

The Fall & Rise Of The Colonial Empire

by

J. C. Rocks

[Part I: Fall](#)

[Part II: Rise](#)

[Part III: Retribution](#)

[Part IV: The Final Conflict](#)

[Epilogue](#)

The following story was originally set against a background of playing a PBEM (play-by-email) space strategy game called VGA Planets and published in VGAP's magazine, "The Planeteer" and "Planeteer Resurrected" (I acted as editor) but has subsequently been altered to stand better on its own ... whether you know or remember VGA Planets is largely irrelevant though some aspects might be slightly better if you did.

J. C. Rocks

Part I: Fall

Hey don't ask me? I don't know how it all really happened, all I know is I'm just some grunt (OK! OK! I'm a Captain) in the Colonial Space Defence Force and that my job is to carry out whatever orders my superiors see fit to give me as part of the great plan. Believe me I would too, if my commanding officer told me that I'd save a life by cutting my own head off ... I'd do it ... with a smile on my face!

I've seen the history archives, I guess you have too, but I was only 3 years old when the Gorn first appeared over our home planet. No one had seen them approach, they just suddenly appeared, in orbit, doing nothing & saying nothing ... speculation ran wild. After days of argument the leaders of The Democratic Council decided that a peace mission should be sent up to meet the newcomers (we had been beaming messages of welcome to the newcomers in various mathematical forms ever since their arrival) and, despite not being able to do so with any clarity, it is with pride that I "remember" my father, the man who captained the ship as emissaries to visitors from other worlds.

Within hours of the announcement Captain Janus H. Clarke had launched his ship skyward. The Gorn ship, a type now classified as a *Cobra* Class Cruiser, simply sat there, unmoved as *The SureFire* approached off her starboard bow, the Gorn ship totally ignorant of the glittering arrays of lights flickering across *SureFire's* hull in what, it was hoped, could only be a display of peace and friendship. For several hours the two ships sat alongside each other

a kilometre apart then suddenly Ground Control noted a surge of power building in the Gorn ships' shields and external systems as with easy grace it rotated towards our emissaries of peace. That *The SureFire* noticed was evident because orbital cameras recorded her moving to align her forward beams to the Gorn ship's position but the Gorn had had longer to prepare and locking their beams upon my father's ship opened fire with beam weapons, following up with the launch of three salvos of torpedoes. Now I don't know how good those Snakes were supposed to be but seven of the nine torps missed. One passed straight through *SureFire's* disc-shaped command & control deck and a second ploughed straight back through one of her new Nova Drive 5 nacelles. My father's ship shuddered and spun slowly out of control, the ground-based scanners unable to detect any signs of life or power in her as the *Cobra* moved close. The planetary defence systems launched several of their ground-based fighters but to no avail as they were effortlessly beamed out of existence by the Gorn ship's beam weapons.

All this time the peace-mission & following conflict had been televised by global networks and on the channel my mother had been watching, the announcer's voice shook as tears were rolled down his cheeks (you know the voice-over we always hear when we see death of *The SureFire* uploaded from archive).

My father's ship continued to spin slowly out of control and the *Cobra* approached to within a half a klick. Without warning, as she one more faced the ship and its Snake crew, two incredibly intense beams seared into existence completely overpowering the Gorn ship's shields and raking long slashes in the dura-steel of her hull. I mean, Christ, our beams were simply not that good, they must've overloaded each beam and traded an entire gun (and likely its crew) for a power shot at the enemy. On the planet below they say you could hear the cheers as the nations of the world rallied behind the crew of the crippled *Compatriot* class ship and they were not to be disappointed. Yet, as those terrible beams expired and the ship turned belly down from the *Cobra* twelve of *SureFire's* sixteen fighters erupted from her underside to viciously attack the now damaged Gorn ship. The Gorn ship turned still shuddering, the strain opening more huge rents in her hull, puffs of air & debris clouding the vacuum around her and began to move away from the *SureFire*. She flickered in & out of visibility but had sustained too much damage to re-engage her cloaking device and eventually, like a cornered rat she turned to face her tiny pursuers.

Flick! Flick! Flick! Flick! Four bright green beams licked out at the fighters wiping them out instantly but still the remaining eight pursued her, their beams punching holes through deck after deck of the larger ship's superstructure damaging sensor arrays and hull mounted weaponry. Flick! Flick! Only two beams this time but before she could fire again, one of the brave pilots (we'll never know who) got behind the *Cobra* and rammed his ship into one of its drive units ... they say the sky lit up so bright that the sun itself was out-shone.

The five remaining fighters had been winched back aboard *The SureFire* and she, with a measure of power restored, had began a sluggish turn homewards when around her space began to curdle & warp. As if from nowhere three more *Cobras* appeared and it only took a salvo of torpedo's from each to turn *The SureFire*, my father with her, into an ever-expanding cloud of dust & fragments.

Yet this was only the first part of the tragedy that befell our race that day. I mean, maybe it's because I'm in the CSDF that I feel so keenly the destruction of *The SureFire*, maybe because my father was in her, maybe I just cannot comprehend the enormity of the disaster that followed. Suffice it to say that the three Cobras began a systematic bombing of our homeworld. Bomb after bomb fell on base after base, city after city. Smaller craft flew with total disregard for any remaining Galaxtian Air Force, raking smaller communities with their fire, callously opening fire on refugee columns as they fled from their burning cities. They say over 2 billion died in that bombardment but many believe the numbers to be much higher ... the Gorn neither knew nor cared, but only after twelve hours did it cease and from every radio & TV the sibilant, hissing voice issue ... a voice striking terror into the hearts of everyone (I guarantee one three year old was absolutely terrified!):

"Humans! You and your planet are now a part of the Gorn Empire. You have paid dearly for your unprovoked attack on our sister ship the <unpronounceable> ...", (but it sounded something like the Slikkithik), "... and if any more attacks are mounted, successful or not, you will pay again!

"As serfs of the Gorn, you will work. Each revolution of this world will be broken up into 8 arn, each composed of 8 mancarn. You will work to mine the minerals you know as neutronium, deuterium, tritanium & molybdenum and you will pay tribute to our glorious leader, Emperor Shethrak of Gorn. You will work 6 arn each planetary day with 7 mancarn working and 1 mancarn resting. Your hatchlings will not be required to work until they reach adulthood.

"Those adults unable to work in the mines will be found work in factories to produce supplies and equipment required by the Gorn.

"But for every Gorn killed by humans we will execute 30 of your hatchlings & for every Gorn ship destroyed another of your cities will be obliterated

"Listen well, humans! Work hard and you will live! Work poorly or attack the Gorn and you will surely die!

"Message ends"

And with that message, two of the Cobras faded into space and disappeared.

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I looked through the visi-steel of the control deck of *The SureFire III* at the unwinking stars. A few hundred metres away I could see the huge towering wall that was one of the landing deck of the *Galaxtia's Revenge*, one of the new *Mk. II Virgo* Class Battlestars, fighters landing & taking off every few seconds. Further in the distance I saw the bright hard points of light of several of my Patriot fellows, few details visible at this distance. I could also see a *Mk*

II Scorpius Carrier in the distance ... and wondered what they would be like in combat, with five launch bays they would certainly be an improvement on the original two bay death-traps.

I had captained *The SureFire II* until her retirement six months ago, but had taken up my new command on the new *Mk. II Patriot* Class Carrier ... it had taken calls to Ramirez himself to ensure that my crew came with me ... but the old friendship had pulled it off. A *Mk II Patriot* ... mine ... I commanded her, I still hadn't fully adjusted to the fact that I, Captain Janus James Clarke, was captaining one of the nastiest little craft, with her six launch bays & twenty five fighters (my Father's ship, forerunner to *The Patriot* series, had had three and sixteen) transwarp drive and two heavy phasers, in the whole of the CSDF. Despite having so few beams, she was a mighty slick mover, and in the right hands, a dangerous opponent ... I only hoped that I was that pair of hands ... and besides, with the crew on full alert, she could get all twenty five fighter's space borne in under three seconds.

I snapped suddenly out of my reverie as I realised my First Officer had been speaking to me.

"I'm sorry, Sathrak, could you repeat that."

"Sir", he hissed, his green eyes flickering as protective membranes snapped repeatedly across his eyes, "There is a Class A-Pri Message coming in. Would you like to receive it in your office?"

"Yes", I replied, "Please accompany me. Helmsman take the chair!"

