

- FLYER -

By Tim Machan

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“Sir . . . SIR ! . . . Come-on sir, please wake up!”

A loud voice interrupted a blissful dream, and a strong hand shook his shoulder - - It registered that this was probably not going to be an ordinary day.

“Please sir, we’ve got trouble top side,” the voice persisted. “Wha . . . Waht . . . What?”, he heard himself asking as he began to awaken. There was no doubt in Jason Masters’ mind that he would much prefer not to rollaway from the comfort of his warm pillow.

“Sir, we’ve got sixteen unidentified bogeys stationed in high orbits”

Jason thought that the voice was too loud for what had to be an ungodly hour. It was definitely not going to be ordinary day! Therefore, as much as he wanted to either ignore this voice, or flatten the face from which it was coming, Jason knew he was expected to respond in some professional and civil manner. His first waking movements were slow, easing his face away from the soft warm depression in his pillow, and then rolling his body outward away from the back of his sleeping pod where he lay.

The young man belonging to the voice figured the slow response indicated reluctance, ‘Is this flyer really going to ignore me?’ he wondered. However, orders were orders, so he decided to up the volume of his voice, and to continued to relate the early mornings’ events.

“When they appeared, the Night Watch instructed me to come get you, and...”

Jason now rolled to face the voice, lifted one eye lid and commanded, “STOP!” His commanding tone, froze the owner of the voice mid-sentence. Although barely awake, Jason had already received enough information to realize that there was big trouble brewing topside. So, from this instant forward, Jason’s conditioning took over. His slow movements were replaced by a series of rapid and precise actions.

The young officer, belonging to the voice backed away from the bed as the flyer’s motions quickened. Although the youngster stepped back, it wasn’t fast enough or far enough compared to Jason’s movements, so the officer flinched as Jason practically vaulted out of his bunk directly at him.

Fully alert, Jason noting this reaction assured the youngster, “Don’t worry, I’m not going to hit you - - Report back to the Night Watch and have him tell the Flight Deck Officer that I’ll be topside A.S.A.P.”

The younger man relaxed but still hesitated to leave. Jason, now on his feet, shook his head to clear the last of his dreams from his mind. Noticing that his morning nemesis hadn’t left, he sternly stated, “Well, as long as you’re going to disobey a superior officer .

. . .” he paused for effect, watching the junior officer’s reaction to these words, “. . . You may as well tell me what God forsaken hour it is.”

At Jason’s threat, the young man gulped, then consulted the monitor on his wrist, and reported, “Just past four hundred hours, Sir.”

Knowing that he was going to be launching within ten minutes, Jason swore out loud, “Shit! Not even ‘dawn’s early’ for cover!”

The monotonous dawn on Kudos offered little more than a grayish light which added to the perpetual dull glow of the ionized gasses in the atmosphere. And even though daylight at its best wasn’t exactly bright, either dawn or daylight offered a fighter a semblance of cover during the launch phase. Unfortunately four hundred hours was long before dawn would break. Jason thought, ‘those bogeys will be able to see me on the way up without scanners...’ “Shit!” he swore aloud. And as he started across his quarters to finish suiting up, Jason asked, “How the hell...”

The junior officer, anticipating Jason’s question, begin speaking before Jason could finish asking how the hell that many enemy craft could have managed to “appear” at one time. “Sir, we don’t know how that many got in so close before detection. Central Control is trying to figure out what went wrong - - The initial report is sensor malfunction ...”

“That’s the usual excuse!” Jason stated angrily.

“Well sir, that’s all they told me ... so far. Anyhow ‘cause they just ‘appeared’ we also don’t have any data on their approach vectors ... “

“Or if they’re alone up there,” Jason added.

The officer paused at this point, and Jason seriously considered simply shoving him out of the room, but considered the energy he might expend would be wasted.

The officer continued “Right! So, even though we have them on long range scanners, they’ve . . . “

“I’ll finish that one,” Jason interrupted. “They’ve stationed themselves just far enough out so we can’t ID’em, right?”

The young officer nodded in reply, but still felt compelled to add. “The Deep Ten Bases and Sentry Ships never saw ‘em com’in either!”

The more he heard about it, the less Jason liked the situation topside. ‘And who’d they send to get me up?’ Jason asked himself, ‘the one person on the base who probably knows the very least about what’s really going on!’ At this point, Jason decided he just wanted his “morning mascot” to go away. Hoping it would satisfy some criteria that this aid had been told to watch for, he quickly finished the first half of suiting up. As he did this, he realized he wasn’t angry at the officer, just the circumstances surrounding the rude awakening. He knew full well from the countless times he’d made the same kind of wake up calls when he was younger, what the price to pay was if a Watch Commander or Flight Deck Officer found out that a flyer wasn’t really on his way up.

