on Sirius were filled with reflected signals from scattering merchant vessels, running from the convoy route in panic. Without warning two of them turned from grey to amber on the screen. Larser looked at his weapons officer.

The young woman nodded and walked over to brief him. "Sir, it appears that those two vessels are likely to be warships, they are matching our course, though slightly convergent, and they are much too fast for typical merchants."

Larser thought for a moment. "Destroyers?"

WeapO responded with a shake of her head, "They aren't emitting, we're picking them up purely actively, at that range they have to be cruiser-size vessels."

Larser nodded, "OK, Weps, listen closely. They can't track us with their sensors down, they're trying to sneak up on us, they're being steered by Dragon's massive sensor systems. Dragon is Strandel's command so he's going to be smart and sudden. The attack will be a salvo of deadhead missiles launched with heading data only, the moment those cruisers fire up their sensors it will be because the missiles are extremely close, seconds from detonation. Put all our defensive systems on alert, give every gramme of thrust to the engines and turn off our active sensors. Launch a cloud of fighters around Sirius and put all their sensors on active. All clear?"

WeapO nodded, "Yes sir. But even after we're outside skin-paint range they'll still be able to use their missiles, they must be close to launch and we don't have time to hide."

Larser waved her away.

Alia walked over to Strandel. "Sir, Sirius has launched fighters, all with sensors active, she's also turned off her own sensors."

Strandel smiled, after all he's never thought Larser would be a foolish opponent. "Larser's seen the cruisers. He wants to prevent them using his own sensors to guide in the missiles. It doesn't matter, even though we've got no skin-paint tell the cruisers to fire at the middle of the fighters, when they turn on their sensors they'll get the paint needed for final guidance."

Aboard Invincible Captain Salin was in a nightmare world. His ship was being steered into danger without any information on what they would face. Like walking across a minefield while blindfolded with only a distant friend shouting instructions through a loudhailer to guide him safely across. Obviously Illustrious was in the same position, though on the other side of the Sirius, only the small detections of the fighter cloud showed where Sirius was, with the distance between Sirius and Dragon growing all the time even Strandel's mighty ship had no direct 'skin-paint' any more. At the moment signalled by a message from Strandel the almost silent bridge vibrated several times as Invincible threw her missiles, unguided, to the enemy battleship. Seconds before impact, as late as possible, the cruisers would fire up their sensors to get that elusive skin-paint and guide the missiles the last few moments of their journey. With luck Sirius would not have the time to react.

Identical scenes were played out aboard Illustrious, then came the waiting. The flight time for the missiles wasn't really all that long but it seemed to take forever before Renal shouted, "Sensors up!" It was the last intelligible command he would ever give. The two cruisers' sensors illuminated the centre of the fighter cloud between them, also detecting, classifying and taking control of the missiles just as they entered the cloud. There was no target. Sirius was not in the middle of the cloud, she'd slipped out of it and sneaked off somewhere while her enemies had been so confident they knew where she was they didn't even bother to get the skin-paint. Renal quickly looked across all the screens, maybe Sirius hadn't made her escape from sensor range quite yet, perhaps all was not lost. The most cursory glance proved outright that escape was not the enemy's priority. Memories of Karil San where Sirius had destroyed Implacable flitted across Renal's mind as he opened his mouth to order the sensors shut down and evasive action taken but it was already too late, far too late.

Captain Larser saw the appearance of the two cruisers on his passive sensor arrays, the moment the cruisers lit up to guide the missiles in, he'd intended to be close to the first of them but he was closer than he had predicted. The cruiser filled the tactical screen, he could have scored hits by opening a hatch and throwing fruit at it, it was so close. Without activating his own sensors weapons aboard Sirius tracked in on the invisible light show in front of them, beams, missiles, everything fired at once. The main view port at the front of the bridge was suddenly filled with visible things as metal glowed, exploded, tore. A series of explosions rocked the Illustrious from her stern, rushing fantastically quickly towards her bow. In seconds the beautiful new cruiser was merely a shipping hazard. No small craft has been launched. WeapO turned to her Captain. "All hands, sir, all hands."

On the Dragon, Captain Tische turned to Strandel. "Invincible reports no contact with enemy, Illustrious must have found the same because she's already shut down her sensors."

Strandel looked up. "What do you mean, no contact?"

Alia looked up from where she was standing next to the Captain, "Sirius wasn't in the fighter cloud, she vanished."

Strandel leaned back in his chair, "Instruct the cruisers to come back towards us, Sirius is a dangerous enemy, especially if we're spread out like this."

Moments later Alia walked over. "Invincible is coming in now, there's no response from Illustrious."

