

Chapter 1

The captain of the Alliance cruiser *Sunflower* silently observed his bridge crew. They were trying to do their jobs, but he could tell they were nervous. The sight of enemy ships tended to do that.

The *Sunflower* was the newest ship in the fleet. It had been commissioned only two weeks earlier and was still on its maiden voyage. It was an Advranki ship; one of three races that comprised the Alliance.

Fleet headquarters had decided to let the public name the ship. Every Advranki citizen had had the opportunity to log into a Websphere site and vote. They could choose one of four names: *Pride*, *Relentless*, *Resolute*, or *Victory*. The fact that the name *Sunflower* had won without actually being a valid choice had raised several questions about Websphere security, but the name had been publicly announced and stuck.

The ship was beautiful, a masterpiece of engineering and art. Each panel was painstakingly crafted, each piece meticulously assembled. The ship had a rounded hull of seamless, interlocking hull plates. The design was practical for two purposes; it could withstand tremendous enemy fire and it could easily glide through hyperspace. The bonus was that the ship was aesthetically wonderful. It was a true pleasure to observe.

Captain Solear had reservations about taking a brand new ship on a long cruise, but the *Sunflower* had handled and performed perfectly since launch. Solear knew he would eventually owe the ship's designer and construction crew an apology. There hadn't been a single problem thus far.

"Captain, we have a problem," said Carank, the weapons officer.

Carank, like Solear a member of the Advranki race, was easily the most intelligent crew member aboard the ship. He had recently graduated from weapons design school and was planning on going to Fleet Research and Development when his training tour was over. It was Fleet's policy that before one could design new systems; one had to have some experience operating current ones.

"What's wrong?" Solear asked.

"There is an air leak in the emergency pressure sensor module," Carank responded.

This particular system measured the air pressure in every section of the ship. If one section was rapidly losing air pressure, it would send a signal to automatically seal that section of the ship. In the potential upcoming battle, if the cruiser was hit and that section did not seal, the entire ship would lose air.

Carank continued, "This is a new design. The old system had air hoses that ran to the center section where their pressure was monitored. The new system uses distributed sensors in each section that sends an air pressure signal to a central processing unit. The new design provides a much faster response, but it appears the solenoids in the control module can leak."

“Why?” the Captain questioned.

Carank: “It looks like they tried to save money by using an existing solenoid instead of designing a new one. This solenoid is normally closed and is designed to only work for a few seconds at a time, but in the emergency pressure system it is normally open. As a result of the constant functioning, it is leaking intermittently.”

“Can you fix it?” the Captain asked.

Solear watched as Carank dejectedly looked down at his green hands and carefully stalled for time. It was clear that the news was not going to be positive. Solear would prefer that his newest bridge member just tell him, but even though they were facing imminent danger he really didn't want to rush the other being. That would be rude.

Carank eventually responded, “No, we don't have the correct parts in inventory. I can take it apart and re-grease it though.”

“Will that make it stop leaking?” the Captain asked.

Carank answered, “Yes, well, sort of. Greasing the solenoids is a temporary solution at best. However, it should make them stop leaking for week, maybe two.”

Captain Solear asked, “How long will it take?”

Carank replied, “Twenty minutes top. I won't have to leave the bridge.”

The bridge consisted of four levels and was separately powered and independently shielded. Carank meant that he would have to go to the lowest level of the bridge, but would not have to leave the bridge section itself.

“Okay, go,” Captain Solear said.

As Carank was exiting bridge, Solear's focus returned to the oncoming enemy ships. The enemy should have been in system long enough for the ship's sensors to have determined the size of the enemy force.

The *Sunflower* was sitting in the Opron system. Opron had a sun, two large gas giant planets, and precious little else. However, Opron was strategically important because it sat at the junction of two major hyperspace lanes. One of the lanes led to their adversary's home world and the other led back to Advranki Prime, their home system.

Solear turned and looked at Clowy, his communications officer. He said, “Please give me a situational update.”

She asked, “What update?”

Solear counted quickly to 10. He may have skipped a couple of numbers because he quickly responded, “I would like to know if anyone is trying to communicate with us.”

