EDGE OF DAWN
AN EMBERS OF THE VOID STORY
CHRISTOPHER FRANK

ONE YEAR BEFORE THE DISCOVERY OF THE ARRAY

Few worlds across the galaxy of Kaveeria remained untouched by the unforgiving wrath of the Advent's armada. At the moment, Vindriss was one of those fortunate planets, and as the rugged gray-green world came into view, Captain Fengorv finalized his approach sequence, armed his advanced weapons system and led a formation of X-14 Star Hawk fighter jets toward the converging fleet of Galactic Union warships positioned around the unscathed world.

The voices of his wingmates crackled through the comm channel as he reduced power to the spacecraft's sublight engines. He settled into an even flight path and examined the holographic instrument panel displaying the first assortment of confirmed targets. He could see their ships. They were already in position. The Advent's concentration of graceful, yet hauntingly sinister assault vessels held steady in the nearest sector, casting their shadows upon the innocent world below as they set their sights on the Union warships standing in their way. The imposing sight of the alien invaders compelled Fengorv to tighten his fingers around the spacecraft's controls. His horned, reptilian face hardened with determination as fiery orange eyes narrowed with unshakeable resolve.

"There's our target," Fengorv declared over the comm channel as his tracking screen pinpointed the desired coordinates. "The ship we've been looking for! Light defensive layers—only one squadron of Interceptors circling their perimeter. We can probably attribute that to the extra sub-fusion turrets mounted across the top of their ship. We'll need to save the fusion rockets to take them out."

"There's only one squadron?" his wingmate Clara asked.

"That's correct," Fengorv confirmed. "Only one."

He detected the heavy murmur of uncertainty echoing through her comm channel. When he sensed doubt that had the potential to spread to the other pilots, he knew it was imperative that he address her concerns before advancing on the enemy ship.

"Something you don't like, Clara?"

"Yes," she replied, "there's only *one* squadron. Wouldn't you expect a primary Advent warship with a high-ranking military leader onboard to have more than just *one* attack squadron for protection?"

"Most pilots would look favorably on that kind of assessment—especially someone like you!"

"I do, but not if it means we're targeting the wrong ship!"

“I agree with Clara,” Kevro, their Rylornian wingmate added. “This defensive pattern deviates from typical Advent protocols!”

Kevro's four eyes tracked the same flight patterns across his terminal, the display's light casting an eerie glow across the broad, fish-like features beneath his visored helmet.

Before Fengorv could ease his wingmate's concerns, the heavy rumble of artillery fire intensified around them as their squadron approached the planet. Lances of plasma fire streaked across the stars and roared past their fighters, triggering a chain of blaring warning alarms within their cockpits.

“Clara—it's the right ship,” he said, his patience wearing thin.

“And if it's not?” she pressed. “If that Advent commander isn't onboard and we send our last available fighters barreling toward the wrong target—”

“Clara,” Fengorv cut in, “I interrogated the prisoners myself! Trust me—we're targeting the right ship!”

Another wave of incoming heavy plasma fire cut him off. Fengorv glanced behind as one of his wingmates took a direct hit, watching as the searing wreckage vanished into the glistening star field.

“Incoming hostiles,” Fengorv shouted. “They've locked weapons and are forming up in Sector 1-12! Keep your secondary defenses active and save the fusion pulse rockets for our attack on the ship! We'll need them to penetrate their shields so we can take down those turrets!”

A cluster of enemy Interceptors appeared on Fengorv's scope. He placed his fingers over the main weapons trigger, ready to engage his first targets of the day.

“It *is* the right ship, Clara,” Fengorv announced, narrowing his determined gaze toward the vessel he had been hunting for two weeks. “Now form up and get your targets locked! The commander is onboard that ship, and we're not leaving this planet until we have him!”

Fengorv's squadron pushed toward the primary Advent vessel while Clara and Kevro split from their formation, engaging the approaching Advent Interceptors with precise bursts of concentrated fire. Swarms of Interceptors plunged from the open hangars of a massive Advent warship, spiraling outward like the menacing clouds of insects they resembled. The deadly formation scattered quickly to annihilate their widespread targets converging toward the hulking leviathan sheathed in jagged protrusions and adorned in the eerie red glow radiating from the exposed openings around multiple weapon ports.

