

Promethius

Chapter 1: The Beginning Times - Devils Gate

It was the same dream as always, fire and darkness, streaming lasers and massive explosions. Darren was sitting in the middle of it all, on the bridge of his battleship, watching as massive amounts of firepower coursed through space, splashing, for the moment, harmlessly in blue waves over his shields. He looked over to his left on the port view screen, and again in his horrible dream he saw his former battleship command, before he had been transferred to the LADY ASHLEY, LA KATANA, come apart under torpedo fire, and he dreamt what a battleship explosion would look like, although in all his days of command, even in the old wars, he had never seen such a thing. It was indeed a horrifying sight to see. LA KATANA's bow crumpled under one torpedo salvo, as another round from an enemy torpedo bomber wing hit the fusion reactors. In a massive Purple ring a shockwave shook his ship, and Darren had a strange sense of falling...

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"Admiral Darren Hayes, LA KATANA is currently running steady off the port side, one half click to the rear of the LADY ASHLEY at a distance of one quarter click," the monotone voice droned on repeating various statistics on shield strength, hull status, crew member readiness, engine power levels, relative velocities, and the like. Everything seemed more or less normal, as the pattern of the last two months continued on. The distances were correct, half a kilometer, or click as the marines were coming to call them, was a good distance for travel, rather close for a ship that was two clicks long, but Darren had always been a pretty good coordinator for large ship formations, and flying that close was nothing new, granted he had never commanded three battleships together before.

It was what the computer relayed next in its feminine monotone voice that shook Darren from his morning routine of making sure that his dream was not real.

"Admiral Hayes, you are required on the bridge for transit through wormhole number 01-D-625, commonly known as Devil's Gate." That was right, it was the day his fleet, the largest earth had ever assembled, was to travel to the new galaxy, whichever it may be. He quickly got dressed and hurried to the bridge, where Vice Admiral Jenyr waited for him.

"Sir," Jenyr began, "everything has been prepped for departure, all that's left is your authorization command to enter Devil's Gate."

“Excellent, Daniel, shall we try to pass through hell then?” Darren purposely used the Marines slang expression to refer to this wormhole’s passage characteristics. The scoutship that had come back had reported that passing through this wormhole was a turbulent event, and that flames had appeared twice, not to mention high reactor temperatures, hellish radiation levels, and points of high gravitation. Scientists had begun feverishly working on solutions to these problems. The Colonization fleet had its hull painted with radiation protectant, and the flames, which were deemed to be from passing through a sun at a velocity that other wormholes could not attain, were deemed to be harmless other than heating the reactor cores a bit, which could be solved by a simple heavier reactor coolant. The high gravitation was most likely, according to scientists, due to the wormhole passing near to black holes, but, as the scoutship had returned, with only minor radiation poisoning, it had been deemed that all this was harmless, once the ships were radiation sealed.

“Sir,” Jenyr softly replied, “we can still protest these orders if you feel the mission is bound for failure.”

“I’m a better soldier than that, Dan, it’s my duty to get a colonization fleet to the far side of this wormhole, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Yes Sir.”

With that, Darren entered the busy bridge of the Battleship, passing coms and weapons officers, and taking his seat right in front of the maneuvering control officers. He ran a quick systems check to make sure that systems on all ships were nominal for the difficult passage, and then turned to his coms officer “Have you sent a message back to Earth High Command, advising them of our status?” The officer shook his head in affirmation, so Darren turned back to the front and began to issue orders. “All power to shields and standard power to warp drives, shunt all weapons energy to boost the shields. Coms, send a message to Earth to let them know we are entering the gate, Engines, ahead slow, Gravity Stabilizers, be at ready for whatever we meet in there. All right people, we’ve run the sims, you know your jobs, lets go.”

The ship began to slowly move forward with the rest of the fleet in tow, while it broadcast its final in galaxy message to Earth High Command. The Coms officer shouted over the hustle of the bridge that the message had been sent as the Devil’s Gate loomed large in the forward viewscreens. Just then the ship lurched sickeningly to the right and shook violently. Darren grasped onto his seat just in time to avoid being thrown from his command chair. He quickly buckled his seat belt to avoid anymore accidents before turning to his maneuvering officers.

“Manuevers, what the hell was that?”

