

Chapter One:

An enormous shape moved through the blackness, glinting with the reflected light of a burning sun. From the top, it looked like an ellipse with a flattened rear end, pipes protruding from that rear end, rocket engines attached to those pipes, used for pushing the huge thing through space. To a member of the crew or the thousands of Interspatial Marines, starfighter pilots, clerical workers, administrators and officers on board, it would be identified as an Interplanetary Military Alliance transport starcraft, known colloquially as a Spacebase, but referred to in military terms as a HIT/AC heavy transport, number 178 of 450. Rows of small laser turrets stuck out from the sides of the starcraft, giving it an aesthetically awkward shape, while larger cannon turrets stuck up from the upper decks, dome-shaped, mostly, but there were some linear-based box shapes on the top as well. Currently, those on board were making their way towards a planet. The pilots were preparing the enormous rocket engines which would be used to slow the craft down, which stuck out from the bottom of it. The briefing had been given: They were moving into battle with hostile forces.

One of the people on board sat alone in one of the canteen areas, half an hour after the break period. He looked down at his food, consisting of bread and badly synthesised meat, along with a few scattered vegetables in the form of a runny slop. That depressed him, so he looked around the room. Metals everywhere, from the aluminium floors, walls and ceilings, to the stainless steel legs of the tables and benches. The tables and benches were all bolted down, presumably to prevent people lifting them up as weapons. The obligatory mess of the day's food-fight was gone, swept away by the maintenance robots, showing that even young adults were still only children at heart.

He picked up his fork and stabbed at the meat, shoving it in his mouth along with some vegetables. It tasted surprisingly good, considering the quality. He mopped up the juices with the bread.

He thought about his friends, a loyal bunch at least, if he could think of nothing else, and, as he still concentrated on the food, he couldn't. Together, they were constantly getting into trouble, usually related to the brewing of alcoholic drinks or lewd parties in the dormitories, the likes of which he had been caught for today.

As he brought the fork to his mouth, a siren sounded and the red alarm lights lit up. The specific alarm for the starcraft pilots, he thought.

"Shit!", he thought as the fork clattered to the ground, a small lump of meat still stuck to its prongs. He got up and ran towards the starcraft hangar.

* * *

Frank Bennett was a starfighter pilot, a position of danger and worry. He had originally joined the Interplanetary Military Alliance because he wanted the excitement of the starcraft pilot position, but it soon transpired that he didn't like starfighter combat, let alone any sort of combat piloting; although he might have been placated with a starbomber position. The starcraft piloting positions paid well, but he saw no point in receiving more money if his relatively mediocre piloting would mean that he would not live to see it.

But at least the starbombers had a set of targeted missiles most of the time, along with several magazines of missile ammunition, while all of the weapons on his Medium Class Starfighter had to be aimed by aiming the starfighter itself, particularly the missiles, which were "fire-and-forget" dumb-fire models.

In the training simulations, it had transpired that Frank was superior at terrestrial combat compared to starcraft combat. He had applied for a transfer to either the Terrestrial Marine Sub-Organisation or, the elite of the Alliance terrestrial and interspatial forces, the Interspatial Marines. He had applied five times in six months, but despite affixing the results from the combat simulations, he

had been refused, based on the fact that there was a lack of starfighter pilots on the transport.

He would not have worried as much if he had been a good pilot, in spite of his opposition to it, but he wasn't even very good at it. He had been using the starfighter for six months, and for three months before that in training. After those nine months, where most people would be moving onto advanced piloting manoeuvres, he was still struggling with the feat of getting his mind locked into relative velocity thinking. So, for six months, all he had managed to do was make himself itchy with discontent.

Having reached the hangar, he rushed through the open door, designed as one part of an airlock system, into the hangar. He looked around for his friends, scanning around the bustling hangar, full of weapons-laden starfighters. He spotted them in between a number of the starcraft, amazing-looking machines with stylistic curves and lines. Just beyond them was a group of people he considered to be a nice sight: some of the attractive female starcraft pilots standing a group, giggling, talking and generally doing *girl-stuff*. Nice, he thought.

His mind was taken off the girls by a booming voice, "Hey! Frank! Where you been?" His friends had spotted him and Frank walked towards them. He answered, "Punishment. Lieutenant Donnelly caught me with the brewing equipment and the beer. Sent to the library to organise the computer systems. Somehow the word's gotten around that I'm alright with them."

His friend looked disappointed. "Don't tell me that he confiscated the lot?"

"No, but he took the brewing equipment with him. The beer's locked in the safe, though."

"Ah. Well, in any case, there's five minutes to launch and you've missed the readjustment time..."