The remaining hostiles who avoided the initial barrage slipped past the Union fighters. One fired a rapid, well-placed shot that clipped Fengorv's left wing, forcing him to silence the blaring alarms ringing in his cockpit. After determining the damage wasn't as severe as the warning systems indicated, he swung hard to port and closed in on his attacker. He hammered the trigger and delivered a killing blow, sending bits of fiery wreckage hurtling across space and into one of his wingmate’s flight paths.

“Hell of a shot, captain,” the Krenv named Larmu said—his flat, horn-dotted green-scaled face flushed with both fear and adrenaline. “Next time, try sending that wreckage in another direction?”

Fengorv grinned as he acquired his next kill. “Clear your targets on the first pass and I won't have to.”

The alien scoffed, disregarding the urge to respond to Fengorv's harmless jab. He redirected his targeting sensors while Fengorv circled to engage two more Interceptors already acquired on his tracking screen. He locked his crosshairs over the same type of targets he’d seen a thousand times before. The agile, black-plated spacecraft outfitted with sets of protracted, sharpened wings protruding from the central pods like iron swords had become both a familiar and regrettable sight. He armed the secondary pulse rockets and prepared to deploy the weapons when the tracking system alarm screamed once again. Another Interceptor closed in behind him, and Fengorv swerved repeatedly to avoid taking another hit.

The erupting cascade of green plasma missed its mark, and as Fengorv readjusted his focus to the battle at hand, he couldn't help but snicker as the inaccurate energy blasts hurtled toward the larger Advent ship holding position in the adjacent sector. He drove the thrusters forward and banked hard to the left, accelerated at a sharp angle, then throttled back as he set himself directly behind the two Interceptors now situated within his targeting scope. He squeezed the trigger and deployed a salvo of rockets into their engines, watching with satisfaction as the explosion tore through their hulls, reducing them to blazing chunks of debris.

He then turned abruptly as an Interceptor closed in behind Larmu. Unable to help him, Fengorv watched helplessly as the Interceptor unleashed a barrage of plasma into the rear engines of the Krenv's fighter jet. His indicator screen lit up with the unsettling casualty statistics as the brief fireball expanded around them.

“They’re starting to throw more at us,” one of his human co-pilots announced, his eyes narrowed as he studied the looming target ahead.

“I can see that!”

“Looks like we might have underestimated that layer of defense,” one of the other human pilots replied.

“It doesn't matter how many they have—we’ll be ready for them! Stay on Vector 3-4-0! Attack Pattern 9-7! Form up and circle around once I take out the head of the formation!”

He tightened his hands around the throttle and redirected his fighter for another pass, but before he could lock his crosshairs over his next target, flickering red bits of data flashed across his display screen—indicating that two more pilots in his squadron had been destroyed. Fengorv sat stoically as he examined the abysmal statistics emblazoned across his holo-screen.

“Clara,” Fengorv announced, “reposition at Sector 1-11. The Iseerian ships will be arriving any second. Commander Neptri's vessel will be the closest to the barrier. Hold there and await command instructions.”

Before she found an opportunity to respond, a new transmission flashed across all secondary displays. An Iseerian cruiser—Commander Kloto Neptri's personal command vessel—emerged from the dimensions of hyperspace and moved into position with the rest of the defenses.

A medium-class carrier cut through the chaos with fluid nimbleness. Its graceful silhouette seemed almost out of place against the inferno of battle—appropriately suited for a vessel under the command of the contemptuous Iseerians, Fengorv thought to himself.

“All pilots, this is Commander Kloto Neptri of the Iseerian Navy,” the shrill, conceited voice declared over the squadron's designated comm channel. “Rest assured, the Iseerians are here to oversee the implementation of this operation, and we will be victorious today! Defenses along the orbital line are secure, and my planet stands ready to lead the way.”

Fengorv noted the gleaming confidence evident in Neptri's voice.

“Hold the line, and I promise you—we will secure a decisive victory that will change our standing in this war. It all falls to each of you. Remember the sacrifices that have brought us here, and look to the victory that will soon follow. Kaveeria is looking to each of you. So, hold the damn line!”

The transmission cut off, compelling Fengorv to grin as he reflected on the added pressure the Commander's poignant statement had placed upon them all.

“Of all the planets the Council could have chosen to oversee this operation, they chose the Iseerians,” Kevro muttered with annoyance in his voice.

“We might have a bigger problem,” Fengorv responded. “The gunships assigned to infiltrate were taken out before we arrived. There isn't time to assemble another squadron. We'll have to make do with available options and handle this a bit unconventionally.”