"Oh, no," Strandel said, "tell Salin to keep his sensors on, I don't want him jumped by that monstrous thing out there."

Invincible was emitting as though emission was the stuff of life itself, as well as all her sensors she was in constant contact now with Dragon and broadcasting unanswered messages to Illustrious. Salin couldn't help the feeling that they were running into danger, Sirius was not as fast as they but with her sensors off she would see them long before they saw her, moreover it wouldn't be a leap of genius to work out their likely course. The sensor screen was covered in echoes of different sizes, wreckage, surviving merchants still crawling from the battlefield, natural phenomena and potentially, one of those could be Sirius, lurking silently close to their course. The bridge crew bent to their tasks with fervent concentration, looking constantly for any object that changed course or had a power signature. One of the merchants had a beacon going, identifying it to avoid mistakes, it took Salin crucial seconds

to realise that instructions were from merchants to turn off their beacons so as to prevent easy detection of the convoy. Of course it could be a merchant deciding that with Sirius gone there was now more risk in not being found but Salin sorely doubted it. He decided to spook them and ordered all his weapon systems to illuminate the alleged merchant to see what happened.

"We're being targeted!" The cry echoed across Sirius' bridge.

Larser smiled. "If they knew who we were they'd have already opened fire, they're just guessing."

The WeapO looked at him calmly. "It's a good guess though sir, isn't it?"

Salin looked across the bridge of Invincible. "Any reaction?"

General shakes of heads. "No, sir, I guess they're a merchant after all."

Salin grinned, "Of course they aren't. A merchant would be signalling us right now demanding to know what we think we're doing. It's the Sirius. Record the current firing solution, turn off sensors and launch."

One of the bridge officers stood. "How long before impact do we reactivate sensors sir?"

Salin was still grinning, "We don't reactivate, I'm playing a new game this time and if he's got more weapons, more shields, more sensors, more crew, more power and more experience then we'll just see if that helps him when we're fighting with bayonets in the dark."

On Sirius there was a sigh of relief when the sensors were pulled off. Larser knew better. "They've fired! Evade and accelerate, they've even turned off their main sensors, launch dead-head back along the same target track, illuminate five seconds before impact."

Invincible was moving fast and in sweeping curves, evading constantly but always moving towards the Sirius, with luck they'd get close before the battleship's sensors were activated and they were frozen like a moth in a searchlight beam. Maybe close enough to do some real damage. Salin couldn't see a disadvantage in his current position. Both Captains knew where their enemy had been but neither knew where he was, the first of them to fire-up

sensors would detect the other but simultaneously reveal his own position, it was a dangerous game but exciting to play.

Five seconds before the predicted impact Sirius' sensors ignited, in seconds every object in near space had been detected, it would take a few more seconds to identify them. The wait seemed interminable but within a few heartbeats Invincible was plotted, too far away from her last-known position to steer the missiles at her but well within beam range. Now the ships could fight toe to toe, something rather one-sided when one of the ships would fit in the other's cargo bay.

Salin ordered everything to open fire together, every shot had to count against their massive foe. His crew were widely renowned as the best in the fleet, fast, efficient, dedicated; they would need to draw on every gramme of professionalism they possessed. His weapons teams fired the first two salvos unopposed to the sound of raucous cheers from his crew, solid hits, practically every shot useful. There was a small wait for Sirius to begin firing but when she did she unleashed something out of a fireman's nightmare. Beam after beam slammed into Invincible, missiles sped lethally into the shields and worst of all, the salvo didn't end, the relentless fire was not a single massive hit but the beginning of a continuous fire sequence. Invincible did her very best to live up to her name, she fought on and on, even attempting to get close enough to ram but with damaged engines the craft was less nimble than her enemy and the battleship skipped neatly away still firing intensely. After nearly half an hour Invincible was defeated. No useful offensive capability remained, her engines were wrecked and her defences barely enough to hold the hull together. Salin, mouth dry, ordered his wonderful ship abandoned.

Dragon was close and closing, not quite in weapons range but if Invincible could keep the Sirius busy for just a few minutes more then battle could be joined. It wasn't to be. The shout of "Spalling!" echoed across the bridge as sensors showed Invincible's crew taking to the vacuum of space in anything that could contain one delta-bar. The engines on the distant Sirius fired and as Invincible began to break up her nemesis began to accelerate away. Strandel punched his hand in frustration and closed his eyes, desperately trying to think of anything else that could be done.

Alia stepped over with half a smile, "Admiral, Sirius is slower than she was."

Strandel's eyes snapped open like camera shutters. "How much slower?"

Alia put the figures up on his console. "Slow enough."