“Who is trying to communicate with us?” Clowy asked and double checked her board.

“Um, the enemy,” the Captain barked with a distinct edge to his voice.

She replied, “We have not received any communication requests.” She then began to cry.

Captain Slear intently studied Clowy for a moment. She stopped crying as quickly as she had started. She wiped her remaining tears from her huge eyes on a tissue and returned to studying the plot.

Fleet headquarters had recently decreed that a representative from all three Alliance species must be on every ship. The *Sunflower* was one of the first ships to implement this new regulation. Clowy was their representative from the planet Altian.

Clowy was competent enough he supposed, but her frequent emotional outbursts were often difficult to fathom. He was glad that he had never served aboard an Altian vessel. He couldn't imagine a ship filled with beings who constantly became emotional over things that were seemingly trivial.

He made yet another mental note to speak softly and evenly when addressing her. He didn't want to attend a second training session on race diversity from Fleet headquarters.

Slear turned to the weapons station and almost asked for an update, but realized that Carank was away greasing solenoids. When the weapons officer was off the bridge, the spot was supposed to be filled by the commander.

However, the commander was at the hangar bay trying to convince the pilots to launch. Slear sighed and sat down at the weapons station. He would have to generate the report by himself.

He checked the enemy's location – they were inside the hyperspace limit and proceeding on a straight line vector towards the ship. The estimated time to weapons range was three hours.

“Captain,” Clowy announced with unbridled excitement. “I now have a clear picture of the enemy fleet. They have one destroyer flanked by two cruisers. The enemy ships are slowing to attack speed.”

Slear was still surprised how quickly Clowy, or really any Altian for that matter, could change her emotions. One second she was crying, the next smiling.

He said, “Computer, please analyze the enemy formation.”

...The enemy fleet is in attack formation Delta and will reach ideal battle distance in 3.8 hours with a speed of .03 light. The destroyer is a model D160, meaning that it only carries 20 fighters versus the newer model D161 that has a capacity of 24. This model destroyer has type 2 ion cannon and eight missile launchers per side. The two flanking cruisers are standard issue C20's...

The captain did some quick mental math. His fleet, well taskforce really, of three cruisers, *Justice*, *Protector*, and *Sunflower* carried 20 fighters each. So, he and his opponent were evenly matched at 60 fighters; provided he could convince all of the pilots to launch.

Missiles would be a problem however. The enemy armada could launch 40 missiles every 3 minutes – 8 per side from the destroyer and 6 per side from each cruiser. The Alliance cruisers only had 5 launchers per side and therefore could only launch 30 missiles in the same

timeframe. So, he mused, if the battle lasted longer than 12 minutes, they would be at a deadly 50 missile disadvantage.

The Alliance fleet had a distinct advantage with the ion cannons though. They could fire three shots while their opponent could only fire one. Of course, that one shot would be twice as powerful since the ion cannon on the enemy destroyer was twice the size of his.

A direct hit from the destroyer's ion cannon would blow a hole in the side of the ship. The bridge would be fine because it was located in the center of the ship and was independently shielded and armored. However, the crew stationed in engineering and the missile bays could be exposed to space. And if the emergency pressure system failed, the results would be catastrophic.

"Clowy," the captain said as evenly as possible, "Signal *Protector* and *Justice* and have them move to attack pattern Gamma."

This pattern would spread the Alliance ships far enough apart that the enemy destroyer could only hit one of the three ships with their ion cannon, but still be close enough to coordinate missile defense.

"*Protector* and *Justice* are in position," Clowy reported.

The enemy ships continued on the same path over the next 2 hours and were now in near real-time communications range. The captain was expecting a message at any minute.

"Incoming message," Clowy said and smiled brightly.

Captain Solear was senior to the captains of the other two cruisers and was therefore acting commander of the taskforce. It was his decision whether to fight or flee. More pressing though, it was his responsibility to respond to the incoming message.

"Put it on the main monitor and forward it to the other two captains." Captain Solear replied.

He immediately regretted the decision when the bridge was blasted with an incomprehensible language. He was certain that the enemy commander knew Alliance basic and had intentionally not used it – probably as a sign of superiority that the Hirculans no longer had to follow Alliance communication protocols.