“Define unconventional,” Clara demanded.

“I don't think we’re going to get another shot at this ship. By the time reinforcements arrive, it might be too late. Reposition in Sector 1-11 and draw them off me. I’ll take my chances and go in alone.”

“You’re going in alone? In a fighter? That wasn't what we planned!”

Fengorv ignored her apprehension, focusing instead on the massive Advent vessel, then readied his weapons system. He drove the control stick forward, taking his Star Hawk closer to the ship as the confirmation flickered across the holo-screen. His eyes widened in surprise—Clara had already rerouted the squadron, complying with his orders faster than expected.

“We're only getting one shot at this,” Fengorv said as he took a purposeful moment to regain his composure and lock his gaze on the target ship.

Specters 2 and 4 remained at his side, and at his command, each pilot narrowed in on the Advent vessel and deployed their fusion-guided rockets into its stern. The weapons struck with devastating precision, delivering a forceful impact that penetrated the glowing blue shield generator. The scorching blast disabled the translucent barrier, and Fengorv allowed himself a moment of triumph as he watched the energy field dissipate—leaving an unimpeded path to the defense turrets mounted on the vessel's dorsal section.

Another wave of Advent Interceptors closed on their formation, but both Specters 2 and 4 broke away to engage the incoming hostiles. The engagement was brief—taking the Advent ships by surprise. But before he could readjust his vector, another wave of plasma pulses thundered past his viewport, striking two more fighters behind him—one of which was Kevro.

Bits of burning debris vanished, and Fengorv forced himself once again to look past the death around him and remember the importance of the objective ahead.

“Clara, another formation is mobilized and inbound, but we don't have enough ships to maintain the perimeter,” Fengorv shouted. “Fall back to Sector 1-18! Wait for reinforcements and—”

“Like hell I'm falling back!” Clara shouted as she examined the same grim statistics.

“You can't take on this many hostiles without backup! They have you outnumbered! Get out of there, Clara! That's an order!”

She answered with action instead of words. A round of heavy firepower erupted from her main guns, the flaring projectiles streaking past Fengorv's ship and consuming the nearest Advent transport. Though she'd eliminated two enemy targets, more Advent ships were already mobilized. Despite her skill, Clara remained fatally outnumbered.

Fengorv's tracking screen displayed two other Union fighters regrouping with Clara, inbound to secure the sector around his ship. Still not enough. Clara was exposed and vulnerable.

“Clara, I gave you a direct order—get out of there now!”

Before she could respond, the other two fighters vanished from his radar, replaced by confirmation of another incoming Advent wave. Spectres 2 and 4 were gone. Clara stood alone.

“Clara, move to the next sector! That's an order!”

She disregarded him again, closing on his gunship's position. She evaded four heavy blasts from the hostile formation but couldn't avoid the fifth. A blazing surge of energy tore through her cockpit, consuming her fighter in a torrent of fiery destruction. Fengorv watched helplessly as the wreckage of Clara's ship scattered across space.

His hands trembled as he steered the spacecraft through the flickering remnants of Clara’s fighter jet. The weight of loss crushed against his chest, another casualty of war that would haunt his conscience.

He examined the holographic weapons display, deactivated his primary turrets and armed the fusion rockets, aware that Neptri and the Iseerian commanders were undoubtedly analyzing his every move from the secure confines of their regal vessels. The computer locked onto the main plasma turret mounted on the vessel's upper section. His thumb hovered over the firing switch as he grasped the secondary trigger, ready to unleash another barrage into the deserving enemy ship. With the target lock confirmed, he squeezed the trigger. Streams of brilliant energy streaked across the stars, accelerating toward their mark. He watched their approach, reflecting on the countless sacrifices that had brought him to this moment.

The rockets found their target. A massive eruption consumed the ship's upper section, and the last defenses crumbled away, leaving Fengorv with an unobstructed path to his objective. He zeroed in on the open hangar bay. The targeting screen flashed green, indicating a clear path into the heart of the ship. Fengorv pushed aside his doubts, redirecting his focus to the mission he'd come to Vindriss to accomplish. He gazed into the open hangar bay and drove the Star Hawk fighter forward as he repeated a simple mantra in his mind—one that burned away his doubts and filled him with unshakable resolve:

He hadn't come this far only to fail.