"Readjustment time" was the starcraft pilot's slang term for the period after the mechanics had fixed your starcraft ready for combat where you had an opportunity to fiddle with the controls and ask the mechanic to change the fix on any components which didn't feel as if they were fitted properly, an occurrence which was relatively common, considering the complexity of a starcraft's mechanical and electronic components. Usually, it was about fifteen minutes long, although in a rush, it could be cut to as few as ten minutes.

"...But Jimmy took a look at your machine. It looks alright. So, it looks like we'll be flying against a group of religious nutcases, you know, the ones we heard in the briefing three days ago. The somethings-or-other of Light."

"Defenders of Light?"

"That's the one. They seem to want to get an invasion crew down on those platinum and titanium mines on the surface. We've battered them back every time. Spacebase 124 blasted away one of their big starcraft a few AU's away on the third planet. You'd think they'd just give up by now."

Another of Frank's friends spoke up. "Ah, well, they give good sport. Based on that, I'll be taking bets. Trevor, over here. First to score a kill today? Excellent odds, but don't get your hopes up. Fifty Credits? Form a line, over there!"

Frank wasn't interested in betting. He couldn't pick a winner anyway, he thought, so based on that, he hopped straight into his machine, a United Armouries MSF-6 Starfighter, as was its official nomenclature. With two sweeping wings set on the back of either side of a cylindrical nose-cone, the cockpit set right in front, with two smaller wing structures either side of the cockpit, it was a

striking statement of its combat efficiency. Littered on the wings were assorted laser cannons, plasma cannons and chaingun Gatling cannons, with two powerful rocket engines, with a large centrally mounted fuel tank and a large nuclear fusion reactor set behind the cockpit. Now inside the cockpit, he set the computer to have his craft the way he preferred it, prepared the plasma and laser cannons, opening up the heat-sink mechanisms, made sure the missiles were in the right order so he could select them easily during combat and generally tried to make up for lost time.

With about a minute left to go, the other pilots got into their machines, strapping themselves into their cockpits to keep themselves secure during the brutal acceleration and deceleration common in starcraft combat. Frank's commanding officer's voice crackled through the communicator set, "B13 Squadron, report in. This is Squadron Leader Harts. Report in."

Frank reported in quickly over his communicator set, then prepared himself for launch, pulling the four-point harness over his head, strapping it in the middle. The rest of the pilots moved their starcraft into their squadron lines, closed their cockpits and prepared their craft for takeoff. The huge hangar door opened up, revealing the black canvas of space, intermittently dotted with patterns of light. The commanding officer said, "B13 Squadron, prepare for launch! Repeat, B13 Squadron, prepare for launch!"

Frank set the throttle into position, slightly forward, in order to take advantage of a design idiosyncrasy and pushed down hard on the starter button. The computer went online, displaying in white letters on a pale blue background:

UNITED ARMOURIES DIAGNOSTIC EXAMINATION:

Engaging reactor ... Reactor active.

Engaging computer control systems ... Computer active.

Weapons systems: Laser cannons active.

 Plasma cannons active.

 Chainguns active.

 Gauss cannons active.

 Missiles active and in position.

Engine engaging ...

The two rocket engines in the back of the starcraft roared into life almost immediately. Flames licked out of the back as the fuel injection systems fired fuel into the engines. Frank eased the throttle into the neutral position. The computer continued to display:

Engine engaged and active.

All systems active and operational.

Diagnostic test complete.

UNITED ARMOURIES MSF-3 STARFIGHTER OPERATING SYSTEM.

The computer clicked a few times, before settling into its normal routine of controlling the engines and weapons systems. A basic GUI displayed itself on the screen, while status lights in front of him turned from red to green in series. The commanding officer radioed, "B13 Squadron, engage your engines!"

Frank pushed the throttle forward. The sudden jolt of acceleration threw him back into his seat quite violently. He rocketed out of the hangar door, out of the side of the transport starcraft. Glowing starcraft engines in front of him soon faded as the squadrons formed.

B13 Squadron quickly assembled into their characteristic V-shaped formation. They were needed

almost immediately, so once they had assembled, Frank just caught a glimpse of the other open hangars and the blue flames coming from starcraft exhausts.

The squadron leader quickly dictated commands through the radio system, “B13 Squadron – Prepare weapons. Defenders of Light light transport attempting to gain spatial superiority. Squadrons of KMS ES starfighters detected. Move forward with me, approximately 0.01 AU's. Over.”