"Sir!" The Helmsman acknowledged glaring at Sathrak's retreating form. I understood why so many Virgans & Galaxtians hated Snakes so much, but he was my first officer and second-in-command of the ship and I would not hide my orders from my First Officer. Besides, he was also my friend ...

It was over fifteen years ago at the age of twenty two that I first came in contact with off-planet Gorn.

Our new homeworld was well-established with a Hi-Tech Starbase and the Bovine natives were happy to help us produce much needed supplies in exchange for a low tax rate & representation on the Colonial Military Council. A large minefield, nearly three hundred light years across, also prevented an attempt to attack our base, the self-tracking mines scanning for any non-colonial (as we now called ourselves) race and eliminating them on detection. Only twice had the minefield ever activated, the first time a Gorn freighter had sailed right into it and managed to sustain nearly one hundred and fifty percent damage before detonating and the second time several explosions occurred further into the minefield ... we can only assume that some cloaked Gorn craft had attempted to directly attack our starbase, but had failed in the attempt.

I was First Officer on a *Paradise* Class Terraformer, *The Pegasai*, investigating a small M-Class world four hundred and eighty light years from the southern edge of the Echo Cluster. Three hundred legions of soldiers had beamed down to the surface after a softening exercise by *The Pegasai* to face the remaining thirty Gorn clans. I don't know what happened but they all but wiped us out, 150 legions gone and very few Gorn left.

I was in a village on the planets largest land-mass when I heard the firing, I ran in the direction it came from and saw a group of Gorn females (?) and hatchlings in the centre of the Village square being brutally massacred by several of my command. I threw myself between them & The Gorn but it was too late. I informed the five men responsible that they we're on a charge and had their weapons removed and then I heard the piteous mewling coming from under the heap of dead bodies. I pushed several corpses aside, feeling sick inside, and then saw a young hatchling, probably only a few months old, struggling to get out of the heap (unlike us Gorn hatchlings are able to walk from birth and grow to maturity in just under twelve of our years), I freed it and saw that it was covered with blood & excreta (none of it, as it later turned out, its own) and picked the hideous little creature up. Initially it struggled but, perhaps sensing I meant it no harm, settled into my arms and began to play with my uniform buttons.

I remember bringing it back to the beam-up zone. My commandant looked at me in disgust telling me to get rid of "that thing!" immediately ... I refused (and later got busted with a 28 day jail sentence for my efforts) but in the end little Sathrak (the only word the little creature would say when we first adopted him) ended up living with me & my main partner in one of the villages on the outskirts of Prime City on Virgo Pegasai. She loved him like a son (we had no children of our own ... complications the doctors said) but I never could, quite, accept him in the same way. Nevertheless, as he grew, to maturity I took a hand in his upbringing turning him into a loyal colonial (he never was able to understand why The Gorn, which he knew were his own kind, should seek to dominate and enslave other alien races) and now, some fifteen years later, he serves with me as my First Officer on *The SureFire III* ... mind you it took a bit of string-pulling!

My orders revealed that Operation Retribution was at last underway! Sathrak looked and me and hissed "So this is it, Boss?" I nodded and told him to put the ship on Yellow Alert before we crossed the perimeter of Mine Field No. 1. He nodded, saluted and left. I sat still ... deep in thought.

"So this is it?" I mused. "The day we at last take the war to the enemy"

Part II: Rise

Our mother, Rachel Clarke, had never lived in any of the cities of Galaxtia and managed to hide us out in the hills, where we lived and grew in relative freedom for twelve years. It was she who taught us the values & importance of freedom and not to simply hate the Gorn (they were "a product of their own culture" she said), to love and defend our people and oppose the Gorn at every possible opportunity but to be magnanimous & forgiving in victory. She taught us to fight (I'll never know how she knew so many different ways to kill, but I suspect that she had had training I could but dimly understand), taught us survival skills so that by my fifteenth birthday my older brother & I were members of the Red Hills clan, nearly a hundred strong pack of mostly teenaged men & women ... few people could be called boys and girls in that environment, we all grew up too quickly! My brother was, nominally, the leader but both he & I knew that if I said something got done, it got done ... he was by no means stupid, far from it, I was simply it ... technically his first advisor, but really the one! I think The Gorn knew we existed but didn't do much about us because we weren't a problem, we used to raid Gorn convoys, stand at the side of the road shouting taunts and throwing small rocks at their dura-steel exteriors, but I don't think we had a real purpose. Other times we would just sit around our campfires telling stories & bragging of our victories against The Gorn ... none of which we're true of course, but then we were kids.

A year later we met Juan Michael Ramirez, the future leader of people and architect of our escape from Galaxtia, just one of over two hundred Gorn dominated worlds. Juan Michael Ramirez known only as Ramirez led a clan of his own in the valley on the other side of the Red Hills, must've been over five clicks away, but we'd never seen them. I mean, they were good, real good. The night we met we were on "manoeuvres" and had set our sentries and traps for the night when suddenly this scarred, but handsome face appeared in front of me. My hand immediately darted toward my dart gun and stopped ... the pressure of a cool, sharp duranium blade against my throat advising me against such action.

He smiled, addressing my brother & I by name but talking mainly to me, and introduced himself giving a quick sign to his knife-wielding friend, who disappeared like an apparition. I looked toward my dart gun, but could no longer see it so I sat back to listen ... and assess my chances of killing him before he could kill me. I don't know what it was about him but within minutes I was hanging on his every word and within an hour I would've died for any cause he cared to suggest. And cause he had. He already had twenty three clans under his direct leadership and a further fifty nine affiliated to his cause. It was, he said, his intention to steal six of the nine Gorn Super Transport Freighters currently being used to ferry Galaxtian minerals to the Gorn Homeworld (they say that Galatians themselves were also ferried as they were considered a Gorn delicacy, but I don't know if we'll ever find out the truth about that!). When asked why, he responded that Galaxtia was doomed and that he, with around thirty thousand soldiers were going to leave Galaxtia (with the necessary supplies and minerals) and form a super base elsewhere and strike back at the Gorn. I told him that it was a "real nice" idea but if we did then our planet's cities would be attacked and our young would die in their thousands.

Ramirez looked at me and spoke ... his response striking a chill deep into my heart. There were, he said, less than fifteen million people left on Galaxtia (the birth rate had dropped dramatically and millions had died in the Gorn mines and factories); there were some two and a half million youngsters all told and he expected all of them to leave with us so there could be no reprisal against them (the remaining fifty thousand would be academics ... just about all that remained of the better-educated) and that the cities were pretty much depopulated by now. Then he said "But what does it matter if a few thousand more die from reprisals by the Gorn? We are dying anyway and those that live have no freedom and would be better off dead. No! Better we steal their ships, materials & supplies and we run. If they retaliate against our people then that is the way it shall be! If we don't do this we, as a race, will die!." I sat there unmoving ... unable to argue ... stunned!

Thus it was that we became just another legion in Ramirez's first Galaxtian Strike Force (24th Legion to be precise) but, more than that, Ramirez and I became very close friends. Patrols were sent ranging far afield learning the Gorn ways & the various habits they had.

On the morning of the thirty fifth day of Ramfan (a Colonial month) we received news that the next day a Gorn military convoy would pass along Highway 17 carrying arms and ammunition for the outlying defence post at Semramra (once a large town famed for its art & theatre, now barren apart from the defence post). Nearly all of us (female & male alike) were proficient in the use of knife, bow & arrow and most forms of hand-to-hand combat. True, we had two VR-Kill!!! launchers with six shells but that had been a lucky find and whilst we had practiced with them, we hadn't actually dared to use them. Now, we know Gorn behaviour, they always travelled in convoys of twenty one units, an armoured skimmer front & rear and a mobile gun platform centre. Only these three vehicles would be equipped with scanning and communications equipment and if we were to be successful they had to be taken out first. With only two of the launchers at our disposal this would prove a problem as it would take nearly a minute to re-load ... easily enough time for the remaining vehicle (we could only hope that our first two shots would be successful) to call in reinforcements from the Gorn planet side starport (built on the ruins of Council City, damn them!). In addition there was the not inconsiderable risk of detection from the orbiting starbase and roving air patrols (the starbase would be nearly a third of the way around the planet at "go-time", admittedly heading towards us leaving us only seventy five minutes to complete the action ... there was little we could do about air patrols).

Ramirez decided that I would lead a patrol to target and disable the central convoy mobile gun platform. The plan was that we would simply walk up to the mobile gun and, somehow (I told Ramirez I had a plan, but I never did), take the thing out & that on our signal the two hidden launcher operators would open fire on the skimmers.