"Computer, translate message," Areal, the first officer said. He had just returned to the bridge and beat the captain to the command.

...Estimate translation at 99.4% accuracy...

...Alliance vessels, you are in violation of section 41.8.19, sub-paragraph 14 of the treaty that was signed and ratified by both the Alliance and Hircula. Retreat immediately or be destroyed...

"Computer, remind me what sub-paragraph 14 of that section 41 something is?" Captain Solear asked.

...Treaty section 41.8.19, sub-paragraph 14 states that when Alliance vessels are traveling through Hiriculan space, they must lower shields, close missile bays, and identify themselves and their destination. They must then wait for confirmation and an escort before continuing...

Clowy said, "We are in the Opron, not Hiricula." She smiled brightly.

Captain Solear thought of multiple responses to her comment. The most obvious was "duh" to the less obvious but equally effective "well, duh." He rejected each one for fear of another emotional outburst and finally settled on, "Clowy, search the computer for the current territorial status of the Opron system."

Arean added, "Computer, the Opron system is considered neutral territory. Have there been any updates to the treaty with respect to the ownership of this system?"

Solear received both responses at the same time – ...no... and "neutral."

"Clowy," the Captain said, "Record and send the following message. Hiriculan fleet, we are in neutral space, therefore the section of the treaty that you quoted does not apply. Please redirect your vessels away from your current intercept path and proceed elsewhere."

"What ship should I send it to?" Clowy asked.

Breathe, sigh, breathe, no yelling. The captain counted fully to 10 this time and responded, "If you can identify the enemy ship that originally sent the message, then send the response to that one. If you cannot, then send it to the destroyer."

He thought the instruction was fairly clear, but he tensed and waited for the inevitable follow-up question. Fortunately, it didn't come.

Carank entered the bridge proper and announced, "The solenoids have been greased." Carank took his seat at the weapons console.

"Captain, message sent." Clowy waited a precious moment and added somewhat nervously, "Also, we have received a priority hail from our engineering section."

The captain wondered why, if it was a priority hail, that Clowy hadn't simply answered it. He looked at her face. Her dark gray eyes that took up nearly a quarter of her face were unreadable, but her gray skin looked flushed.

It might be his imagination, but she appeared to be trembling ever so slightly. Either way, it was clear that she didn't want to answer that hail. Then, he suddenly realized who was hailing them and knew that he didn't want to answer either.

"Carank," Solear ordered, "Answer the incoming priority request."

Carank responded, "Captain, the message is garbled. There must be something wrong with our communications gear. I have taken the system off-line while the computer performs a full diagnostic check. It will be back on-line in just under 15 minutes. We can still send messages, but we won't be able to receive them."

Well played, Solear thought. Fifteen minutes was about the amount of time it would take for his message to reach the opposing fleet, the enemy to craft a proper response, and the response to travel back to the ship.

He thought briefly about Lorano, the person everyone was working so hard to avoid. Lorano was a chief design research specialist at fleet headquarters and had been responsible for the design and construction of the *Sunflower*.

Lorano was aboard for its maiden flight to ensure that everything was functioning properly. The Altian was brilliant, one of the top minds of his generation, but was very, very difficult to deal with. He had a propensity for belittling and a knack for annoying. Even Carank, the closest to Lorano's intellectual equal in the taskforce, did not want to talk to him.

Captain Solear said, "Commander."

"Yes Captain," Arean replied instantly.

Arean, the first officer, was also an Advranki. Unlike the other bridge crew members who had joined the staff when the *Sunflower* was launched, Arean had been with the Captain for over two years. Since the first officer was also the commander of the wing of 20 fighters aboard, Captain Solear often referred to Arean as Commander.

Fleet policy required that every being be able to speak to each other in a common language. Fleet linguists had developed a language that all species, including their enemy, could speak. Although the computer could translate between the languages almost instantaneously, Fleet psychologists felt it was better for beings to be able to interact directly.

This included the pronunciation of being's names. For instance, the commander's real name was Audarrei Redkavinaini. Like nearly all Alliance Fleet personnel though, his name had been shortened to a combination of letters that all three species could easily pronounce. His particular combination was Arean.