With this command, the squadron leader's starfighter soon blasted out of sight. Frank took a look at the scanner in front of him, hammering his throttle to the red zone of its track. The rocket engines behind him let out a great burst of blue flame and Frank was knocked back into his seat as the g-forces took their toll on Frank's body. The velocity reading on one of the status screens incremented rapidly, and Frank tried to keep his mind off the discomfort.

He soon heard the command over the radio to slow to a cruise. He hammered the throttle all the way backwards, being knocked forward into his harness as the starfighter's reverse engines slowed the craft down. Within twenty seconds, the craft had slowed down sufficiently to see the squadron leader's starfighter, along with a few others from his squadron.

The gigantic lander craft in front of them soon came into view. It was a large, awkward, wedge-shaped craft with several assorted cannons on board. It wasn't as large as the Spacebase, but it was still thousands of times bigger than the starbombers who would assault its decks with their magazines full of missiles. The GUI on one of the computer screens soon showed a different sort of starcraft: A wireframe representation of a crescent-shaped starfighter (Designed by a company called Kyreian Military Supplies, a company much less significant than United Armouries, the military suppliers of the Alliance, Frank remembered from one of his many briefings). These would be taken on by starfighters, as the starbombers were incapable of taking them on head-to-head, being armed for different types of combat.

It was at this moment that he remembered a briefing he watched after a class a week ago or such. "The Defenders of Light are known for their almost complete use of energy weapons, especially arc-lightning cannons. They are to be considered very dangerous in that respect..." Frank tried to remember the rest, about how to avoid those arc cannons, but his mind was blank, mainly from the pressure and discomfort of the rapid acceleration and deceleration.

About thirty seconds had passed since he had started thinking about that, and he wondered why exactly the squadron hadn't received any orders yet. He pushed the accelerator forward slightly, taking a cursory glance at the commander's craft.

Bits of the cockpit and fuselage had been blasted off the starfighter. The front of the craft had been mangled. He knew of only one type of weapon which could hit such a small target from such a short distance – a gauss-cannon sniper weapon. At least it wasn't going to happen again from the same gun. Gauss sniper cannons were notorious for melting, due to the lack of coolant that could be distributed to them and the high amount of heat created from the propulsion of the projectile. The craft, and the disintegrated components, were still travelling along at a cruise velocity.

Frank immediately activated the radio, shouting into his microphone, “This is Red Sixteen. Repeat, this is Red Sixteen. The Squadron Leader has been hit. Over!”

The subordinate officer soon radioed in through the communicator sets. At least the morale won't be affected too much, Frank thought.

A strong female voice came through the radio, "This is Secondary Squadron Leader Vanessa Ferndan. Continuing with standard procedures. Prepare for contact with DOL starfighters. Watch yourselves! Bennett, thanks for the call."

Frank felt proud at that moment. Soon, the new squadron leader had prepared for the mission. Frank noted the large volumes of starfighters coming forward. Vanessa shouted, "We have to break their lines! Don't worry about formation! We charge at the count of three... one... two... THREE!"

Frank hammered his throttle all the way to the end. He could immediately feel the stress on the engines, but he wasn't expecting to have to do it for long: He had soon reached combat velocity, and clicked a switch to keep him under a certain velocity. The Defenders' craft were still in formation, and he saw one of their starfighters coming straight for him... Would the fuselage sustain a potential crash?

Yes, it would, Frank thought as one of the enemy starcraft glanced off one of his wings of his own craft. He had broken past the line, which for all its discipline in a "chicken" situation, had broken after the A and B groups had made it behind them. Frank slowed down the craft quickly, inverting the craft with a sharp pull backwards on the joystick. He pushed down on the weapons select buttons for the gauss cannons mounted on the frontal turret.

Quickly spotting an enemy craft on his scanner, he pushed the control stick forwards, watching the representation on his scanner. Lining his sights up with the craft, pushing the targeting button for the computer, he twitched the control stick to keep himself in line, tweaking the throttle. Having locked the starcraft in his sights, he pushed down on the trigger in front of him.

Frank heard the faint sounds of recoil as the guns thundered every half-second. The blue smoke corkscrew left behind the rounds of ammo served as effective tracers. Soon, bits of the starfighter in front of him, which had been trying to outmanoeuvre him, were scattered as a few lucky rounds struck the engines, soon culminating in a small explosion. The shots had been well-placed, considering the velocities which the craft travelled at, and Frank's often-mediocre piloting. At least he had something to show for his nine months behind the stick of a starcraft: He had at least learned how to use the weapons effectively.