I couldn't believe it! It went, very nearly, without a hitch (if you can call only just avoiding getting your throat ripped out ... "without a hitch"). The lead skimmer and six hover-trucks had passed when we walked boldly out onto the road next to the convoy angling towards the mobile gun. The convoy began to slow and as the platform reached us, stopped completely. A door opened in its dull green-coloured side and three Gorn emerged, two guards with laser

rifles in ready position and an officer (Talon 4 I think ... equivalent to a local ground-based Captain).

The officer looked at me and hissed "Yuman! What you 'ere on road wi' convoy doing?"

I said nothing and continued to move closer to the vehicle.

He hissed again, more loudly this time "Ans Yuman!"

Now, only three metres from the Snake I began to walk around the vehicle, my companions standing ready but looking relaxed. The Gorn officer began to lumber towards me hissing in anger but, when he was less than a metre from me, I ducked to the side so that he charged past with what I could only assume to be the Gorn equivalent of surprise on his face. My companions began to laugh & the two guards looked around half aggressively, half nervously. Now the Snake officer was mad, he roared at me and charged and, as before, I ducked to the side but he, anticipating such a move, swiped out at me and knocked me to the ground. I was stunned & the next thing I knew was that the Snake had picked me up under my arms and was holding me in front of his vile slime dripping face (I was young .. they're not really that bad!) ... and what did I do? I spat in his face! Now, I didn't know this, but to a Gorn, spitting is one of the worst possible insults imaginable ... sort of like telling him he was born in a bad egg, all on its own with no city or kin and that he is weak & uncultured AND works on EightDay (all rolled in to one). He gave one enraged roar, drew his head back as if preparing to strike and then ... collapsed. My companions say that had I delayed any longer the Snake would've ripped my throat out but suffice it to say that moments later both he and the two guards lay on the ground with green ichor running freely from wounds as I cleaned my knife on the grass beside the corpse. There was a hiss and a thud from inside the platform and a yell of "Secured!" and I knew that our phase of the operation had succeeded. We dragged the corpses inside the platform and climbed in ourselves. Within minutes Loki, our resident Gorn specialist had identified fire control and sent an energy pulse skyward.

In the hills to the side of H17 the pulse was seen and instantly two white trails broke from their cover, streaking unerringly to their skimmer targets and, as the shells exploded, several hundred youngsters erupted toward the convoy.

As the running forms approached the convoy an amplified voice yelled "Freeze!"

Instantly all the running forms tumbled to the ground and froze immobile.

Again the amplified Sound of Ramirez's voice spoke. "24th Legion, Special Patrol Group move forward to lead skimmer ... 1st Legion 2nd & 3rd units move to mobile gun platform ... 3rd Legion, 7th unit advance cautiously on rear skimmer."

As our replacements arrived we began working our way forward along the convoy of automated trucks to the immobile forward skimmer. It looked completely unharmed. I signalled my companions forward and moved towards the hatchway, pressing my palm on the entry pad and the door slid open to reveal a red, dimly-lit interior. My pistol raised, I dove through the door and into the vehicle rolling until I was once more upright but crouched. All

three of the lizard crew were inside but none were moving, although one was alive. I guessed that the shells had been unable to harm the skimmer itself but the concussion had killed two its crew, disabling the third.

I shouted "Clear & secure", hearing it repeated by my companions outside and within minutes Ramirez himself was within the skimmer.

"Leave these where they are for now, take the third Snake back to Camp. We'll decide what to do with it later!"

I stepped outside to see men & women burdened with huge bundles disappearing off the road back to our camps. It did not seem long before all the trucks had been cleared of their cargo's and were waiting patiently (as automatics do) for the convoy to proceed. We were to take the convoy to a prepared area some seven clicks away where our "experts" could work on the vehicles and prepare them for the forthcoming action.

The convoy had just begun to move when a small Gorn Air Patrol Car dropped out of the sky and levelled out to parallel our course. We couldn't reveal ourselves or it would attack (or worse radio back to base) but Ramirez, readying for such an event, was preparing the others on board to leap out & open fire, distracting the pilot whilst he attempted to take it out with the skimmers twin-positron cannon ... he knew some of his "men" would die under the Patrol Crafts fire but it was the only way. He was about to press the Exit Pad when I mumbled "Wait!".

Ramirez looked at me and I looked at the corpses ... thinking. Suddenly it clicked, "Help me! Strip this one's uniform off!"

It was done. I took out my knife, duranium of course, and cut easily around most of the lizards upper torso skin and then with help from Ramirez (who was beginning to understand my thoughts) we began to strip the skin from the upper part of the lizard. One of the men was vomiting in the corner of the skimmer but having completed the grizzly operation I lifted the gruesome disguise over my head. Up until then I had had only known that lizards smelled bad on the outside ... but this? I can only say I was glad I hadn't been able to eat that morning! Once the uniform was on as well the upper half of me would have passed for a lizard. Rapidly the others helped to clean me up and then, carefully avoiding the remains of the grisly object on the floor I opened the upper hatch and climbed through so that only the upper half, the perfect Gorn Officer, was visible. The patrol car was at the other end of the convoy but it's pilot must have seen me because, with a high pitched whine of over-stressed engines the craft made a rapid turn and headed back towards me. I thought I was dead but he slowed to a halt only ten metres from me, his VR flight helmet all but covering his face. I tried to ignore the wetness dripping down inside my bloody disguise as I raised my gloved and uniformed arm in a Gorn salute. For several seconds he remained, then he nodded and accelerated away skywards. I collapsed back into the cabin the awful costume was removed ... "I need a bath" I said!

Our tech's had been working on the convoy all night and we were again approaching the place where we had ambushed it the previous day. Armed and armoured men & women waited at the roadside and when we stopped climbed sombrely aboard the trucks waiting for them.

The core of the plan was that the Gorn were fanatically religious creatures. There were eight, eight and a half days (roughly twenty four of our hours) in their week and they believed that their god (as currently represented by their God-Emperor Shethrak) created their world in seven days and had rested on the eighth (a piece of information discovered when several young Gorn had been observed staggering drunkenly down a street arm-in-arm singing one of their religious dirges "Eight days a week"). As such The Gorn always rested and fasted on EightDay ... they did absolutely nothing. It was this aspect of their religious culture that we, a pathetic group of ill-equipped, poorly trained humans numbering less than thirty thousand, were about to test.

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My mother and I lay on a small ledge overlooking the Gorn Spaceport, observing through VR electrobins. There was no activity and eight of the Gorn Super Transports lay in their raised concave berths to the far side of the field, the blackened, scarred ground evidence of the tremendous energies needed to lift the behemoths into orbit. I comm'd Ramirez and told him the field was clear, with no activity detectable then sat back to watch developments ... neither me, my mother, or any of the other five observer pairs were scheduled to take any part in the upcoming action.

A few minutes later the convoy appeared rolling rapidly towards the gate of the port and 100 metres from the wall the lead skimmer opened fire with it's twin positron cannon (few surface craft can mount anything heavier because of the size of the generators & accumulators needed), the heavy whine followed instantly by the harsh wailing of the port alarm systems. As the head of the convoy passed through the shattered gates, dazed looking Gorn stumbled from various buildings, but were rapidly disarmed and herded up by the lightly armed humans ... Ramirez had taken all possible measures to ensure than no Gorn were killed in the action ... not that any resistance was offered. I guess they must've thought us savage barbarians to attack them on this, their holy day (they got wise to this technique later, using hypo-conditioning, but they were never as effective on that day of their week ... I always found it interesting to note that space-faring Gorn were far less susceptible to the eight-day syndrome) but we used every possible factor to our advantage ... primarily to reduce our losses but also to reduce theirs and thus possible reprisals against the many Galaxtians that were to remain. It took less than an hour to secure the port and then the observers were called in. Our forces had found several Gorn Air Patrol cars at the port and we were now using them to maintain a high-profile lookout.