Unfortunately, as he pulled on the last layer of the lower half of his four layer flight suit, the aid still failed to show any sign of moving towards the hatch, so Jason tried another old tactic. “Damn it! Get the hell out of here!” he yelled. The aid still refused to move, so Jason slyly added, “You’re actually slowing me down - - Want me to report that?”

Now, without any hesitation, the officer turned and bolted for the hatch. As the man stepped through the opening, Jason shouted, “Don’t forget to tell that slacker-chair-jockey Higgins that I’m on my way!”

After the aid ran out of Jason’s quarters, Jason snickered and said out loud, “I guess they told him that just after I start yelling, I start swinging! - - Which of course is usually true.”

Now alone, he continued to fasten the flight suit as quickly as possible, still checking every fastener and connector three times.

Just before he reached for his helmet, he commanded the dat—term in his room to report any preflight updates - - He wasn’t surprised when it replied, “Sorry, Sir, none.”

From that point on Jason knew he’d have to make it happen. The ball was going his to handle and he knew that it wasn’t the fun type of ball to handle, already his enemies were trying to make him play by their rules. He knew that his success today would be rely upon how quickly he could figure out what those rules were, and then, of course, how to win by them instead of lose.

The most alarming factor effecting the rules was not just the number of unidentifieds, but the mysterious nature of their “appearance”. Still, flyers always wished they knew more before a launch, but the role of a fighter pilot on Kudos was, and always would be, with information or the usual little to none, to identify, engage, and dispatch all intruders - - No matter what the circumstances - - No matter what the cost!

Jason wished he didn’t know the numbers, they told the truth, the cost was always too high, because death was always involved. Jason hated the statistics even though the odds tended to weighed in his favor. Which never ceased to amaze Jason because he didn’t even trust the data on which the statistics relied, or his command center even though it was full of well-trained officers who also knew the odds. Sure he liked and almost trusted a few of them, but most of them had the bad habit of trying to cover their precious asses with whatever poor excuses or weak explanations they could fabricate when “unexpected guests” arrived. Therefore, no matter who was Watch Commander, or how much was known before launch, Jason only had complete trust in himself, his ship, and his fellow fighters. So no matter what was known or unknown, there was only one fact, important one, a flyer was needed.

This morning, the real problem was going to be quickly figuring out how many of the unidentified orbiting ships were manned craft and dangerous, and how many were perhaps even more dangerous booby traps. And, Jason wondered what new tricks or ploys the pirates might be trying this time in order to make a run on the wealth of

Kudos. Therefore, not without the usual degree of trepidation, but with no alternative, Jason having finished suiting up, helmet in hand, ran out of his cubicle, and reported to the flight deck. There he scrambled his FK-16D “Dragonfire” and headed aloft to sort things out.

As he left the launch pad in a high gee vertical on a tower of booster flames, he had a few additional minutes in which to collect his thoughts. Mission after mission, his thoughts focused on the same two points.

First, and foremost, was the reason for the brazen attacks the bandits and pirates made on Kudos. Their hope was to make it a risky run on the planets surface and to carry off a load of precious minerals.

The second was what he might have to do to counter their assault. He knew he had to engage as many of the craft as possible in high orbit. Although it was the riskiest time for him, because he would have the least back up either from the surface missile launch sites, or from his fellow pilots, it was the best place in regard to planetary defense security. Getting them before they entered the atmosphere would minimize they possibility that they might make a successful bombing or missile run on the fighter launch platforms called the dragons’ lairs.

In his favor was that in high orbit his weapons were the most potent. Up there he could make the “cleanest” kills. The remains would fragment and vaporize when they hit the atmosphere. No falling debris would threaten the bases and or research stations on the surface.

But Jason also knew there were special dangers inherent to being “up on top.” Although the odds weighed more heavily in his favor in his fighter’s orbital weapons configuration, many dragon riders, as the fighter’s pilots were often called, had lost their lives in horrible ways far from their bases. Jason knew that of all the dead riders in the past only a few had made large errors, so he knew that the tiny ones were just as fatal. Even the smallest amount of over confidence was the worst error a dragon rider could make. Unfortunately, young riders and old alike paid with their lives due to this deadly error.