Solear said, "We need the fighters to launch in about two hours. You should probably head down there and give them a speech."

Getting the fighters to launch was an arduous task. The automated fire control systems of the enemy fighters were so good that if a battle ensued, very few of his fighters would return. Of course, their automated fire systems were also very good, so the enemy fighters would take heavy casualties as well.

This fact had made all previous battles save one consist only of posturing, fleet maneuvers, and angry communications. Neither side really wanted to lose a large contingent of fighters or worse yet a capital ship.

If one side was outmatched, they would simply jump into hyperspace before the other side could engage. A ship that got trapped inside the hyper limit generally surrendered before getting destroyed.

Since Carank, the weapons officer, was currently off of the bridge, the pilot was responsible to watch both weapons and navigation. Captain Solear started to talk to her, but Ella seemed to be consumed by her duties.

Ella was a Solarian, the third species in the Alliance. Like all other Solarians, Ella had beautiful, light blue skin, a slight frame, and was a centimeter shorter than the other two species.

She was often the butt of well-intended jokes because of her species' physical resemblance to Humans. The standing joke when she messed up was, "Don't worry; after all, you're only Human."

Ella (or any Solarian) could pass for a Human if she wore make-up or had her skin bleached. She would appear thinner and shorter (about 15 centimeters or 6") than the average female.

Solarians were the exception to the Alliance basic pronunciation rule because their names were pronounceable by both Altians and Advranki. Therefore, Ella was her actual name, not a combination of letters.

Since she looked busy, Captain Solear decided not to bother her. He then reconsidered and said, "Ella, can you tell me the weapons status?"

After a moment's hesitation, Ella replied, "The ion cannon is fully charged and all 10 missile bays report ready to fire. All 20 fighters are fueled and ready for launch."

The ion cannon was the ship's primary offensive weapon. It fired a concentrated beam of light that was intended to destroy a section of the enemy's shield and render the vessel unable to jump into hyperspace. An un-shielded ship would be disintegrated.

The main drawback to the cannon was that it required a tremendous amount of stored energy to fire. If the *Sunflower* fired its ion cannon, the ship would not have enough energy to form a hyperspace window. It would be stranded in the system for about 4 hours – the amount of time it took to recharge its energy reserves.

The second drawback to the ion cannon was that one had to be in a perfectly straight line to hit the enemy. Even a small deflection or a random enemy movement would cause the cannon to miss.

Solear was pleased with the expediency of the report and commented, "Thanks Ella, nice job including an update on the fighters. How are the shields?"

The shields were at full strength. The Captain could easily see the status from his command chair. However, it was the most subtle way he could think of to remind Ella that a shield status should be included in the weapon status report.

Ella replied, "98.8%."

The percentage was announced and understood as measure of strength; but it was also technically a measure of efficiency and an inverse measure of volume. The higher the percent of

shield strength meant that the coverage envelope around the ship was smaller. A smaller envelope provided a better barrier against missile attack.

The enemy reply came back in exactly 15 minutes and was not helpful. The enemy had stated that the Opron system was recently annexed by the Hiriculans and that the Hiriculan ambassador at Advranki Prime had filed all necessary paperwork to this effect.

Therefore, this was Hiriculan space until the binding arbitration panel reviewed and ruled on the application. The fact that the paperwork violated the treaty and would be summarily rejected by the panel was omitted from the response.

“The enemy is changing speed and bearing,” exclaimed Clowy.

The Captain barked, “Computer, analysis.”

...The enemy fleet is increasing to a speed of .05 light and is adjusting course. The ships will curve toward and then away from the fleet on an elliptical plane. Time to intercept is 18 minutes...

“The enemy has outmaneuvered us,” said Arean.

“True,” said Captain Solear. “Options.” He added, “Anyone?”

The enemy’s curved flight path meant that they would shrink the missile engagement envelope to only a few seconds and would stay completely out of ion cannon range. Each group would only get one missile volley before the ships are out of effective, powered missile range.