All the transports were emptied of Gorn and their engines were now on warm-up sequences in preparation for the long journey ahead. Already the refugees were moving into the port area and onto the transports, many bringing others with them. The blanket rule was that no-one over twenty five would be allowed onto the port or ships unless they were one of the group of academics also selected for the journey. We knew this ruling was harsh but understood, only too well, the necessity for adhering to it, but even so rules were broken ... many times! Families with young children, where the parents were anything up to forty were often allowed through and Ramirez, presumably well aware that this sort of thing would happen, allowed it to continue. In the end we had over seventy thousand clans of Galaxtians ready to board the ships. Most worrying was the undisciplined mob of "oldsters" that were gathering around the outskirts of the port. At present there was only a few hundred but their numbers were swelling rapidly ... I briefly thought that my mother was lucky to be going but then remembered that her "special" training gave her more than adequate qualifications. The space-port walls were guarded by nearly two hundred of our number, utterly loyal to our cause, despite the fact that many of them were well over twenty five years and would not be going on the exodus (it was planned that they would "disappear" to remain underground for strikes at The Snakes should they attempt reprisals against the remaining population. Their courageous actions allowed the rest of us to get on with the necessary tasks of loading the freighters and ensuring the systems were fully functional.

By nightfall the six chosen ships were stocked with people, minerals and supplies and the remaining ships (and much of the spaceport) rigged to explode. Sluggishly, the lead ship, renamed *Exodus*, began to rise from her berth, flame cascading over her landing cradle from her underjets and at the sight the mob outside threw themselves against the wall and our guards. In a daze I saw my mother running toward my ship, the last one, due to lift in less than twenty minutes, twenty or more oldsters trailing her. I picked up my laser rifle, sighted, fired and the figure directly behind my mother folded & fell. I realised that my mother was going to make it but as she reached the platform fifty metres ahead of her pursuers, a beam licked out from behind burning a neat hole in the centre of her chest, a look of surprise on her face as she collapsed.

They say I went crazy! I flicked my laser to burst and seconds later twenty seven people lay dead on the field and answering fire was flicking inaccurately out from the mob surrounding the port. I stumbled towards my mother and realised that she was conscious and looking at me. There was blood dripping from one corner of her mouth and I noted, almost dispassionately, that she was not bleeding from the wound itself as the laser had neatly cauterised the edges of the two centimetre hole.

"Johnnie," she whispered, then coughed blood, "Johnnie ... look after Frankie ... he has no one else!".

She bucked in pain for a moment and there was a rattling sound. Then she was dead.

I hugged her still warm body until a voice spoke to me.

"Sir! You must let her go sir! We have to leave!".

Eventually they persuaded me to leave her on the ground beside the ramp but before I went I pulled her ring from her finger ... I was never able to wear it properly but it hangs on a chain around my neck.

Our ship, suddenly renamed *The Rachel Clarke*, lifted into a deepening blue sky and the eventual blackness of space in the path of her five sister ship, bathing her berth, my mother's body with it, in fire. My eyes remained fixed on the darkened disk below, the planet I was born on and called my home.

"I'll be back!" I muttered ... somewhere, maybe an old movie, I'd heard that line before.

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Our escape had been well planned. We headed galactic north until we were out of detector range ... *The Exodus* had done her job well, docking with the unsuspecting starbase and disabling all long-range scanning and communications equipment. They had also captured two *Cobra* Class Cruisers (*The Intrepid* and *The Endeavour*) which were docked at the station and these fell to the front and rear of the Freighter column. Some months later we left the Echo Cluster and began a long loop to the East bringing us right around the cluster and in again from the south, over two years later. We had had to duck back into the cluster on several occasions, once to hide from pursuing ships but more often to collect fuel and supplies, finding many native races sympathetic to our causes. Only once did we come into conflict with Gorn ships when on one of our refuelling stops we encountered three Gorn ships, one *Saurian* and two *Cobras*. The Snakes hailed us and demanded that we return with them to the nearest Gorn starbase. We, of course, refused and just after the *Saurian* fired upon one of our freighters (*Freedom*) *Intrepid* and *Endeavour* decloaked behind and blew her out of space with a dual salvo. The *Cobras* turned to attack but were only able to target the *Endeavour* before they were destroyed. *The Endeavour* escaped with light damage and *Freedom* suffered about eighty percent damage but was towed by *Hope* forcing the convoy of freighters to slow to warp two until essential repairs were completed.

As we re-entered The Echo Cluster our force split into two exploratory groups, each accompanied by a cloaked warship and each prepared to split as necessary to investigate small groups of planets. Time was of the essence, we all knew that. We had to find a mineral rich cluster in which to establish a new base and homeworld. It was a total surprise to us that the first world we encountered was the planet chosen ... Virgo Pegasai!

Virgo Pegasai was a beautiful green world with white polar caps and huge world-girdling oceans ... about as much like Galaxtia as it was possible to be without being the same planet. Unspoilt and virgin it had Bovine natives (the only real difference with our native world) with a stable monarchy-style government and it took only a few days of negotiation before they agreed to let us settle on a large triangular continent on the opposite side of the planet to where most of the Bovine natives lived.

The natives also had a thriving economy which they would easily be able to shift to a war footing so as to provide us with supplies in exchange for our defences. They had agreed to aid us financially wherever possible ... they seemed well aware of the threat the Gorn represented.

Within a year our own economy was established, our population thriving and we had twelve more planetary colonies. More importantly, with the minerals "liberated" from the Gorn it was only a month before our new starbase was assembled in orbit above Virgo Pegasai and within a year it had the latest technology installed within it, sixty fighters, two hundred defence posts and was building a warship every month in preparation for the day upon which we would launch our counter-strike against the Gorn. The most beautiful ships it turned out were the Virgo Mk II's, huge behemoths requiring five Transwarps but, with six Tri-Focus Plasma beams and nine inbuilt launch bays, able to get nineteen fighters space borne in under five seconds. On the day Operation Retribution was launched we were turning out five Battlestars a month from our main SB and our subsidiary ones at Sigma 1212, Shaddan, Vega & Delta.

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Part III: Retribution

There were to be two phases to Operation Retribution, BlindSide and Retribution itself!

BlindSide had been launched nine months ahead of Retribution and consisted of nothing but cloaklers. After years of research and many lives we had finally managed to duplicate the Gorn cloaking device and, although we still didn't really understand the tech, had captured and copied around twenty ships capable of cloaking. The ships were mostly copies of Gorn *Cobras* but we had built several new Experimental Class Probes and the ships had been sent ahead to destabilise Gorn shipping and attempt to divert resources that would otherwise be turned to our defeat as soon as we began moving into Gorn space. With BlindSide in full swing and the ships due to meet us ahead in Gorn space, Retribution was being launched.

BlindSide was designed to harass enemy shipping, freighters and relatively lightly armed vessels only, running away from anything large enough to destroy. Most significantly the crews were ordered not to destroy their targets instead capturing the ships long enough to board, rob and dump cargo and fuel leaving enemy forces with an ever-growing load of recovery & repair operations.

Retribution was a strike at a main strategic target within Gorn space. The main strike force consisted of nearly two-thirds of the Colonial Space Defence Force; sixty eight *Patriots*, forty three *Scorpius's* and thirty four *Virgos* carrying over fifteen thousand fighters between them. A lot of thought had been given to the pros & cons of using torpedo based craft but, with the exception of ten ram-scooping *Cobol* Class Heavy Cruisers armed with over one hundred *Hell Hammer* torpedoes, it was eventually decided that our new in-fighter anti-mine tracking systems gave us the advantage. We were good at removing minefields, not in laying them and in general terms had little use for torpedo-based attack craft. In support we had *The Exodus*, the original lead ship stolen from the Gorn at Galaxtia, fully restored and now painted the stalwart grey of the CSDF, six large freighters and a fleet of smaller freight shuttles. We had the ten *Cobols* forming a mobile fuel generation facility but we expected to raid for much of our fuel and supplies. The final component of the support fleet was the six *Sagittarius* Class Carriers whose sole purpose was to build fighters and repair damaged ships. The hub of support ships was surrounded by a double wall of *Virgos*, a triple wall of *Scorpius's* and a wide-ranging screen of *Patriots* ... the travelling version of the Colonial Sphere of Battle. During combat the support ships would stand off several light years with a protecting screen of *Patriots* whilst the sphere engaged the enemy. The flagship and Central Command vessel (CenCom) was an older *Mk I Virgo* Class Battlestar called *The Echo Cluster* commanded by Captain Helm and, since she carried the strategic "brains" of the fleet ... including Ramirez and Commodore Perry, had been modified extensively so that she carried little in the way of offence but conversely carried every known item of defence possible. She no longer had any bays or fighters but had ten beams, enhanced structure, many anti-torpedo turrets and more shield generators than five *Mk II Virgos* combined.