And their were small judgemental errors that killed riders, little things like straying too near a craft before scanning it inside out. “Parent craft” were often simply hollow hulls carrying dangerous surprises. The nastiest booby traps, were proximity triggered explosives, rigged to fool scanners, to read as innocent rocket boosters. Of course, there were the parent ships which contained power plants that were destabilized and turned into nukes. During training Jason and every other rider had to watch clip after clip until the blazing death of past riders was practically burned into his brain to attempt to cure him of over confidence. It was even standard procedure for the flight prep crew to remind you every flight, just as they closed the canopy, “If you get too close, you’ll burn in your own fire.”

Jason’s mind snapped alert as his ship signaled him that he was now on station in his pre-selected orbit. Cleverly, he had placed himself both behind and above the cluster of bogeys.

When he looked at his ship’s targeting computer read out, he got his second hint that something very strange was at hand. It wasn’t just the number of craft below him that was strange. His computer displayed an extremely odd staggering to the orbits of the bogeys. Some were in slightly lower orbits, some higher, and this particular spacing wasn’t in any of the typical patterns. It looked like nothing Jason had encountered before. Of course, for years pirates had been trying different configurations, but Jason had never seen a pattern like this one, even in the books. He also didn’t like what he saw displayed on his read outs about the sizes of the craft. What troubled him was his immediate conclusion about this bevy of prey, it was “TOO”. It was comprised of TOO many ships, some of them TOO large and most alarmingly TOO widely spaced, to have arrived in their present orbits as completely undetected as reported by the defenses of Kudos.

No wonder they’re so worried at the base, he thought. Either: One, someone got caught napping, which was very unlikely. Two, the base’s sensors really were malfunctioning, which was only slightly probable. Or three, the worst scenario of all. The “screw was in.” Someone at control has sabotaged some vital equipment.

Jason knew that there had only been one previous incident involving sabotage in the history of Kudos’ ground based defense. Of course, unfortunately, that one had been extremely costly.

Jason remembered Karmer well. Lieutenant Karmer had been a highly reliable, top notch flight controller. He had been stationed at what known as the Bonner Base for over six years before he went sour.

Everyone knows that the wealth of Kudos can do strange things to people, but a staff officer had never been corrupt before. Later it was found that Karmer had tied in with a really rotten bunch during his last scheduled R &

“Good Afternoon Gentlemen!” a new voice came from Jason’s headset.

“Walt, you’re supposed to be down there keeping our beds warm!” shouted Cecil.

“And let you guys have all the fun?” questioned the newcomer.

“Hey Walt! I know you’re our senior, but what the heck do you think you’re doing popping top side without letting control know?” demanded Jason.

“Well, Jason I would have, but I didn’t ‘pop up’!”

“What?” said Cecil.

“Shall we say I was just out doing a little fishing over on Nimbos.”

“You sly dog!... Over there!... Again!... Messing with the native women while we thought you were cozy warm in your cube ready to come to our aid!” kidded Jason, who then took on a very serious tone. “May I assume you’re communicating on a scrambled Dragon comm line.”

“Righty-Oh!”

This meant that Cecil and Jason could hear Walt, but Base One was probably be unaware of his presence.

“Bare with me on this Walt, hold an incoming flight path above me, and keep yourself between Base One and my coordinates,” said Jason.

“Mine is not to question why...” began Walt, but Jason’s scope exploded into life as a bevy of prey suddenly broke from the cover of the larger pirate ships.

“Divers Cecil!” Jason broke in on Walt’s words. “Go cook’em buddy!”

“Two clock’s ticks and they’ll never reach twenty clicks!” replied Cecil as he swooped down to dispatch the small craft.

“Sorry I had to make you stay at home buddy,” said Walt, realizing Jason’s last request was designed to accomplish some unspoken purpose. He really wanted to know, so he asked Jason, “So, what’s shaken?”

“Follow Cecil’s path visually on your monitor, and punch in for my orbital data on the area,” said Jason.

“Shit that’s the weirdest configuration I’ve ever seen!... Looks like real trouble,” Walt stated.

Below their positions a Dragonfire, man’s most potent flying weapons platform, swept down. Cecil negotiated a neat figure eight beginning and ending at his original orbit, he quickly dispatched the eight divers.

“Cute!” said Jason, “But how about dispatching their cover ship too?”

“As good as done! Watch this!”

At Jason’s request, Cecil was already closing on the diver’s cover-decoy. Unfortunately, Jason spotted an error in Cecil’s approach vector too late! The hot dog was running too close to the line, and Jason feared that Cecil was going to get himself fried! As Jason realized this, he heard a proximity alarm sound from Cecil’s defense armament computer.

“Cecil, BREAK 90!!!” Jason yelled, but it was too late. Jason’s scope briefly displayed a growing blip where Cecil’s ship had been, then all around Jason his surroundings suddenly went brilliantly bright, and his canopy darkened to save him from the raw radiation of the explosion. The target Cecil had neared, and Cecil’s craft were consumed in a ball of hellish fire.