Even as his tactical display showed the remaining squadrons well out of range, the words continued to burn in his mind:

He hadn't come this far only to fail.

Then, a lone Advent Interceptor appeared suddenly behind him, firing a single, devastating shot into his engines. The blast disabled his fusion drive core and knocked the fighter off course, but his resolve endured:

He hadn't come this far only to fail.

Fengorv guided his crippled Star Hawk into the hangar bay, compensating for the failing systems and adjusting for the best possible crash landing that would guarantee his survival. The flaming transport skidded across the tarmac in a spectacular display of fire, smoke, and screeching metal. He braced himself, his muscles tightening as he absorbed the brutal forces as the ship eventually ground to a halt.

Without hesitation, he emerged from the mangled cockpit and retrieved the SR-1 rocket launcher stored in the compartment beside him. He shifted his stance and targeted the very Advent Interceptor that had shot him down. The instant his targeting sensor locked, he deployed the projectile. The energy pulse tore through the enemy ship, sending it spiraling into the hangar. The twisted heap of the spacecraft skidded erratically across the landing pad, carving a jagged scar in the landing section with a loud, destructive screech, eventually coming to a stop near Fengorv's position.

Once the Interceptor's wreckage came to rest, Fengorv saw the dead pilot encased within the cockpit. He moved forward to investigate, but two insectoid Wask warriors burst into the shadowy hangar, their plasma-powered assault

rifles already leveled at him. The Takorian moved instantly as their weapons discharged, forcing him to dive behind the wreckage of his ship. With bolts of energy roaring past him, he reached for the X-1 assault rifle at his side, then returned fire with a withering volley of his own.

The insectoid warriors weaved and dodged the incoming barrage with unnerving agility, even as Fengorv's firepower tore through the air and scraped against their armored, prickly exoskeletons. The Wasks gripped their plasma rifles tightly, returning fire in a desperate attempt to repel the lone invader who had breached their vessel. But Fengorv's ability was superior, and his reflexes sharper. He deployed a final wave of ordnance, dropping both warriors where they stood.

As their bodies hit the tarmac, Fengorv caught sight of a third figure accompanying the Wasks into the hangar bay.

The Advent Commander. His eagerly pursued target.

A thin smile crossed Fengorv's face as he met the alien commander's quivering orange eyes. He was a surprisingly diminutive figure, frail and etched with leathery, scaled skin.

The relative calm was shattered as the commander sprang into action, diving for a nearby mech assault pod docked into the compartments of a nearby charging station just a few steps away. Once the frail alien had secured himself within the control module, he pressed the activation icon, bringing the systems online in an instant. The massive war machine sprang to life with sets of mechanical legs unfolding from within its shell, lifting the main chassis to full combat height as crackling energy fields formed around the weaponized frame.

Fengorv crouched behind the wreckage of his crashed ship and raised his weapon, unleashing a barrage of firepower toward the mech. The mech pod returned fire and discharged swirling vortices of fusion energy from its particle cannons. Advanced targeting systems maintained a constant barrage while the quadrupedal frame adjusted as the shriveled commander unleashed the machine's fury on his target. Though the shots hammered Fengorv's crashed ship, none found their mark on Fengorv himself.

As they traded fire, Fengorv's trained eye caught a crucial detail—the glowing purple hue of an energetic reactor core partially exposed beneath the main chassis. The orb's distinctive luminescence marked it as a critical weakness in the otherwise formidable design.

Several times he tried to line up the shot, each attempt thwarted by the pod's erratic movements and incoming fire. Finally, he saw his opening—a slight pause in the pod's evasive routine as it prepared to shift its stance.

Fengorv took the shot.

His energy bolt struck true, penetrating the minimal shielding around the power core. The impact was devastating. The war machine collapsed in a heap of twisted metal and sparking circuits, its legs crumpling beneath it like a fallen insect. Fengorv stepped forward cautiously, his weapon charged and ready. He

thrust his assault rifle and bashed away the remnants of the command pod's protective shell, revealing the emaciated alien commander still strapped inside the mangled heap.

Fengorv leveled his weapon at the commander's exposed form as the sounds of battle faded to silence.

“This is Captain Fengorv,” the hulking warrior announced over his comm link. “I have the target in custody!”