Patriots had, in many respects, the best job of all. We were not going to be involved in the major battles although I had little doubt we would see our fair share of action and having left prime-minefield we were spread out over a hundred light year sphere of space. There were to

be no cloaking ships accompanying the Retribution Strikeforce, the general feeling was that we preferred an open, up-front battle ... no finesse just mano-a-mano (OK! mano-a-Snake!) ... it simply was not part of our character to sneak around cloaked.

We knew we did not have a sufficiently large fleet to smash the Gorn out of space and, indeed, that was not our aim. Our aim was to make him (the God Emperor Shethrak XVII) realise that he could not step on us (or other races in such a manner) ... that we were a force to be reckoned with and to pay the Gorn back for some of the damage done to our homeworld, Galaxtia. To do this most of our best clansmen from Virgo Pegasai, the life blood of the colonial race, were with the fleet. Apart from essential personnel, only children, and parents unable to leave them, the old, the infirm had been left behind. The aging ships remaining to guard our new homeworld were flown by similarly aging CSDF officers & crew ... this was a fight for the survival of The Colonial Empire ... we were going to win ... or die in the attempt! Virgo Pegasai's major defence whilst we were gone was the Prime minefield. That the conflict had to be now was obvious, for some months now our wide ranging scouts had been observing Gorn exploratory warships moving in distant systems ... moving ever closer to our new homeworld's location. We had no desire to fight a defensive war nor did we want to reveal our location to the enemy and the only unwanted Snake visitors so far had never left the system. It was estimated that lizard explorers would be within detection range of our outlying colonies within a year and so it was decided to move forward the day of the great plan to today.

Our target was, could only be, Gorn itself. Ramirez and his advisors (myself among them) had considered the matter at great length and had come to the conclusion that if we took out every lizard colony but the Gorn homeworld, the enemy would still be able to mount a devastating counter-attack and our history would be abruptly terminated. But a strike against their homeworld, apart from having an almost religious significance to nearly every colonial alive, would damage the Snakes seriously and, it was hoped, would make them sit back and think ... to be receptive to proposals for peace. Even if we had wanted too, we did not believe we could wipe out the lizards, and many of us (myself included) did not believe genocide to be the answer but in a strong offensive action which might, just might, bring the Gorn to their senses and whatever passed for their knees!

It was anticipated that the journey would take over eighteen months and, as Captain of *The SureFire III*, I cannot say it was easy going. Fleet fighters were always deployed which was a strain on crew and fighter pilots but, because all fighters were now equipped with the specially designed anti-mine tracking systems, did prevent the fleet sailing into Gorn minefields.

* * * * *

We saw our first action nine months out from Virgo Pegasai, a small fleet of fifteen *Saurian* Class Cruisers de-cloaked in front of the fleet as, simultaneously, the orders came in to "Pull back! The *Virgos* will deal with this!"

"Full reverse engines, helm!" hissed Sathrak

"Sir!" acknowledged the helmsman. Over the past months he had begun to overcome his prejudices and now held an almost grudging respect for the young Gorn officer.

I sat in the command whilst we backed away from the nearest Snake ship ... which was coming toward us unfortunately, for us, somewhat faster than we were backing off. At this rate they would be able to stick a couple of fish in our guts in less than a minute since intelligence had revealed that Gorn torpedoes needed to be within two thousand clicks before they would acquire lock. Our screens were already glowing white and, in patchy areas, dropping into the black as local, recoverable, overloads occurred. The automatic response systems were handling the load and, of course, we were returning fire but the ship we were sparring with outgunned us two to one so their screens, whilst white, were showing no signs of overload.

"Continue to back off, helmsman!" I said, "No 1, get the fighter pilots to their craft and ready all fighters for a rearward scatter launch." I knew, of course, that our fighters would have to be launched to the rear for if they attempted to emerge forwards they would get fried by the intense fire and counter-fire the moment they left the protective envelope of our shields.

"Prepare to divert all weapons energy to shields" I said as the helmsman continued to report distance and weapons control tracked the various offensive and defensive ship systems.

"Three thousand metres Sir! Two nine, two eight, two seven ..."

"Outer shields down, mid shields have taken up the load ..."

"... two six five, two six, two ..."

"Launch fighters on my mark, No. 1"

"... five, two four five ..."

"Fighter's ready and waiting, Sir!"

"Weapons control? I want everything you've got, target his forward beams and sensor array then switch power to shields."

"No 1? As soon as the beams strike, confirm power to shields and launch fighters ... weapons control ... on my mark ... three ... two ... one ... huh?"

At that moment a huge form crossed our screen, our shields dropped to zero load and the *Saurian* disintegrated under the impact of the *Virgo's* additional six beams, the voice of *The Megalomaniac's* Captain, Ramos I think his name was, laughed at us through the radio.

"Nice job boys! See you later!"

"Cocky sonofabitch!" I muttered.

It turned out later that I had done the right thing. All fifteen *Saurians* had been wiped but three patriots had been lost and two seriously damaged. Repairs could be made in space at The *Sagittarius* factory ships but the three *Patriots* were an irreplaceable loss. Control had wanted us to back off so that the heavier weaponry of the sluggish *Virgos* could be brought into play as they rolled up, speared the enemy with a tractor beam and smashed their shields down with the six beams each ship carried ... and with their screens down there was little left to resist the madly ravaging energies thus released.

* * * * *

Three months later we came upon the outlying colonies of the Gorn empire. From this point on we knew the going would be tough. Standing orders were to ignore freighters and planets, to defend against smaller warships and to attack only larger Gorn warships and any starbases even though we were well aware of the threat any enemy warship we left behind could represent to our homeworld, and its colonies, so far behind.

We also knew we were being tracked and knowing this we made a huge show of it. We wanted the Gorn to know we were coming ... there was nothing of finesse in this attack, no skulking from planet to planet, we wanted the Gorn to see us & that we were coming loaded for bear!

So it was that at Helms Deep we encountered our first really large defensive force, over 100 ships in classic lizard formation ... the cone! The cone was based on the philosophy of protecting your biggest ships whilst smaller ships darted around the edges observing and/or engaging individual smaller enemy units in battle but, quite simply, the central mass of the cone's ships was unstoppable ... or so the Gorn believed. The fire-power generated by such a huge mass of ships was incredible ... it had to be seen to be believed. Our strategists had spent hours agonising over the various "what-ifs" of the present situation and possible tactical responses to it. We knew that the Gorn had, in total, three to four times as many ships as us, of which the fleet we were facing represented maybe a quarter, and that ton-for-ton they outgunned us. They had cloaking ships, were superb torpedo marksmen and were masters of surprise attack. We, however, had our vast numbers of fighters at our disposal together with our native Bovine allies we had developed a series of small robots which given the correct orders, supplies and minerals would build fighters automatically for us. We had our new fighter-based minesweeping equipment and we had the automatics but we were also attacking a heavily armed, well "entrenched" enemy with a relatively small fleet of ships.

We weren't mad ... we were desperate!

So it was that our strategists came up with the globe formation where we would endeavour to englobe the enemy fleet within a sphere of our finest ships. In principle then, with their ships packed into such a tight space at the centre of a contracting sphere of ships, their own torpedoes would be as likely to damage their own ships as ours and with the hellish temperatures that would exist at the centre of the globe weapon systems would soon begin to malfunction and victory, we were assured, would be ours. All the while the *Virgo* fighters & *Patriots* not be involved in the globe itself would be attacking any enemy ships that had escaped the englobement manoeuvre.

"Take up your visual scanning ladies and gentlemen, we need to find those Snakes and quickly" I ordered, everyone knew that cloaked ships were invisible ... except to the naked eye!

The interior of the *SF3* was deadly quiet as virtually every crew-member bent their heads to their viewplates and several seconds later I was rewarded by the sound of, "Sir! Large mass of enemy ships detected visually at three ten degrees bearing ... two seven five, warp eight and slowing!" I instantly opened a channel to fleet command informing them of the situation as the *SF3* flipped end-for-end and sped back towards the rest of the fleet leaving only a tracking probe to monitor enemy movements.

We took up position on the edge of the globe of ships next to the huge *Colonial Avenger* and within minutes the Gorn fleet was once again detected, the huge maw of their tremendous Cone of Battle visible even at this distance.

"All ships will overlay shields with a blue-phase screen." Instantly all the fleets' ships disappeared behind opaque blue screens, each of us able to see out, but none in. The reason was two-fold, firstly it identified our ships as friendlies to our own and secondly it disguised the power & nature of our ships ... I could tell the next few hours were going to be as nerve-racking as they were uncertain.