Frank was soon under attack from two sides as a couple of laser-cannon armed starfighters rushed towards him. He pulled the joystick backwards, disengaging the gauss cannons and switching on the plasma cannons. With the starfighters gaining ground behind him, he hammered the throttle forward slightly, then jolted the stick to the left. The starfighter twisted to the left, then, as Frank yanked the throttle to strong reverse thrusters, the starfighters zoomed past him. Frank decided to make sure that the next contact was on his own terms.

Suddenly, he noticed a red mark on his scanner coming from the bottom. Frank shoved his control stick forwards sharply, sending the nose of his starfighter dipping towards the target. As the silhouette of an enemy starfighter came into his sights, he shoved the throttle forwards, pulling the joystick backwards. The craft was now just in front of him, and appeared to be making sparks from the engine. Frank pulled down hard on the trigger, sending a flame-structure of superheated ionised gas flickering from the cannons. Soon, the craft in front had caught on fire as the fuel tank ruptured, and Frank promptly yanked the control stick backwards, sending his head banging against the headrest of his seat. A few sharp jolts came from the craft as pieces of shrapnel banged against the undercarriage.

Suddenly, he received a message on his communicator: "This is Black Twelve from A3 Squadron! Need assistance near vector, V13003, HB4560, HL90, as measured from Spacebase. Repeat: Need

assistance. Over!”

Frank immediately put the vector co-ordinates into the computer, then pulled the control stick towards the blue target on the scanner. Once he had lined it up, he shoved the throttle forwards, stopping just short of the red line. He was knocked back against his seat, but soon returned to normal as the craft struck the velocity limiter.

By the time Frank had reached the target, there was already a swarm of Alliance starfighters there, all firing at a particularly large craft. This craft was wedge-shaped, somewhat like the lander, but was much smaller. There were turrets all over its body, most of them glowing red as they moved to blast down some of the starfighters which were swarming around it like angry bees.

Suddenly, one of the starfighters erupted in a burst of orange flame and scrap metal, and Frank knew that this would be a dangerous craft to try to take on. He engaged both his gauss cannons and his laser cannons, considering for a second whether to use missiles.

He had no time to complete that thought, as he reached combat range. Suddenly, a laser cannon had locked onto him and Frank found himself sharply declining in order to try to trick it. He remembered a briefing that he had about the craft:

“This... (the teacher had pointed to a picture of a starcraft) ...is a Kyreian Military Supplies SCT Support starcraft. It is well-known by many pilots who have taken it on for its formidable armoury... Aim for the pilot if possible, if not, aim for the engines.”

As soon as he had remembered that, he made his way towards the engines, twisting and turning his stick and sending his head flying around the place for a few brief seconds. He shouted over the communicator set: “This is Red Sixteen. Suggested plan of action: Do not aim for the pilot. Repeat, do not aim for the pilot. Fire on the engines. Over.”

Frank hoped that in spite of his lack of rank, the rest of the starfighter pilots would listen to his suggestion. Suddenly, he caught another explosion from the corner of his eye as another starfighter exploded. He had noticed that the computer depicted burn marks all over his own craft by this point as well.

He had made it to the undercarriage of the support craft, where there was a much lower concentration of weapons. He, working on instinct, pulled the nose of the starfighter into line with the rear of the craft, then pulled back on the trigger. He felt the reverberations of the gauss cannons on the front four times in the two seconds in which he had managed to get any fire in. He swiftly looked at the damage. Bits of the engine plating had come off, leaving the flames from the engine deflected in strange ways, but the damage had been superficial. Frank then pulled the throttle backwards, flipping his craft towards the engines again by yanking the control stick backwards.

He noted by this point that more and more of the starfighters were attacking the engines, but by this point, Frank wanted to have the last word on the subject. He would have to get his velocity in line with the support craft, which seemed to have turned off its velocity regulator and was now speeding away. Frank turned off both the laser cannons and the gauss cannons, switching to the missiles. He clicked off his own velocity regulator switch, banging the throttle into the middle of the forward yellow zone.

As more and more starfighter pilots realised that the craft was pulling away from them, more and more of them were catching up on Frank, who had caught the craft right in his sights. Twitching the control stick from left to right, Frank kept an attempt up to try to get the engine opening right on his

sights.

He noticed the yellow-red plasma trail and blue smoke corkscrews coming from the starfighters behind him, and started to worry that in this situation, he would be shot down by his own allies. But before they could mess up, the support craft changed trajectory. Frank noticed this, his senses at a high, twitching the craft in line with the craft.

Within that split-second, Frank realised his opportunity, pulling back on the trigger three times. Three missiles blasted from the missile launcher mounted on the undercarriage. All Frank noticed of the missiles was a very quick blue trail behind them, before a big red blast inside the engines of the starcraft in front of him. He quickly dipped out of the way, before noticing the massive explosion at the top of his eye. Bits of metal struck the cockpit screen from the now-scattered support craft.