Marie Almaida stood behind the pilot of the TR-21 Nebulon gunship as it weaved through debris-filled space lanes beyond Vindriss's orbital line. Streaks of gleaming plasma crisscrossed the sector as the fighter jets and troop transports threaded the deadly maze of debris. Nylim the Augantuan—her trusted comrade and a skilled pilot—guided the transport through the barrage with impressive precision, but unlike her green-skinned, scrawny alien pilot seated at the cockpit controls, Marie’s attention remained fixed on the main comm link.

“Repeat, Captain Fengorv,” she said into the comm. “Repeat your last transmission!”

“You sound surprised,” Fengorv responded with irritation edging his voice. “I said I have the bastard in custody! His head is at the end of my rifle and he needs a ship dispatched for exfiltration—now!”

“You're in luck, Captain.” Her hands swept across the instrument panel as she plotted her course toward the Advent ship. “We made it into the sector faster than expected. E.T.A. is looking like two minutes. Standby!”

The gunship plunged deeper into the sweeping battle, its reinforced hull shuddering under the impact of nearby explosions. Through the viewport, Marie watched as an Advent destroyer split apart under the concentrated fire from the Iseerian cruisers, but more Interceptors had already mobilized, and Fengorv’s squadron was gone.

“You might want to hang onto something,” Nylim shouted as he jerked the controls. “I think the Advent knows they’re up against one of the galaxy’s best pilots— so they’re likely going to be throwing a lot of reinforcements at us to try to stop me!”

“I can't say I was particularly worried about that possibility,” Marie responded.

Nylim grinned as he navigated the fields of debris and spitting plasma. Another squadron of the sharpened, insect-like Interceptors appeared on the targeting screen, but Nylim had already prepped another barrage of heat-seeking plasma rockets, and with the simple press of his trigger—and the unapologetic flash of a prideful grin—Nylim unleashed the whirling cascade of gleaming blue energy into the face of every enemy transport in their path. Nylim exhaled, then reduced thrust as their transport pierced the cloud of debris.

“That was too close!”

“You've been saying that a lot lately, and it's really starting to worry me,” Marie said. “One of these days it won't be!”

“Well,” Nylim said through a fearless grin as he armed the ship's secondary weapons cannon, “it’s not going to be today!”

He clamped down on the triggers and deployed the thundering spears of plasma pulses into the face of the alien craft.

“Well, would you look at that?” he said as the simmering remnants of the enemy squadron vanished around them. “Looks like I got 'em all!”

He leaned forward and spoke into the comm.

“Captain Fengorv, be ready! We’re making our final approach!”

———

Seconds later, Nylim brought the transport into the open hangar bay of the Advent vessel. The landing gear extended as the ship dropped in for a landing, while Fengorv kept his sidearm trained on the commander's head—enough to deter potential Wask soldiers in the hangar from reaching for their weapons.

Marie disembarked with her special forces unit following close behind her. Fengorv jabbed his weapon into the commander's back as the team moved in to secure their target. With swift efficiency, they subdued the alien and ushered him toward the transport.

Marie moved toward Fengorv with an encouraging grin crossing her tawny features. But her smile faltered when she saw the frustration burning in his eyes.

“I'm sorry, captain. You had a good squadron. Kevro. Clara. I know what they meant to you. We’ll be sure to honor their sacrifice and—”

She paused, noticing the tightness in his poise and the anguish in his eyes.

“Let's make it worth it and get that bastard to the surface.”

She turned toward the two human soldiers standing watch behind her.

“Mason, Adler, secure the prisoner for transport!”

Fengorv allowed himself a moment to assess the other soldiers who had accompanied Marie, then walked toward her with a desperation that surprised even himself.

“Have you heard from Commander Neptri? Does he have another unit mobilized?”

“He’s trying, but they cut off our units at Sector 11. But Lightning Squadron is on standby—and fully capable. I'm confident.”

Fengorv sighed nervously and stared out the open hangar.

“Is Shadow Squadron still in position?”

“The Advent’s coordinating attacks on Alskune and Lavaria. The Council issued new orders and sent them there instead. But Lightning Squadron is going

to have a tough time breaking through the defenses, so I think it's safe to say we might be waiting a while before they can get here."

Fengorv looked upon the world below with profound grief, unable to turn away from the doomed landscape.

"I think it's safe to say we're going to lose Vindriss."

His words cut off as plasma fire erupted from behind a stack of supply crates. The surviving Wask soldiers had used their momentary distraction to take up defensive positions.