However, the Alliance fleet had to fire its missiles in the next few moments to hit the enemy ships while the enemy could wait another 4 minutes before firing. The log would show that the Alliance fired first and the Hiriculan fleet had no choice but to defend itself.

Solear could order his fleet to begin chasing the enemy to increase the weapons engagement window and bring the ion cannons back into range. However, the enemy could simply increase speed as well. With the enemy’s initial velocity advantage, his fleet would not catch them. He decided not to fire the missiles. He would not be the one to initiate the conflict.

It was at this point that Ella did something, by all accounts, dumb.

She had seen a hail that appeared to be from another ship, answered it without thinking, and was greeted by Lorano leering at her through the screen.

“Hello Human,” said Lorano.

“I am not a Human,” Ella responded.

“Well, you look like a Human” responded Lorano.

“Do not,” Ella retorted. At this point though she knew she had lost the argument.

Lorano responded, “Humans have white, black, brown, and yellow skin. Some are as short as you. Who’s to say there aren’t blue ones we haven’t observed yet.” He was smiling broadly and clearly enjoying the exchange.

“I was born on Solaria, not, not ... Human world,” Ella responded. She felt silly for having forgotten the name of Humanity’s planet. “Have you even met a Human?”

“Yes, I am looking at one now,” Lorano sneered.

Ella became visibly upset and shouted, “Well, you look like an Altian, but you are clearly an ass!”

The upcoming battle momentarily forgotten, Captain Solear ordered Ella to step away from her station and compose herself. Clowy graciously volunteered to touch up her make-up because it had become smeared during the encounter.

The moment they exited the viewing area, Solear asked, “Lorano, What can I do for you?”

Lorano responded, “I command that you move the *Sunflower* behind the other two ships.”

“Why?” Solear asked. However, he already knew the answer. He just wanted the personal victory of hearing Lorano say it.

Lorano made no point to hide his intentions. He simply stated, “Because I’m aboard.”

Lorano must have realized when the words were spoken aloud that they sounded insensitive, so he added, “Really, it’s simple Captain. I am worth more than the lives of everyone else aboard either the *Justice* or the *Protector*.”

Captain Solear ran his green fingers through his mostly black hair. There were a few streaks of gray starting to appear that hinted at his advancing age. However, he still had several more years before he would be forced to retire. Per current Advranki fashion, he was growing it long – just above his ears.

Solear knew that if he outright rejected the request that Lorano would file a complaint with Fleet headquarters. He didn’t want to have to deal with the unnecessary paperwork, so he thought of a suitable response.

He answered, “It is too late to change formation. If only you had told me 15 minutes earlier we could have changed our attack pattern to accommodate your request.”

“Well, what do I do now?” Lorano asked. He over emphasized the word ‘now’ to subtly reinforce the fact that he had tried to call 15 minutes ago.

Solear responded, “Come to *Sunflower*’s bridge. It will be sealed for battle. You will be safe here even if the *Sunflower* is struck by the destroyer’s ion cannon.”

Solear thought it was odd that Lorano wouldn’t have thought of that since he had basically designed the ship. The *Sunflower* may not fly after a direct hit from the destroyer’s ion cannon, but the independently shielded bridge would certainly be intact and functional.

“Thank you Captain,” Lorano responded.

Just in case they missed the subtle response he added, “However, I want you to know that I did in fact try to signal you earlier.”

Solear responded, “The message was garbled and we didn’t receive it. Something may be wrong with our communications gear. You can diagnose it yourself when you reach the bridge. Go now!”

Fortunately, the communications equipment was located in the lowest section of the bridge, keeping Lorano away from the main section and the bridge crew. Hopefully, the task of reviewing the communications gear would keep Lorano busy for quite a while.

Solear displayed the cruisers’ status on his chair’s mini-monitor. The status displayed the five main sections of the ship from back to front – engineering, maintenance, bridge, missile storage, and fighter bay. It also displayed the status of the missile launcher and the ion cannon. Everything was in proper functioning order.

By this point the enemy had reached the engagement window and had launched all 60 fighters. They had changed course again and were now moving in a large circle that would bring them back to weapons range in 25 minutes.