Frank thought to himself, "I'm on a roll today!" However, he didn't have much time to celebrate his victory: The Defenders of Light had regrouped, and were coming straight for Frank and the other starfighters in the area. With this in mind, Frank switched on one of the set of velocity regulators (this one allowing twice as much velocity as the last), in order that he wouldn't move too quickly that he couldn't slow down enough to avoid a collision, or something of the like.

Having prepared himself for the combat ahead, Frank hammered forward his throttle, but it wasn't long before the velocity regulator kept the engines from accelerating the craft any more. Frank rapidly switched off the missiles, switched on the laser cannons and prepared himself for the evasive manoeuvres that would be necessary to evade this group of starfighters.

With the crescent-shaped craft flying towards him, Frank shouted down the communicator, "This is Red Sixteen! Requesting assistance around vector V12990, HB4300, HR27. Over!" With assistance called for, Frank locked on one of the starfighters as a target. They were approaching him, about a kilometre away... five hundred metres...

Suddenly, Frank could see only yellow and red in front of him. He had been struck by a plasma shot. His cockpit very quickly became hot, causing him to sweat profusely. Soon, his skin was red from the heat and he was grimacing in pain. Struggling against his instinct, he shoved the stick forwards, soon breaking free of the plasma stream. The heat quickly subsided, but Frank still felt very uncomfortable.

With that discomfort on his mind, Frank quickly shoved the stick backwards again, while pulling the throttle into the reverse red zone. As soon as he had levelled, he noticed that the enemy starfighters had swept right past him, but were still on his scanner. Clicking off the velocity regulator, he shoved the throttle just beyond the yellow zone to the front, looking forward with eyes darting from side to side, despite the discomfort he was still feeling. He had soon nearly caught them, then, while clicking on one of the velocity regulators, he tried to get one of the starfighters locked on to his targeting computer.

The red corners on the HUD which symbolised target acquisition soon appeared around one of the starfighters. Frank twitched the control stick into line, the deflection sight moving rapidly from side to side on his HUD before managing to move the craft into line with the other one. In one of the split-second situations which characterised starfighter combat,, Frank managed to loose off a salvo of laser fire on the starfighter. It struck the craft, but merely left superficial damage.

Suddenly, Frank noticed a green dot on his scanner, and a crackly voice came from the communicator, "Red Sixteen, this is Red Four. Answering your call for assistance. Red Twelve and

Blue Two are coming up behind me. Keep the pressure on them!”

Frank noticed that, by this point, the enemy starfighters were attempting evasive movement. By using throttle control and pushing the control stick forwards, Frank managed to keep behind them. He noted that they were not using very drastic movements, and he promptly felt very suspicious.

It soon transpired that his suspicions were well-founded, as a sudden blast of electromagnetic force seemed to affect the computer systems. The speaker in his communicator headset started to crackle and an effect similar to “white noise” appeared on the computer screens and status panels. Frank took a look at his scanner. A massive trail of red was obscuring the screen, and Frank realised that he had just been missed by an arc-lightning cannon from a Defender starfighter.

Working on instinct, Frank pushed his stick forwards, reaching over to disengage the velocity regulator, then he shoved his throttle right to the end of the red zone. As a trail of blue flame erupted behind him, Frank knew that this would be a big test of his piloting skills.

He remembered another part of the briefing on the Defenders of Light: “The arc-lightning cannon is a particularly deadly weapon because of its use of non-ammunition sources, like other energy weapons; it does not overheat, unlike most other energy weapons, and it can cause electrical interference with the computer systems of the craft. A brief hit to the right place on your starfighter can lead the engines to malfunction, either leaving you as a sitting duck or else blowing you to pieces.”

Frank certainly was worried about the last part. He quickly rolled the craft in an evasive move and attempted to outmanoeuvre the starfighter that was chasing him. In a brief moment of clear vision, Frank could see a steady stream of electrical discharge coming from the wing-tip mounted cannons, and the crescent-shaped silhouette of the starfighter that was chasing him. However, soon the starfighter was back on Frank's tail, closer than ever. Frank knew by this point that trying to outmanoeuvre was going to be difficult and that outflanking was impossible. Dipping and twisting was difficult when you had two bolts of lightning chasing after you, almost like a strange form of celestial retribution. Frank hammered the joystick forwards, sending the craft downwards as he flipped the throttle back.

The engine status light was flickering between green and red. He had put himself in a dangerous position in trying to outrun the other starfighter, as the difference in acceleration rates wasn't significant. Nevertheless, he was still very worried about the electrical discharges which were still making their way towards him.