“Damn it!” came Walt’s voice angry and upset.

“Base One, Scramble Dragons Six through Ten!” ordered Jason, as difficult as it was not to think about Cecil, and his “Dragon,” Jason knew he had to act fast.

“Procedure already in effect,” came Phil’s calm reply.

Funny, thought Jason about Phil. Its nice to know that when things really go wrong, the true professionals always stand out!”

“Thanks, Phil!” he radioed.

“You’re welcome,” came the same calm voice.

Now, Jason redirected his attention to the matters close at hand.

“Walt, we’re not going to sit on this one!” he told his fellow rider, then again directed his communication to the ground defenses... “Base, I’m calling for a ground launched missile flush. Once Dragons six through ten are air-

aggressor, kept forcing him to alter his course always turning him. After every turning, rolling, and twisting evasive maneuver he made to avoid being hit, he always ended up on a heading towards those ominous mountains.

Jason still wasn't really worried about his little pest, in a way he was enjoying flying by the seat of his pants, and his skill had so far managed to keep his Dragon from being compromised by any debilitating hits.

Unfortunately, as this thought crossed his mind, his Damage Control Computer suddenly reported a pressure loss in his right engine feeder turbopump, and responded by automatically shutting it down.

'That's just great!' he thought as he felt the controls in his hands go a bit sluggish. His power for maneuvering was suddenly cut by two thirds. That cuts it! he cursed, he was now angry that his Dragonfire was injured.

With that, he kicked his ship into a tight loop, split out of it at ninety degrees after completing three quarters of a loop and then rolled out to the vertical on the outside and snapped a hammerhead expecting to find his prey right in his gunsights. This maneuver was as unique as Jason's Lightning Bolt. It was Jason's fanciest maneuver and it never failed to work. Unfortunately the pestering bi-wing was able to avoid being caught by even this trick, which perplexed Jason, but he always had an ace up his sleeve!

Jason knew that he could see through the clouds better than his enemy, and that if he could buy enough time to reach those mountains, once he got there he might be able to bait the pilot behind him into making a critical mistake. So, Jason continued his evasive darting, and continued to be surprised at the knowledge of the ship's pilot who was hounding his tail. He couldn't believe that man's ability to have avoided his Dragon's powerful guns and his own flying skills.

Suddenly it struck him! It had to be Darmin! There was only one pilot who could be that good who wasn't on the Defense Force. Only one person who knew his secrets that well.

"Darmin?" he asked as he opened a multi-channeled com-link.

"Thought you'd never want to talk," came a cool reply.

Darmin and Jason had spent two years together in a advanced planetary avionics course.

"Why don't you just give it up ole buddy," Jason wanted his old friend to survive!

"Just when we're having more fun than we ever had," came back the soft feminine voice.

Those two years had been wild! They'd filled the days with dogfighting in the latest generation of fighters, enjoying sparing with each other so much that they had quickly filled the nights with a different mode of close combat.

"You know you can't win!" Jason said. Hoping to talk her out of her collision course with disaster. "If I go down, they'll scramble two fresh ships that will jump on you before you can escape."

"You're wrong, I can win! If I knock you out, I can get anyone!"

"That may be true of any one fighter Darmin... But, it's futile, this isn't a training course. Please land and surrender!" He pleaded, not wanting to see her die.

"Jason, you know me better than that!" she angrily replied. "I'm a fighter and a flyer like you!"

"I thought I knew you well! I never thought you'd turn against me, let alone use my own moves against me!"

"So, that's when you finally figured out who was on your tail?" her towering ego demanded Jason to acknowledge her.

"Dar, your ego cost you one time too many already," Jason said trying to remind her of the jams he'd helped her out of long ago. "I saved your ass ten times if I saved it once!... Why don't you just land that broken piece of scrap your flying, and give it up!"

"Jason, you know I never liked that bullshit male superiority attitude you harbor. You don't display it often," she answered. Then she paused for an instant and then added, "But it just cost you another engine!"

She was right! Just as she called it out, he felt the thrust decrease that was pushing him back into his seat as he kept on trying to evade her shots. He didn't panic, but he knew this loss was critical, he was finally beginning to lose the winning edge his superior craft possessed over Dar's small ship.

"How's that feel Jason? How'd YOU like finding out what its like to lose?" Dar was still bitter about losing the chance to advance after the flight school they had attended, she was good, but not good enough to follow Jason where he was going.

"I'll never lose!" he said, finding himself almost shouting the last of these words at his unseen enemy. And yet,