Arean verified that Lorano was safely inside the bridge and sealed it for battle. He then ordered the crew to their battle stations. The crew didn’t need 25 minutes to reach their assigned locations, but he wanted to be nice and give them plenty of time to finish whatever they were doing before reporting.

The *Sunflower* was manned by 50 people; 5 officers in the bridge, 5 people in engineering, 20 fighter pilots, and 20 for all other duties. Ordering the crew to battle stations meant sending the 20 pilots their fighters, the officers to the bridge, and the engineers to engineering. The remaining 20 would split into ten teams of two and man the missile launchers.

He looked at Captain Solear and asked, “All 20 pilots are in their flight suits and are sitting comfortably in the ready room beside their fighters. Shall I order them to get into their fighters and launch?”

Solear said, “Well done. Your speech must have been exemplary. I am impressed that all of the pilots are actually willing to get into their fighters. And yes, order them to launch.”

Arean sent the order to the pilots. Captain Solear contacted the *Protector* and *Justice* ordered them to launch their fighters as well.

“Proximity alert,” announced Clowy. “There is an object just off our port bow.”

Wait for it, thought the Captain. Calmly now! Just wait. No reason to respond.

“I have identified the bogey,” exclaimed Clowy. “It’s our fighter!”

A cheer went up through the bridge. It had only taken 5 minutes from the time the launch order was given until the first fighter was launched. No one really knew when or if the fighters would actually launch. Solear noticed that the *Protector* had beaten the *Sunflower*’s launch by 20 seconds.

The enemy fighters had moved into their favorite configuration, the rectangle formation. There were three even rows of 20 fighters, with the top and bottom rows just slightly behind the middle row.

The enemy fighters were the same shape, size, and configuration as the Alliance fighters. They had even been made in the same factory until the infamous price increase by the manufacturer 40 years ago had forced both sides to find new suppliers.

There were several minor cosmetic changes though. The atmospheric wings were swept back a little more, the coloring was a completely different hue, and the fighter boasted a slightly different weapons package.

All 60 Alliance fighters eventually launched and set course for the enemy. They aligned into a straight rectangle formation of three rows of 20 fighters; essentially matching the enemy formation. This configuration would limit the enemy formation's effectiveness and basically create a situation of every fighter for himself.

There hadn't been an actual dogfight in the 38 years since the Hirculans left the Alliance and Captain Solear doubted there would be one today.

He was wrong.

The enemy fighters in the lead group launched attack missiles. The two trailing wings launched counter attack missiles and began a loop. The loop was a classic maneuver. The upper fighters swoop up and then down and the lower fighters swoop down and then up. This aligned the nose of the fighter with the body of the opposing fighter and gave the pilot a potentially devastating shot.

Commander Arean couldn't believe the enemy had actually launched missiles. He was stunned, and for a moment couldn't move. Fortunately, he remembered his training and said, "All fighters you are free to engage the enemy. Attack at will."

The Alliance fighters launched an initial barrage of missiles and split formation to avoid the on-coming loop. Counter missiles sought missiles, missiles sought fighters and fighters tried to establish a lock on enemy fighters.

The enemy fighters broke past the initial engagement. Since both sets of fighters were facing each other during the initial pass, they were for the most part, now tail to tail. As the Alliance wing was turning for another pass, the enemy fighters had a choice – turn back toward the Alliance fighters or continue toward the Alliance cruisers.

Captain Solear tried to influence the enemy's decision by ordering a full round of anti-fighter missiles to be fired. The enemy fighters turned away from the Alliance cruisers and up and away from the remaining Alliance fighters. It was clear the Hirculan fighters were leaving.

The Alliance fighters easily had the range and speed to catch the enemy fighters before they rendezvoused with their ships. He considered ordering his fighters to pursue, but paused. Something didn't seem right.

A moment later he said, "Computer, analysis."

...The enemy fighters are retreating, but retain full combat capability. The Alliance fighters can engage them, but will be unable to do so until they are in range of the enemy's capital ships. There is an 85% probability that our fighters will suffer nearly 50% casualties in a second pass...

That decided it. Solear said, "Clowy, signal all fighters to return. Launch the recovery shuttle."

Clowy asked, "What fighters?"