Suddenly, a bolt appeared to skim across the surface of the right wing. Just as suddenly, Frank was blasted forwards as the engine juddered into an acceleration. A sudden reflex in his arm forced the joystick backwards, protecting him from the possible effects of a complete engine malfunction.

Having regained control over the engines, he pushed the throttle into the yellow zone, rolling the craft and sending it to the left as he quickly pulled the stick backwards. Frank knew that he wasn't going to be the one to destroy this craft. He called over the communicator, “This is Red Sixteen. I repeat, this is Red Sixteen. Have an arc-cannon fighter on my tail. I am requesting backup. I repeat, requesting backup!”

As he rolled and climbed to the right, he heard a response, “Red Sixteen, this is Blue Seventeen. We have your position. Standby for assistance and keep it off your tail. Over!”

With assistance called for, sheer force of will would have to act to keep Frank from being roasted

alive. Pulling the joystick towards him, he tried to locate the squadron on his scanner. He could see a few random green dots on the scanner, but nothing significant. In contrast, there was a lot of red, mainly because of the electro-magnetic interference coming from the craft behind him.

Suddenly, the screens blurred into white noise, an awful crackling came from Frank's headset and the engines started spluttering. Another bolt was skimming its way over the right wing, and this time, Frank jerked the joystick to the right, pushing the joystick forwards once he had turned a right angle. He checked the scanners again. This time, he could see a large group of green dots coming towards him. Frank needed to make one final desperate dash for the squadron.

He shoved the throttle right to the end of the red zone again, keeping the pressure up on the starfighter chasing him by alternating left and right rolls. All of a sudden, the craft started jerking from side to side and the engines started sputtering again, this time ruining Frank's acceleration. He refused to let the enemy win, shoving the stick forwards. Frank's head was spinning from the constant accelerations and decelerations, not to mention the rolls, the climbs and the dives. However, he needed to make just one more final spurt towards his squadron ...

Concentrating his mind completely on making it past the squadron, Frank stared forwards, using instinct to dictate his motions. He hardly noticed the final spins and dives. The loudspeaker in the cockpit was bleeping, but Frank blotted out the sound. All that mattered was that he survived this test.

Suddenly, Frank noticed starfighters blasting past him. Using the reverse-view camera, he was able to determine their origins: They were Alliance starfighters, coming in for the rescue. The enemy starfighter seemed lost in a maze of opposing craft, trying to flee as the pilot noticed the outnumbering. One Alliance starfighter was hit by the arc-lightning cannons before the starfighter was blasted out of space by a co-ordinated attack of gauss cannons. Frank held back the throttle, flicking on one of the velocity regulators. He could rest for a while, safe in the knowledge that he'd survived another mission.

As soon as the starfighters had mopped up the resistance in the area, Frank heard a call over the communicator unit, "Red Sixteen, this is Squadron Leader Ferndan. Brilliant piloting there. We thought you were dead."

Frank snorted, then replied, "Thanks for the optimism. I'll just be glad to get back onto that Spacebase. There can't be many remaining enemy forces in the area..."

Vanessa paused, then replied, "We've just heard that another lander craft has recently come near the area. There's another few waves of starfighters in the distance."

Frank groaned, "Oh, bloody hell. You mean to tell me that we've got to blast down another lot of them?"

"Most of us. You, however, will be escorting a squadron of starbombers to bomb the first lander craft. We have to get a few sections of Interspatial Marines on board. I thought you'd prefer it, after that massive chase."

"You mean to tell me that you thought I'd prefer getting shot at by laser turrets on board a gigantic lander craft while fighting starfighters over a surface which is bound to be less than five hundred metres away?"

Vanessa contemplated on this answer for a moment, then answered, "I've heard you in the canteen.

You've always said that escort missions were more interesting.”

“More interesting, yes. More enjoyable, no. Ah, fuck it, I'll do it because I have to and the tactics require me to, but I'm not happy about it.”

“None of us are happy about this, Frank. Don't be self-centered.”

“Sorry, Vanessa. Right. Tell me where I'm supposed to go.”

“That's better, Frank. Co-ordinates uploaded to your scanner. You'll be under nominal command from Gribley.”

Gribley was a starbomber commander, far more experienced than most of the pilots in any other nearby starcraft corps. He was known for being able to run nearly any starcraft effectively, but he chose to stick to starbombers, because as he had said, “It allows me to put my feet up.” He was reputed to be relentlessly hard and very overbearing during missions, but Frank had spoken to him a few times and found him extraordinarily well-mannered and cordial. Frank thought that the reputation was due to overbearing attitudes on inexperienced pilots in particular, as a few of his friends had escorted for Gribley before and had received no unfavourable opinions on him.