"Contact!" Marie shouted, diving behind a landing strut as bolts of energy sizzled past their heads. Her team scattered for cover, dragging the prisoner with them. The hangar erupted into chaos as more Wasks emerged, drawing the attention of every soldier on the tarmac. Fengorv noted the distraction, turned toward the momentarily unguarded prisoner and seized his opportunity. He grabbed the commander's arm and hauled him toward the docked gunship as the chaos of the ongoing firefight continued around them.

"Captain," Marie shouted over the roar of weapons fire once she spotted him darting toward the nearby transport, "Captain Fengorv! What are you doing?"

Before she could make a move toward the ship, Fengorv was already inside. With a swift strike of his assault rifle to the commander's head, the alien collapsed to the floor, while Fengorv raced to the cockpit and pressed the instrument panel to bring the ship's engines to life. He gripped the controls, lifting the ship off the tarmac. He banked hard to the left as he wove through the crossfire with practiced precision, leaving the firefight—and Marie's unit—behind him.

"My apologies, Captain Almaida," Fengorv announced over the comm channel as he steered the transport away from the Advent hangar. "I'll reroute another ship to extract you as soon as one becomes available. In the meantime, I—"

"What the hell are you doing, Captain?"

Fengorv hesitated, glancing back at the motionless prisoner lying behind him.

"The only thing left that I *can* do!"

He changed frequencies and guided the ship through the carnage of the escalating battle as the weight of his own words settled in his chest. It was another burden the war had now forced him to carry.

"This is Captain Fengorv of the honorable war-fleet of the planet Takoric sending a message on all frequencies!"

He paused, allowing the tension of the ongoing battle to reinforce his commitment and quell any lingering uncertainty.

"Let the warriors of the Advent hear my message clearly: Your commander has been captured! And I will kill him the same way you killed my squadron! Clara, Kevro, Larmu—they're dead!"

Another squadron of Interceptors formed ahead of him, and Fengorv grabbed the controls—unleashing a punishing wave of firepower that destroyed them instantly.

“Order all ships to withdraw from the planet and cease all hostilities against our fleet! This ends today! Surrender—or the commander dies!”

“You fought valiantly today, Captain Fengorv,” the unexpected voice of Commander Kloto Neptri announced over the channel. “Although I would expect nothing less from someone with as exemplary a service record as yours.”

Fengorv’s hands tightened around his weapons deployment system once again as the holographic image of Commander Kloto Neptri himself materialized from the terminal at the center of his instrument panel. The heavily distorted image, skewed by the sweeping carnage, was being broadcast to all designated units spread across the fleet, but struggled to maintain clarity. But even through the jumbled assortment of incoherent flashes, he could still distinguish the Iseerian's defining features—the back of his head protruding like a pulsating sack with small tentacles dangling from his gray-blue skin, the lines of nostrils situated on the top of his skull, and the condescending gleam of his eyes permanently etched into his bone structure.

“I know you heard my transmission,” Fengorv said. “My orders to the Advent were clear. I'm not backing down.”

Neptri’s expression was unshaken.

“I do hope you reconsider. For your sake. And for the pilots who will be forced to take such a regrettable and unfortunate action if you compel me to give them the order to fire on your ship.”

As he steadied his advance, the tracking monitor blared, alerting him to the multiple approach signals in his vicinity. He glanced to his right, then his left, seeing a formation of XR-171 star fighters closing in behind him.

“You're not going to fire on this ship with the prisoner onboard,” Fengorv shouted as he noted the fighters’ coordinates on his tracking screen. “Reposition your squadron. There are more important targets out there.”

“That prisoner onboard your ship is more than a meager hostage to barter with.”

Fengorv turned once again to analyze the fighter jets waiting for Neptri’s order to fire upon him.

“He’s in my custody. I’ll decide what he’s useful for.”

Neptri remained motionless in his expression.

“You were a hero in the Battle of Skrade. You lost far too many comrades in the siege on Barvonak. And even here, the bitter losses have only solidified your standing as one of the Galactic Union’s most deserving heroes. But every sacrifice that's been made along the way—and every blow you’ve endured has led us to that prisoner. You’ve been a part of this operation for six months. You know as well as I do what we’ve been planning. And you know how critical that prisoner is to the entire operation!”

Fengorv lowered his head somberly as he reflected on the very poignant moments Neptri had just alluded to.