At a distance of thirty thousand clicks from our fleet the first lizard beams began to probe our shields, range finders, and then, almost instantaneously, a near-solid composite beam of pure energy erupted from the maw of the enemy cone ... a beam which destroyed nearly 70% of our deployed vessels, each exploding in incandescent rage. The enemy must have been exulting, the first blow and they had all but wiped us out! The maw of the cone swung slightly and the beam, once again, flashed blindingly into existence but at that point our fleet split into an additional two segments.

The Gorn, it is true, had destroyed many, many of our ships but what they didn't know was that every single one of them was an automatic. Lots of shields and enough fissionables on-board to create an impressive pyrotechnic display but not a single colonial life had been lost!

The remaining automatics continued towards the lizards in exactly the manner of a fleet which had lost all of its central command & control ships which, indeed, it had ... the colonial crews were far too busy now to worry about the fate of a few automatics even if a few units

had been programmed to move erratically within it. The "fleet" continued to suffer blow after blow, but the lizards achieved nothing ... I'm not even sure they ever realised their mistake!

I can only assume that they regretted their lack of foresight when, some six minutes later, the two halves of our colonial attack globe closed around nearly seventy of their biggest ships ... but to their credit they didn't give up. On the instant of its closing the centre of the globe became a seething, searing cauldron of heat and light, Snake torpedoes were unable to reach their colonial targets because once outside their parent ships shields and unable to cope with the intense heat, they simply exploded adding their contribution to the nightmare already in existence. Quickly the lizards realised this and it became beam for beam and those beams were not weak or few ... but the inside of the globe grew ever hotter and gradually the lizard beams expired as they had to divert energy to keep their shields up and life-support operational. The end came quicker than expected as suddenly several huge explosions rocked the weakening fleet of Gorn ships and shield after shield overloaded and collapsed.

The worse phase of the battle occurred after the destruction of the largest part of the lizard fleet as, perhaps realising that the hour of defeat was close at hand, the remaining lizard ships seemed to go crazy, attacking like maniacs with no apparent regard for their own survival. In destroying seventy percent of their fleet we lost only two ships but in the ensuing chaos we lost another fifteen. Lizard ships were seen to ram their ships through colonial vessels and it was in this manner that *Colonial Avenger* was lost. But step by step, fleet command regained control by ordering two or three ships to intercept and defeat individual lizard craft and after that it was slaughter, gruesome & bloody slaughter.

With the exception of long-range, possibly cloaked, observers not a single Gorn ship escaped the Battle of Helms Deep. Although our casualties had been light, the loss of seventeen ships, mostly *Patriot* and *Scorpius* class vessels, had a serious psychological impact on the crews. In my own crew, ninety eight souls all told, I had three hysterical breakdowns and one who completely flipped (simply wandered around the ship trying to brush invisible insects off his uniform) ... the Doc tranked him up for the remainder of Retribution but the others recovered within a week or so.

The good news was that eight lizard ships were captured in controlled battles (where the enemy ships screens were held just below collapse and their energy gradually exhausted) and another fifteen surrendered to us ... a total of twenty three ships. twenty, after repairs had been carried out, were sent ahead to Gorn, cloaked, to aid ships already involved in the BlindSide operation. The idea was to increase tension within the Gorn armed forces and upon their homeworld in the hope that the tension generated by BlindSide could only act in our favour in the upcoming Battle of Gorn. The remaining three were too badly damaged for serious fighting and so were assigned to protect our support ships which would hang back from the Gorn homeworld when we attacked.

Part IV: The Final Conflict

The final assault on Gorn began with our contact of the three hundred light year diameter minefield that surrounded the planet. With so many thousands of fighters, all equipped with the new Anti-mine tracking and detection equipment, it was the work of only a few hours to obliterate it and during those few hours space around us seemed to be alight with pyrotechnic glare. Within the mine-field, waiting for us, less than half a light year from Gorn was the biggest fleet of ships we had ever seen composed of nearly two hundred and fifty ships. Our best estimates broke the ships down as sixty *T-Rex* Class ships, ninety *Saurians* and one hundred *Cobras* and immediately the orders came in for a complete stop.

For many, many hours nothing happened, but from my command & control panel I could see that that Central Command was accessing my ships computers at incredible rate ... I could only assume that their computers and strategists were considering the various tactical options. I could see that the Snake fleet was a huge globe of ships and not the typical cone. There was a rift around the middle and I guessed that they had had cloaked observers at the Battle of Helm's Deep and were planning to counter our globe formation with a bigger one of their own. Some 5 hours later the radio's burst into life.

"Fellow Colonials! As you know, at 2300 hours we detected the Gorn fleet less than ten light years away. They are using a globe formation, much larger than ours which appears to be composed of a central core of very heavy, *T-Rex* Class ships with a heavy screen of *Saurians* and a light screen of *Cobras*. This globe is split into two halves and it seems they intend us to die in the centre of a trap we so recently sprung on their fellows. With some two hundred and fifty ships to our one hundred and fifty four, ship for ship they outgun us, outweigh us and ... out-number us!

"Every strategist knows, now, that the split-globe is the most efficient method of fighting either conventional cone or a smaller formation that is formed into a globe and for the past hours we have been endeavouring to define a strategic solution to the problem.

"We now believe that is possible, although by no means certain, that we can defeat their fleet with a loss of less than 20% of our manned ships. The new fighting structure will be a cylinder and with it we hope to take out their heaviest ships first"

A barely audible gasp rippled around the control deck.

"To maximise the effect of our new formation," Ramirez continued, "we intend to carry out a series of manoeuvres intended to optimise our strategy before we commit to final combat.

"This battle represents victory or defeat for our race ... if we are defeated then our homeworld & colonies will surely follow. Fight for your brothers ... fight for your sisters ... fight for your children's future!

"May God bless us and grant us victory!

"REMEMBER GALAXTIA!"

I wasn't a religious man but I still whispered "Amen!"

As the message ended, the bridge stayed quiet until the computer began to beep and Sathrak said "Incoming orders, Sir! Do you wish to take them in your ready room?"

I thought for a moment and then said "No! I think you can display this on-screen!" Sathrak looked at me, unblinking, then turned away & flicked several switches at which the face of the Supreme Commander, Commodore Perry, appeared on the screen. He glanced down at his desk then raised his head, a grim look upon his face. "Captain, at 0500 hours you will advance at exactly warp three on course three ten galactic until otherwise ordered. You will also align your ship so that 'Up' corresponds with the lenticular galaxy GA-738. As you progress towards the enemy fleet you will receive a series of orders indicating a degree where 0 is straight up and a distance. For instance one hundred and eighty, ten means that you will cease all forward blasting and without re-orientation move on impulse power for ten kilometres 'downwards'. You will then resume your original orders. Is this understood?"

I gulped and said, "Yes Sir!" at which Commodore Perry replied "Very Well!" and the screen went blank!

"Helmsman? Lay in a course of three hundred and ten degrees, warp three but do not implement until my mark!"

"Yes Sir!" he replied, his face pale.

"Where does the course take us, helmsman?"

"Uh ... the centre of the enemy fleet Sir!"

I sat silent for a few moments, then ...

"Is there anyone on the bridge who is not happy about these orders?"

After a few moments a young man, perhaps 18 years old spoke up, "Sir! I can only admit that I do not like the thought of committing suicide ..."

"First Officer Sathrak! Escort this man to his quarters and find me a replacement immediately!"

"Sir!"

With orders like these I knew I had to keep the crew controlled and calm. I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing but I had to have those orders carried out exactly as they were ordered and I couldn't afford to have even the slightest moment of hesitation. I found it hard to believe that Command Central was prepared to sacrifice my ship & it's crew but if, in some small way, such a sacrifice would benefit the Colonial Empire then I would do it ... but I had to be sure that ALL my crew would do that duty ... WITHOUT QUESTION!

At 0500, *The SureFire III* started moving at warp three, course three ten planar. After several minutes the helmsman spoke.

"The enemy is moving Sir! Warp five ... estimated engagement range in ninety three minutes."

"A message from CenCom, Sir!" Sathrak hissed, "We are to keep frequency 25010 MHz open and clear of traffic!"

"Communications? Clear frequency 25010, incoming only!"

"Sir!"

"Helmsman, count us in!"

"Sir! Nine hundred thousand clicks, ETA ninety one minutes"

The enemy craft would begin to fire at approximately one hundred thousand clicks, their composite beam fairly ineffective at this range) but our screens would fail at anything from fifty thousand clicks in (a *Patriot* simply didn't mount screens capable of handling such a hellish load as that fleet could put out!).