"Our fighters," he said. He hastily added, "Order all of the Alliance fighters to return to their respective ships." He added, "Carank, do you have a count on the fighters?"

Carank said, "Not yet. We are still receiving telemetry. I can confirm though that there are several life pods that need to be retrieved."

As the fighters neared the cruisers and prepared to dock, Carank finished the tally from the battle. The pass had literally decimated the Alliance fighters - six planes of the sixty launched had been destroyed; their pilots dead. Eight more fighters had been destroyed, but their pilots had ejected in time. An additional eight fighters had been damaged to varying degrees, but were still flyable.

The enemy had fared much worse. Eighteen of their fighters had been destroyed, with no surviving pilots. Three others had been lightly damaged and were able to return to their fleet. The destroyer and the two cruisers picked up the remaining fighters and headed back toward the hyperspace lane that led toward Hiricula.

Solear let them go. Six dead pilots in an unnecessary skirmish was unfathomable.

It was a tradition for the weapons officer to give a formal account of the battle when all surviving fighters were back aboard. Carank stood and opened a channel throughout the ship. The other four bridge members also stood.

Arean broadcast, "Today we launched 20 brave and noble fighters. They fought valiantly, scoring a total of 7 hits and 6 kills. Fourteen fighters returned and three additional pilots were recovered in life pods. Three were killed in the battle."

After a moment of silent reflection by the bridge crew, Clowy announced, "We are receiving a hail from the *Justice*."

"You're welcome," answered Lorano as he strode onto the bridge. "I have fixed the communications system. It was the secondary bypass router."

"What?" Clowy asked. She thought for a moment and added, "Why would we ever need to bypass the secondary system?"

Lorano laughed and answered, "It doesn't do that. The secondary bypass router is technically the button you push to use the emergency back-up system. It had created a small feedback loop that was causing the issue. I have never seen one fail like that; it took me quite a while to diagnose it."

Captain Solear looked over at Carank, who simply smiled back and winked knowingly. The Captain mouthed a thank you to Carank and said, “Clowy, please answer the hail.”

Solear could see that Clowy was about to ask for clarification, so he quickly added, “From the cruiser *Justice*.”

“Captain Solear,” said Captain Dalan, the captain of the *Justice*. “I had some of the debris from the enemy fighter brought on board. We found something unusual in the wreckage and are having difficulty determining what it is. We need help analyzing it.”

Captain Solear was angry at himself for not thinking of inspecting the debris. The enemy had certainly acted strangely and there may be clues in the wreckage. From the sound of the message, the answer may be in the debris.

Solear answered, “What is it, a new metallic compound or a new type of weapon?”

“No. It is a trace of a biological fluid,” answered Dalan. He continued, “At least we think it is. We ran some standard tests and had the computer analyze it. We know that it isn’t a known coolant fluid from a fighter and it doesn’t appear to be Hirculan blood.”

Captain Solear looked over at Lorano. He was sitting at a spare panel; his large, aqua eyes were focused on a minor detail of something. Solear gave a brief sigh and counted to 10. He realized that he had mentally stuttered on the number 8, so he restarted counting at 7.

He said, “Lorano, we really need your help on this one. Please transfer over to the *Justice* and see if you can identify this fluid.”

Lorano answered, “I can’t Captain. My primary duty is to ensure that there is nothing wrong with the *Sunflower*. If something goes wrong with the ship while I am away...”

‘I will feel terrible about it’, Solear mentally finished.

“I will get a blemish on my record,” Lorano actually said.

“Lorano,” said the Captain. “You know that you are the only one in the taskforce with the skills and intelligence required to solve this problem. If the Hirculans have developed a new technology or ability we don’t know, it could change everything. The situation could go from a dispute to a shooting war. Further, I promise I won’t move *Sunflower* until you complete the analysis.”

“Fine,” said Lorano, clearly making it sound like the request was a huge sacrifice.

Lorano left the bridge and headed for the hangar bay. Arian already had a shuttle waiting for him. Engineering was kind enough to collect his gear and have it sent to the shuttle so that Lorano didn’t have to return there. Lorano left the ship 15 minutes later.