At this point, Frank bid Vanessa farewell, then pushed his throttle into the middle of the green zone. After about thirty seconds, he had reached the target and soon heard the gruff voice of Gribley on his communicator.

“Ah, Frank Bennett, is it? I'll call you by your codename; it's a little easier in a crisis. I seem to remember seeing you last at the firing range. We had that conversation on the correct deployment of commando troops on surface. I told you that you should have at least joined the Terrestrial Infantry, and now look what you're doing. Wasting all the officers' time as they read every request for a reassignment. But enough about that. When will the others be here?”

“Sir, apparently there was a recent arrival of another lander craft. Most of the other starfighters are off blasting down other starfighters.”

“Damn it! Not only do I not get my full detachment of starfighters, they have the cheek to give me one as a token gift and then expect us to launch another mission?”

“No rest for any of us, sir.”

“Ah, there'll be no rest for anyone today! Look, Red Sixteen, you know the drill. You don't need me to dictate orders for you – I've seen the personnel records. You can follow orders well enough. Those damned tacticians! It's pure insanity to send a single starfighter as an escort, for both the starbombers and the starfighter!”

Frank tended to agree with Gribley on the idea that the order was insane. Frank almost laughed at the sheer audacity of the circumstances, but decided not to. It wasn't funny at all.

Locking Gribley's starcraft onto his targeting computer, Frank pushed the throttle forwards into the green zone, watching the starbombers in front of him cruise along towards the lander craft, which was now in sight. After about a minute at cruising speed, Gribley shouted over the communicator, “Listen up! Target is in sight! Green Two to Green Seven, to the left. Green Eight to Seventeen, straight ahead. Strike the peripheral targeting systems. Green Eighteen, Nineteen, Twenty, follow me. Red Sixteen, pick off any starcraft that come into your sights. And don't just sit there gormlessly; move!”

With this command, Frank considered the position. It would be preferable for him to get as close to the surface of the craft as possible, and with this in mind, he switched on a different velocity regulator and shoved the throttle into the middle of the yellow zone.

Frank had a few seconds to think about Vanessa while he was making his way to the surface of the craft. She was very dedicated to the cause, a skilled pilot, but perhaps lacking organisational skills at times. Frank thought she was a nice person, personality-wise; not pompous, as many who had reached the status of Secondary Squadron Leader had become. She understood that Frank rued the time that he was spending in the Starfighter Division of the IMA, but, like others, found it difficult to talk to him when he was annoyed at it. But Frank had no more time to think about colleagues, or work outside the current mission. He might be irritated, but that was no reason to neglect his duty.

In any case, he had reached the range at which the weapons on the lander craft were effective against small craft. He flicked off the velocity regulator, hammered the throttle into the red zone and was promptly knocked back into his seat. He soon had reached a point about a thousand metres above the surface of the craft, avoiding the targeting systems of the larger cannons, so he clicked on a velocity regulator, engaged the chainguns on the wings and concentrated on keeping the craft level over the craft.

All of a sudden, Frank noticed a group of three red dots on his scanner in front of him. He twitched his joystick into line with them, keeping them in the centre of his scanner unit. He realised that they would be concentrating just as hard to keep their craft from crashing into the surface, and that, even though there were few advantages in starfighter combat in this sort of situation, short of superior skill, he would appear to have one: His engaged weapons didn't need utmost accuracy.

Soon, the dots were moving towards him, so he quickly twitched the stick so that he appeared to be in line with one of the starfighters and then let out a quick burst from the chain-guns. Frank felt a slight judder from the wings and watched the tracer moving forwards from the craft. A few seconds later, a shape came towards him at a violently quick rate, blasting right past him in a split-second. There were no abnormal movements from the craft. Frank knew that his blast had been entirely ineffective.

With at least knowledge of where the starfighters were, Frank flicked a switch next to the joystick, shoving the joystick to the left. This time, instead of the customary roll, Frank moved horizontally from right to left. Once the enemy starfighters were back in line with Frank's line of motion, Frank clicked on a different velocity restrictor, pushed the throttle into the yellow zone and tried to brace himself for the force that would come from the force. He managed to keep himself from knocking into his seat, but he was having a difficult time keeping the starfighter from ploughing head-first into the surface of the lander craft. As the velocity regulator took control, Frank levelled off, aiming one of the enemy starfighters within his sights. Frank fingered the trigger.