"Sir! Three hundred thousand clicks, ETA thirty minutes"

The radio burst into life, "Two Seventy, Twenty execute!"

"Helmsman cease blasting! Side thrusters twenty clicks, two seventy degrees relative ... uh, left"

It took nearly thirty seconds for the thrusters to blast us the required direction and then neutralise our drift and then ...

"Warp three, three ten planar!"

"Sir! Three hundred thousand, ETA thirty minutes ... Sir? The enemy has just duplicated our move!"

"One forty, ten execute!", the radio again.

Again we shifted but nearly south-east this time and again the enemy fleet moved with us. Time after time orders were received and each time we ceased blasting, carried out the manoeuvre then resumed blast. After about ten such manoeuvres the Helmsman spoke up.

"Sir?" he said uncertainly, "I've noticed something"

"Yes?" I looked at him.

"Sir! Every time we move, every other ship in the fleet moves with us"

"So?"

"Yes Sir, but every time we move the enemy tries to move with us and Sir?" He paused, "He isn't doing very well, Sir!"

"Give me a serial view of the enemy fleet composition and sub-unit positions since first blast!"

Upon the screen there appeared an eight minute loop of images, accelerated to thirty seconds, showing the highly organised Gorn fleet and our own fleet, much smaller but dodging as it approached. As each colonial move occurred, each ship moving in the required direction in perfect synchronisation, the enemy ships became more & more disorganised.

And then it hit me ...

"Do you know what we're doing?"

"Sir?" Sathrak asked.

"The enemy is relying on organisation to beat us. He's got a lot of ships out there, but they aren't much good unless he can keep them organised. Just look at what we are doing to his fleet ..."

No one laughed, but I did sense a lightening of tension on the bridge ... at least we now had some faint understanding of what we were doing and why we were doing it!

The "change" orders continued until we were only fifteen minutes from contact with the enemy fleet and then we were ordered to extend our shields and blue phases to maximum. We then began to receive orders to move to ship placement area U, to join ship Vx on perimeter of W, to move to location XY at ... and so on. For several hours we shuffled around the inside of the fleet seemingly ending up in the exact same position we had started and I think as confused as, I had no doubt, the enemy was. There was a short pause and then orders came through to get clear of the fleet and to engage in independent search and destroy operations against stragglers of the enemy fleet that escaped the forthcoming main fleet action. We were also told that there would be no further communication with CenCom until the Battle for Gorn was effectively over.

"Sathrak", I said, "Set course to zero four five degrees planar and contact the captains of *The Captain Hook* and *The Sand Man*. Invite them into a three-way with me. I'll take it in my office."

As soon as I entered my office the intercom announced "Patching you through on three-way, Sir!" and almost instantly my comm. screen split into four parts, two showing views of the bridge, the other's the familiar faces of my "Class of 23" CSDF Officer Training classmates Captain's Bean and Sands. After a brief exchange of greetings I said "Look boys, we're on our own now and there are going to be a lot of big Gorn ships around here ... any one of which could blow us away individually but if we act in unison" I paused as they looked thoughtful weighing up the pros and cons of unified action, "A sort of sub-fleet if you like? We stand a better chance of winning & getting out of the battle alive ... what do you say?"

The two Captains nodded their agreement and after a lengthy debate it was agreed that I would act as "admiral" for the duration of the battle or until a higher-ranking, or better experienced, officer could be found. I asked each of them to contact other ships to see if they could get a few more ships to join our "fleet". I outlined a series of ideas for manoeuvres I

had, loosely tagging them as "Strikes" A through F, the other's contributing several more ideas, and then we cut comms and returned to our respective bridges.

Within a few minutes our sub-fleet, now known as "Sub #1", had expanded to seven ships including another of the new *Scorpius* carriers ... with their five heavier beams it would be useful in the upcoming conflict. Sub #1 stationed itself ten thousand clicks galactic north of the main fleet and we settled down to watch developments and wait for possible opportunities.

When first detected the Gorn fleet had been a near perfect split-globe and our fleet a solidly packed sphere of *Virgos* surrounded by a double sphere of *Scorpius* carriers and a light, loose screen of *Patriots*. For nearly thirty minutes our fleet (the main *Scorpius* and *Virgo* units tractor-beam linked) had been shifting up, down, left & right and now, five minutes from contact they still maintained that absolutely perfect formation but the Gorn? The Gorn fleet was a mess ... with a little imagination it still resembled a globe with a trail of disorganised ships behind giving it an almost comet-like effect, the split was gone and units of their fleet were rushing around the edges of the "sphere" trying to find some useful place to fit into the formation.

Four minutes from contact and the colonial fleet began to increase in size as the automatics were once again deployed and the sphere changed with slow-easy grace from a sphere into a hollow cylinder with trailing and leading edges and an outside screen of automatics.. The automatics, I knew, would carry nothing but shields and those shields would be so synchronised that our beams could fire through them but the enemy, unable to detect the frequencies we were employing would not be able to return that fire ... except of course by the brute force method of blowing away the automatic to expose the ships beneath.

The cylinder met the "sphere" and all space seemed to light up with the energies being released and in those initial few seconds nearly 80 colonial ships were destroyed but every single one of them was an automatic. The cylinder, however, did not stop and disappeared inside the Gorn fleet ... silence reigned on the bridge, everyone's thoughts no doubt on the brave men & women now fighting for their lives at the very centre of the enemy fleet. A ragged cheer arose as the cylinder emerged from the other side of the sphere and then tapered off as they got their first look at the emerging cylinder. The edges of the cylinder were ragged and the outer screen was badly holed. Many ships bore evidence of the conflict that had just occurred but we could see that the fleet was still more-or-less intact. The enemy, however, had not fared nearly so well! The disorganised globe, which had not even attempted a split and englobe manoeuvre, now featured a huge hole where our colonial cylinder had punched its way through. I can only assume our strategists had planned it that way because the lizard fleet, now missing a significant percentage of its heaviest ships, including (it would seem) the command and control vessel, continued to drive forward at its original warp five, completely ignoring the fact that the colonial fleet was now behind them.

For a moment our fleet unlinked its tractor beams and the individual units spun end-for-end. Tractors re-engaged and the fleet shot backwards (or was it forwards?) into the retreating

lizard fleet, removing another huge plug of ships. This time we were not so lucky. Deprived of many of the screening automatics we lost 7 ships, 6 Scorpius's and a Virgo and as the colonial ships again de-linked, once again flipping, to reverse the manoeuvre this time towards an advancing enemy all hell broke loose. The Snakes, with less than a hundred ships left and realising that their fate was sealed broke off in every direction, attacking any ship they felt could not resist their less than amorous advances.

It was Helms Deep all over, although this time we were better prepared! However in less than a minute fifteen of our front-line ships were lost. *Snake Killer*, *The Enterprise*, *The Hermes*, *Galaxtia's Revenge* to name but a few ... all lost to the massive assaults of *Cobra* and *Saurian* class cruisers. Two ship's, *The Megalomaniac* and *The Terminator*, joined forces to attack a group of fifteen snakes but were hopelessly outclassed. They still sing songs of those two captains and their brave crews, of how they fought against incredible odds but died a useless and pathetic death with not a single lizard ship destroyed.

Most of the ships however, *The Lord of Kobol*, *The Centurion*, *Straight Shooter* & *The Gopher* performed superbly, beautifully organised in their defence of the fleet. They organised, much as my fellow captains & I were doing with our group with small fleets of ships grouping into sub-fleets capable of concerted action.

Sub #1, now with twelve ships, had targeted the group of fifteen lizards that had so easily defeated *The Megalomaniac* and *The Terminator*. With easy grace, and a lot of effort, we formed a mini-globe around them and blasted them out of existence. Fortunately for us, in such a relatively small-scale action, our fighters were able to take part each launching bolts from outside our sphere into the rapidly diminishing number of enemy vessels within. Two ships, fighting bravely, were still lost in the action but we went on to take out a further ten Gorn stragglers for the cost of only one more ship.

Eventually, sensing final defeat and with only twenty two ships left, the lizards fled. Most of them were damaged and few could cloak or manage speeds in excess of warps six or seven but they fled unaware that our captured and own-construct cloakers followed them. In total we had lost nearly a third of our fleet but felt able to hold our heads up with pride at what we had achieved that day. We were proud of ourselves and even more proud of our comrades who had died for their race and so with a mixture of sadness and joy we reformed our fleet (into a strong defensive sphere) and followed our cloakers towards Gorn at a leisurely warp four.