It was still four hours before Dragon closed to within range of Sirius but even before the order could be given to open fire Sirius changed course and charged full-speed at Dragon. Obviously their distant enemy was unhappy at the thought of taking damage from the huge weapons aboard her pursuer while still being out of range of her own weapons. That band of luxury for Strandel was extremely narrow and Sirius crossed it in minutes. Both ships now pounded each other, Dragon slowly trying to retreat, Sirius trying to close. Lashing each other with their vast power proved to be futile while the shields held, but they didn't hold for long. Sirius was actually better shielded than Dragon, though her protection had taken something of a beating from Invincible already, Dragon had the more powerful beams but a less experienced crew and a newer ship. The battle could be considered fairly even. For two hours it looked like that, there seemed to be a chance that the two opponents would fight each other into dust; Strandel had an image of battling lifecraft as the two battleships hammered each other continuously. It was two lucky hits that swayed the battle. Firstly Dragon scored a perfect strike on one of the main beam turrets on Sirius, destroying it, suddenly Dragon could expect a large reduction in the incoming fire intensity, a full third of Sirius' weapons were out of action. Sure enough the battle inexorably swung towards the larger ship, despite the dust and sparks inside the bridge of Dragon there was a lightening of mood, they were going to win.

Sirius fired the second lucky shot. Moments before her ability to fight at all was completely destroyed she landed three of her main beams squarely on Dragon's bridge. Alia was hurrying back to the bridge when she was thrown off her feet, she picked herself up and continued. The centre of Dragon's command and control was wrecked. The pressure seals had worked but other than atmosphere there was little to commend the environment as a working space. The deck had buckled and twisted up making the short journey from the aft entrance to the central comm and helm an exercise in hill walking, cables and jagged metal hung from the ceiling, surrealist stalactites to avoid at cost.

Alia worked her way to the command chair, hoping to find Strandel, find him she did but most of him wasn't in his chair any more. Half the bridge crew had been shredded by flying debris, as she turned to survey the scene she realised it would be amazing if she found anyone alive, not that it stopped her looking. Every few seconds the Dragon's weapons fired again at the now silent Sirius, one of the few screens still working showed the distant crippled battleship frozen in space, hugely magnified. Now and then explosions, more damage rippled across her flanks as though the image was being distorted. After minutes of

searching for signs of life among the bridge crew Alia began to make her way to the emergency bridge. As she did her eyes were drawn to the image of Sirius. Now dozens of lifecraft were spilling out of her, parts of the ship were glowing as fires ran out of control consuming the remnant oxygen storage aboard. The thrum of weapons firing caught her attention. Why was Dragon still firing? It was a rule of these affairs; if the enemy abandoned their ship then you gave them time to do so. At once she realised that the firing would continue until an order was given to stop, she slid and scrambled across the crazy floor to the nearest comm unit. It was not working. She tried one after another without success, tears streaming down her face, all the units were broken. As she moved to the door, attempting to make her way to a working comm unit she saw the final destruction of Sirius. A single titanic explosion turned warship into powder, like the largest firework ever seen. Sirius had been a beautiful vessel in life, her death was probably the most beautiful imaginable. The expanding ball of glowing metal crept outwards absorbing and destroying all the lifecraft that had launched from her. Still the regular thrum of weapons firing, now firing at nothing at all. Alia fell out of the destroyed bridge and curled up on the companionway outside, she pressed her hands against her ears and screamed.

After a month, the doctors pronounced her well; she was released from the plush facility at the naval station on Kobak Ri and spent her days in the parks and gardens. One day she went to see another officer on his way through, transiting to his new command. When she saw Captain Salin she threw her arms around him and held on as though he was the last solid thing in existence.

Later they sat. They talked and healed a little. Alia talked about Strandel, about his life and death. Eventually Salin put a hand on her shoulder and said, "We all die. Even Strandel was always going to die. What death would you choose for him? He died an Admiral, commanding a battle, and more than that, before he died he knew he was going to win. I should be that lucky."

Alia realised he was right, it was true, Strandel died as he had lived, she could even imagine the controlled triumphant smile on his face at the instant of death.

Later still they ate. Good food, though food on navy stations always has that slightly suspect flavour that regulars referred to as 'navy granules'. As Salin finished his meal he looked at the woman opposite him. "I have my new orders. I join the new battlecruiser Vanguard as her Captain. I need a good intel officer, are you interested?"

Alia thought for just a moment. She needed to feel the deck hum as the engines fired, she needed to use her mind to out-think opponents, she needed responsibility. "Captain, I would be honoured."

Salin grinned his infectious grin, the one that made his crews stare down the nightmares and never feel the fear, "Don't be honoured, be packed in two hours."

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