Without any notice, one of the starbombers cut across Frank's line of sight. It flashed by in a fraction of a second, but it was enough time to allow the starfighters in front to realign a small amount. Again, Frank lined himself up, aiming the starfighter inside the sights, then, making sure that no allies were in his line of fire, he pulled on the trigger.

The machine juddered slightly as the chainguns blasted out their rounds. Frank started aiming the tracer towards the starfighter in front, whose pilot had just noticed that he was being chased. The starfighter in front started to climb, so Frank took the opportunity to gain some altitude over the lander craft's surface. With tracer blasting out from the cannons as he kept engaging the trigger, the area was soon full of faint white smoke.

Suddenly, Frank noticed a burst of flames in front of him. Soon, the enemy starfighter started wobbling. Frank pulled the joystick very slightly backwards, observing the enemy starfighter plummet into the surface of the lander. A large explosion temporarily lit up the area, while Frank spun around, trying to find more starfighters to destroy. He was exceptionally drained by this point, trying to keep himself from crashing his craft.

All of a sudden, Frank felt a massive bang from the left wing of his craft. His status panel started turning red, an alarm rang out from the loudspeaker and a harsh electronic voice repeated, the computer concurrently displaying: "WARNING: Plasma Cannon A on Left Wing; Gatling Chaingun A on Left Wing; Laser Cannons A, B, C on Left Wing critically damaged. High risk of craft self-destruction. Suggested course of action – jettison from craft."

Frank looked out at the wing structure on the computer. It had been blasted by a point-blank shot from a dispersal cannon, a weapon which fired similarly to the shotgun. The wing had holes through it, the plasma cannon was spraying sparks of ionised gas and the chaingun ammunition had been destroyed. With a series of complicated commands to the computer, he set the engine to shut off power as soon as he had initiated his next command. With this done, he placed a key in a slot to the right of him, pulling back on a lever beside him to the right.

Frank felt an almighty blast from below him as the escape pod, consisting of the cockpit, the fusion reactor and a number of small engines and fuel tanks, ejected from the fuselage of the craft. Below him, the engines of his starfighter had shut down, the craft continuing to move on at the same velocity that it had before Frank had ejected. Frank initiated his communicator unit, "Green One! Commander Gribley! Critical damage to left wing, have had to eject from craft!"

There was no response. Frank initiated the engines and made his way towards the Spacebase, safe in the knowledge that, by war convention, he was unlikely to get shot at: It was illegal to attack a pilot's escape pod.

Frank never knew what hit him. Whether it was an enemy starfighter, an allied starbomber or even just a large piece of debris, Frank's escape pod had been struck on the undercarriage, propelling him towards the planet below him at a rate which the escape pod engines could not decelerate him quickly enough.

The lander craft had been just on the orbital line and Frank had been knocked quickly enough so that he was soon in inner space. The computer's altimeter had initiated, showing that Frank's escape pod was descending very quickly. Frank pushed the throttle into the end of the red zone, trying to make sure that he decelerated quickly enough before he reached too close to the surface.

The glass-polymer screen which protected Frank in space was made of several sheets of glass and polymer, with a few heat-resistant agents in each layer. Despite that, the glass on the outer layer was starting to glow red, obscuring Frank's vision. He was decelerating, but unless he could manage to get to a manageable velocity, he was going to crash very violently into the surface of the planet.

After about twenty seconds, he had managed to get the craft down to seven hundred and fifty metres per second, enough so that he could flip the craft around, as he had made the descent to this point backwards. Shoving the stick to the right, Frank flipped the craft so that the nose was now pointing towards the planet. Frank flipped a special velocity regulator and inputted a velocity value so that he need not worry about that part of piloting.

At ten thousand metres, Frank noticed a strange flickering on the computer screen. He went to take

another look and then was knocked back into his seat. The craft had shut down! Frank was close to panicking, but then remembered the procedure. He held back the throttle all of the way and then shoved at the starter button. Nothing happened. The now infuriated and close-to-snapping Frank kept shoving at the starter button. As he jabbed at it, the wind whistled past the escape pod drowning out any other noise. After about three tries, he was knocked forwards violently. The parachutes below him had initiated. He looked at the computer altimeter; it was now showing that Frank was four thousand metres above ground.

Frank pulled back on the joystick. The craft soared out of its nosedive as Frank engaged full reverse for the engines. He could see green fields below him, large amounts of crops growing on the land. The parachutes disengaged, dropping off the craft to the fields below. Frank didn't need them any more. He was now skimming just above the ground at about ten metres per second. Suddenly, the pod hit a bump. A massive crunch came from the undercarriage and Frank was jolted backwards. He blacked out just as the craft came to a complete stop.