* * * * *

As its final defence Gorn had thrown up every possible ship that could mount a beam .. over 100 units but Ramirez had no plans to fight them. I remembered past times as his voice, persuasive as ever, issued from our CommSets and sped to the planet nearby.

"Emperor Shethrak and Citizens of Gorn, attend!

"We do not offer violence but will return it if it is offered.

"We do not come in anger but can be angered if you wish.

"We do not come as slaves, although we have been enslaved by you in the past.

"We come in strength but in peace!

"Many of us remember your treatment of us at Galaxtia and many would disagree with an offer of lasting peace .. they would rather see you and your kind wiped from the galaxy forever.

"Nevertheless, we are here to offer you the hand of friendship!

"We await your response."

Over an hour passed, then ...

"Sir! We've detected a launch from the planet below ... it's climbing on an intercept course with the fleet Sir! ... Sir! it's massive ... readings go off the scale!"

"Red Alert!"

Instantly all systems came on light, shields were raised and weapons & other battle systems peaked at full power. The fleet, also alerted to the launch of the ship from the planet below, began to deploy its relatively few remaining automatics and suddenly our CommLink burst into life and a list of ships names issued from it.

" ... *Colonial Defender* and *The SureFire III* will investigate!"

Our Sub #1 Sub-fleet & some supporting *Virgos*! I tensed for a moment then forced myself to relax and drawled, "Helmsman, set a course for that ship ... Weapons Control? See how much power you can re-route to our shields and prepare for a full power divert to our beams! Do not, I repeat, DO NOT make any hostile moves against the enemy unless I order it ... operate defensively at will!"

As we closed on the ship, I began to realise just how big the ship was ... it looked four to five times as large as our *Virgo* Class Battlestars and must have been at least twice the mass, probably as large as a Super Transport Freighter or *Merlin* Alchemy Ship ... and then I realised that it actually was a *Merlin*. True! It had been altered, drastically ... our sensors detected at least eighteen main beam weapons and numerous small, mobile anti-fighter turrets and I could see the maws of twelve huge torpedo tubes, their covers rolling back to reveal the darker orifices behind ... they had to be specially modified tubes, probably carrying enhanced Hell Hammers. I could see the ship's name scrawled in Gorn Symbols across the front of the ship and simultaneously Sathrak and I muttered "*Serpent's Venom!*" under our breaths.

I comm'd Ramirez ... he told me that the ship had to be taken out quickly or it could do irreparable damage to the fleet ... he had no doubt the fleet could destroy it but, for once, he was unsure at what cost!

A bright flash and a *Virgo* Class Battlestar disintegrated ahead of us.

"*Excalibur* is down Sir! No apparent survivors!"

"Evasive action Helmsman, get us in close enough to launch our fighters!"

Apparently the remaining seventeen Sub #1 (plus) ships were doing the same, dodging and weaving crazily attempting to avoid the huge *Venom's* beams. *The Scorpion* (*Scorpius* Class) was hit a glancing blow and spun helplessly off at a tangent only to explode as the *Venom* administered the *coup-de-grace* ... sixteen ships left!

Closer and closer we moved, randomly dodging the searing beams. Twice our shields deflected glancing blows that, had they hit anything close to dead centre, would have disintegrated *The SureFire* in less than a second .. as it was after each blow our power output dropped into the red before recovering. We closed more rapidly ... and found the danger from the beams decreased as the ship was less able to target small, close, relatively mobile craft but now we became subject to the small-scale defence turrets and our shields began to glow.

"Launch fighters at 1 klick!"

"1 klick Sir!" hissed Sathrak.

"Coming up on 1 klick, Sir? *Strike Four* has launched her fighters"

"Prepare to Launch Fighters!"

"Yes Sir! *Revolution* and *Colonial Storm* have launched their fighters"

"Launch Fighters!"

"All fighters launched, Sir! *Maximum Chaos* has launched her fighters!"

The intensity of the beams dancing around our ships decreased as the *Serpent's Venom* was forced to divert more and more power from her offensive systems to her defensive systems, but still the beams struck & clung to ship after ship and salvo after massive salvo of torpedoes was launched at our main fleet. Most of the torps were taken out by the laser wall approach being adopted by the fleet, the curtain of beams issuing from every ship in the fleet catching most of the incoming torpedoes, but still some got through ... already the *Crucifixion* and *Intrepid* were drifting away from the main fleet, massively damaged hulks. But ever so slowly, the burden of dealing upwards of 400 fighters and their carriers began to tell, the beams expiring and, seconds later, the closure of the torpedo tube doors. Brighter and brighter flamed the *Venom's* shields, glowing white with local failures showing as patches of black, leaking like sieves ... already her crew must have been irradiated so badly that they were dead ... they just didn't know it yet! Then suddenly, the massive forms of *The Centurion*

and *The Lord Of Kobol* appeared over the behemoth, clouds of fighters swirling from their launch bays, and as one their beams struck down at the *Serpent's Venom*, her shields collapsed and once again the sky was lit with fire!

There was little else to do, the *Serpent's Venom* was space debris and the world below awaited final destruction. The final explosion had been so bright that only our automatic screen-filters had saved us from blindness.

Three capital ships were lost in that explosion, all were within five hundred metres of the ship when she went down and *The SureFire III* was so badly damaged that she had to be decommissioned on her return to space dock some fifteen months later. Although many more men & women died in the three ships and others lost with the fleet, it is perhaps with greatest regret that we remember the one thousand, one hundred and twenty nine fighter pilots (including all twenty five of my own) who will never again see the homeworld as any fighter within three clicks was simply snuffed out of existence by the huge explosion.

We limped back to the fleet and from the planet below a distinguished looking Gorn, an advisor to Emperor Sathrak XVII who had been aboard the *Venom*, announced a complete and unconditional surrender to the Colonial forces above. In tears, still crying for the unnecessary losses just witnessed, Ramirez rejected the Gorn terms stating that he did NOT want a surrender he wanted a negotiated settlement.

The Battle for Gorn was over.

Epilogue.

I watched from the command chair as the *Scorpius Mk III* descended toward the silver and brown planet below, her three engines working at impulse and easily handling the gravity of the planet below. She was running light, her fighters weaving a complex display pattern around her as she slid down the planets gravity well. The planet's main land mass grew ever larger and with a sudden decreasing impulse power, and a concurrent increase in the noise from the whispering braking thrusters, *The SureFire IV* settled to ground at the planets main spaceport.

With military precision the fighters returned to their on-board docking cradles and the long boarding ramp lowered to hardened steel apron underneath the ship. A wave of heat .. damp, sticky heat hit me but with a grim smile on my face I adjusted my uniform and stepped forward into the searing heat and light, ahead of me a carpet of brown moss and green fern flanked by an expressionless guard of honour.

"VIP Treatment!" I thought as I stepped onto the carpet of vegetation.

The vegetation squelched under my boots but I kept any thoughts from my face as I walked slowly along the path. A young native awaited at the end of the path and hissed, not unpleasantly, "Your transport to the Embassy, Sir!"

Minutes later we drew up outside an impressive glass & steel structure set in beautiful grounds ... sickeningly reminiscent of home. A discreet plaque to the side of the imposing entrance read "Colonial Embassy, Gorn". The youngster supervised the transfer of my luggage into the Embassy and as I approached the doors swung open to reveal an old Colonial in full military regalia, his face radiant with pride.

"Welcome to Gorn, Ambassador!"

"Thank you Josh"

"We must make haste! You have been summoned to The Emperors Palace!"

"Summoned?"

"Invited, Sir!" He smiled, "but on Gorn that means summoned!"

"I see!"

Three hours later I strode, Josh at my side, into the main throne room of The Emperors Palace, Gorn. A palace guard barred our way but on seeing my uniform backed off hissing with annoyance. Then we stood before the throne of the Gorn Emperor.

His eyes, which had never left me from the moment I entered the room, remained fixed on mine. I inclined my head slightly to indicate respect (but not enough to give any impression of humility or subservience) and Josh announced.

"Your Excellency, may I present to you Colonel James J. Clarke, Colonial Ambassador to Gorn?"

For a moment the Emperor remained silent & impassive ... then he grinned a huge reptilian, almost human, grin.

"Welcome to Gorn,. Ambassador!"

"My thanks, Your Excellency!" I replied ... then, returning the smile "You've done well for yourself ... Son!"

The God Emperor Shethrak XVIII's smile broadened into a grin.

"Hell! How was I to know I had royal blood?"