Then, a piercing blast tore through the gunship's left side engine—triggering a blaring chain of emergency alarms inside the cockpit. Neptri's fighter jets shifted their positions as the pilot who had fired the crippling blow moved in closer.

Fengorv seized the controls in a desperate attempt to steady the plummeting gunship as it descended through Vindriss's atmosphere.

"We can negotiate a ceasefire," Fengorv shouted over the wailing alarms as he tried to regain some control over the disabled ship. "We can spare the planet! We can save more lives! We can avenge what we've lost!"

"Captain Fengorv, that prisoner is not a bartering tool! You know as well as I do the information he has, and where it will lead us. He holds the key to everything we've been planning. *That's* what's going to avenge everything we've lost."

Fengorv corrected his approach signature, adjusting his flight path in a desperate attempt to bring the transport in for a survivable crash landing. The squadron of fighter jets were still behind him tracking his descent as he spiraled through the clouds—the pilots undoubtedly aware of his exceptional piloting skills. Perhaps they were familiar with his exploits during the Battle of Ulreen, Fengorv thought to himself as he plotted his landing site. It was unlikely Neptri would risk the hostage by firing on a ship if the pilot couldn't ensure a survivable landing.

Fengorv prepared for landing, lowering the thrust as he eyed the abandoned runway stretched beyond the outskirts of a city on the surface. The fighter jets behind him broke away, accelerating toward the landing pad before Fengorv could reach it. With a TR gunship at their side, the fighter jets were already on the ground as Fengorv made his final descent. He decreased the thrust on all engines, lowered the still functioning landing gear and brought the crippled transport in for a rough but survivable landing. Once the transport came to a stop and the clouds of dust subsided, the engines fell silent. He could already see the groups of heavily armed special forces rushing toward the landing pad.

"Captain Fengorv—we have you surrounded! Relinquish the prisoner! Step forward with your hands up!"

Fengorv sighed, quickly finding a way to accept the unfortunate situation his actions had put him in. With grim reluctance, he activated the controls to lower the boarding ramp, rose slowly from his seat in the cockpit and emerged from the ship. The special forces surrounded him quickly, and once they noted the sense of cooperation in Fengorv's eyes, two of the special forces moved past the group, hustled into the ship and subdued the now groggy, defenseless prisoner.

“Get him to the interrogation center,” Commander Kloto Neptri announced as he stepped off the nearby docked TR gunship. “I’m eager to see all the little secrets he’s got tucked away in there!”

Fengorv turned abruptly, spotting the Commander and his armed Iseerian counterparts walking toward him. With a subtle gesture of their weapons, the soldiers led the prisoner away from the tarmac, but Neptri remained where he was, offering enough indication to Fengorv that he had more to say.

“Excellent work, Captain Fengorv. On behalf of the galaxy of Kaveeria, I commend you for your heroic actions.”

Fengorv stood silently, stunned by the calm level-headed demeanor coming from the alien overseer standing poised to arrest him.

“I need all the heroes I can get. And right now, that includes you.”

Fengorv remained motionless, struggling to comprehend the Iseerian’s unexpected reaction to their predicament.

“And as far as I’m concerned, this little incident never happened. I hope you don't forget that! And I hope you don't forget the sacrifices our two planets have made to see this operation through.”

Neptri turned to signal the marines gathered around them to lower their weapons and stand down. His posture softened as he studied the battle-worn warrior before him. Pride and acceptance radiated from his eyes, and gradually, Fengorv's gaze mirrored his resolve as well.

“Despite what you’ve endured here today, I want you to see there's still hope. Something to drive you forward. Something worth fighting for. Enough of our worlds lie in ruin. Now get back out there, captain. Your fight here isn't finished.”

Fengorv acknowledged his honorable words with an uncomfortable nod. Then, a piercing roar echoing from the fusion engines of an X-14 fighter jet squadron broke his concentration. The formation thundered over his head and ascended to the sky—advancing toward the mass of Advent ships that had slipped through the clouds as they prepared for their final descent toward the Union-controlled cities. Fengorv kept his focus on the dreadful sight emblazoned across the sky, absorbing the pulsating echo of weapons fire as it cracked through the clouds like endless thunder. As the roar of galactic war lingered in the skies, he acknowledged the haunting truth—he now stood upon another world destined to suffer the Advent’s devastating wrath. The war was far from over, but today the Galactic Union had struck a decisive blow. Whether it would be enough remained to be seen.