Captain Solear said, “Ella, Clowy, you two go get some rest and maybe a snack. Not much is going to happen for the next few hours.”

They took the electro lift down a level to their crew quarters and went straight to the galley. Meals were mostly self-serve. Enter a selection and a preserved packet would be automatically heated to the correct temperature.

Fortunately, both Altians and Solarians could eat the majority of Advranki foods, so they had a good selection. They each got a snack from the galley and went into Ella's quarters.

There were six available rooms in the officer's quarters, but only four were occupied. Ella and Clowy were on one side and Carank and Arean were on the opposite side. Fortunately, Lorano had chosen to stay in the engineering section.

Ella's room was dominated by a large holographic picture viewer. Currently, it was showing a painting that featured a bird flying above a majestic rock canyon. Each week, Ella's father would send a picture of his latest masterpiece and Ella would display it on the viewer.

This was the third picture Ella had displayed since the voyage began. Ella's father was a renowned painter and sculptor on Solaria. His work had even been chosen for the Alliance Senate chamber on Advranki Prime.

Clowy looked at the painting on the monitor and said, "Did your dad paint that one?"

"Yes," Ella answered, "This is his latest painting. He titled the work Bird Flying Over Canyon. He traveled to the unpopulated area in the southern zone of Solaria to paint it. The military accompanied him to guard against wild animals and they had to tie everyone to the ground to ensure that they didn't fall off the cliff. It was an exciting adventure; well to hear him describe it anyway."

Clowy responded, "Wow, it is really beautiful."

"So, do you like Lorano?" Ella asked Clowy.

"He's okay," she responded somewhat politically.

Ella clarified, "Would you ever see yourself dating him since you know, you are both here, now, together?"

Clowy answered, "What, I don't understand the words."

They were speaking the Alliance basic language to each other. Sometimes, certain concepts did not easily translate, so Ella said, "Computer, translate my last sentence to Altian."

...Estimate translation to the Altian language at 99.8% accuracy...

...Are you, or would you at a future point be romantically interested in the being named Lorano. You are both single, the only two beings from your species on this ship, and roughly the same age...

Clowy smiled broadly and yelled, "Yuck, I would rather go on a date with a Human."

Ella said, "Clowy, a Human would kill you and eat you."

Clowy responded, "Well, it would still be less painful than an evening with him!"

The cabin erupted with the sounds of their laughter. They finished their meals and continued talking until they were hailed by Arean and ordered to return to the bridge.

“Captain, we are being hailed by the *Justice*,” said Arean.

“On-screen,” announced Captain Solear.

Justice's entire bridge and engineering crews were in the landing bay where the wreckage of the Hirculan fighter had been dragged aboard. Lorano was in the middle of everything, checking figures, directing others, and scurrying back and forth to the wreckage. It took them several moments to realize that the *Sunflower* had acknowledged the hail.

Lorano looked up, realized Captain Solear was now watching and said, “We have identified the foreign element in the wreckage. It is biological, and you won't believe where it is from.”

Lorano told him exactly what it was. Lorano was right, Captain Solear didn't believe it. Solear almost asked Lorano if he was sure, but caught himself just in time. The Captain really didn't want a lecture on from Lorano on how he had solved the mystery.

Instead, he said, “Lorano, excellent work. We have to report this to the Alliance Senate immediately. As soon as you are finished, get back on board the *Sunflower*.”

He motioned to Clowy and asked her to set up a taskforce wide broadcast. When she indicated it was ready, he said, “All hands, we have disturbing proof the enemy engagement earlier today was no accident. They were testing a new biologic weapon. We are returning immediately to Advranki Prime to report this information to the Alliance Senate.”

He cut the system wide contact, mentally noted that the communications system performed marginally better than before, and said, “Ella, set course for Advranki Prime and signal the other ships to prepare to leave.”

Arean said, “Lorano is back aboard.”

“Excellent,” Captain Solear responded, suddenly thinking about the absurdity of being happy that Lorano had rejoined the ship.

“Course and speed are set. We will reach the hyperspace lane in 10 minutes.” Ella said.

A few minutes later the three ships lined up in single file line and jumped to hyperspace.