The officer turned to him, wide eyed and unsure of what had just happened, and that scared Darren the most. “Admiral, I have no idea...” his voice trailed off as the ship shook again. This time, a tongue of flame shot out from the Devil’s gate and rocked the LADY ASHLEY hard, before a gravity swell pulled the ship forward... hard. Then, like a swelling wave from a roiling ocean sea, a ball of darkness swept forward and the LADY ASHLEY was pulled into the Devil’s Gate. The darkness swept over Darren, and that was the last thing he remembered...

Chapter 2: The Beginning Times - Hell's Passage

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Chapter 3: The Beginning Times - New Arrivals

Darren pushed back from the table where his daily reports lie. Having read them twice each, he was ready to go and get some lunch. The colonization effort was going well. Once a suitable planet had been found and colonized as a base of operations, Darren had been shuttled down from the LADY ASHLEY to command the colonization effort from the newest planet in the Earth High Command regime, Iota Prime. The fleet communications had been repaired and all that had been restored to normal status. That was about a hundred days ago, and Darren appreciated the outdoor space still available on this planet, allowing the new sun, which had not yet been named to warm him more deeply than the scientific heating coils of the colony buildings would allow. Eight out of the ten outpost ships had colonized planets, and the other two were in route to colonize two more planets with a frigate that Earth had sent along as reinforcements. Well, not so much as reinforcements as it were to serve as an escort. Shortly after the colonization of Iota Prime, Earth had sent a fleet of freighters and merchants, along with the necessary trader class vessel (which contained the drive needed to travel Devil's Gate). The fleet had delivered enough supplies to build some basic wartime factories, and the communications satellite was built.

All in all things were moving fairly smoothly. Darren had divided up the new freighters and merchants into several smaller fleets and had them traveling around the new planets redistributing various goods. The colonization effort was going well and Earth High Command would soon send an ambassador to do the work on the command node, and Darren would be allowed to return home, leaving a third of his fleet to serve as defense under Vice Admiral Jenyr. That was much more agreeable to Darren, he missed his home a lot. Despite his being used as an Admiral for more and more daring missions, and being the highest ranked admiral, he had no aptitude for life in a colony planet, nor for life at Earth Command Prime, the central command station on planet Earth. In truth, the hustle of larger cities and newly colonized planets fascinated him, but there was also a sense of dishonesty, almost like one could trust no one else in these places. No, Darren was from a small town, only about eight thousand in population, on the fairly developed but still small planet, Calvarias Prime. His town had served as a mining town for gold when the precious metal still held value. Law had determined that gold could serve no functional purpose and, like central heating and air-conditioning to set the temperature how one pleased, the metal had been outlawed.

"Admiral Darren Hayes," the voice of a young officer came through the comms, since planets did not have central computers that communicated and kept schedules, "please report to the Command Node, our outpost ships are about to come out of their hyper travel drives into the target colonization planets."

Darren clicked a button on his desk next to a speaker which he inclined his head toward, "I'm on my way. Any difficulties or anomalies to speak of?"

"No sir."

"Alright, be there in one second," and with that Darren clicked the com unit off and pushed his chair back. He looked longingly out the window as the sun streaked lazily down through the rugged pine and spruce trees. He longed to have a horse here to ride around and explore, but his horses had all been kept back at his ranch on Calvarias Prime. It was a shame really. Darren rounded the desk and walked through the door, nodding courteously to the body guards stationed outside, who then fell in step behind him a few paces. The Earth freighters had also delivered more colonists for

a workforce, but who knew if they could ALL be trusted not to be members of the PEACE Corps—short for the PEace At All Costs Elite Corps—which would not mind killing military leaders to ensure peace. Darren found it more than slightly amusing that they couldn't even come up with a proper acronym and thus had to mis-capitalize the first word to make it fit. Darren had first gotten body guards two years ago, this being after the assassination of Lord Terrinal, High Admiral of Earth Fleets which had made the appointment of bodyguards for all generals and admirals a necessity. Darren had enjoyed it at first, shuffling his feet rapidly every once in awhile to make his guards have to shuffle along in order to stay in step with him, or he would pretend that he had forgot something, turn and then pretend to realize he had found it, then turn back, just to watch them do their intricate pattern required for doing 180 degree turns. Darren grew tired of that rather quickly though, and now he just let them do as they please with little attention paid to their doings.

Darren arrived at the command node and took his seat in the command chair. The node was, except for size and number of personnel, not much different from the bridge of his ship. "Sensors, give me a visual from the second outpost ship." This was not a military crew, no one called out a reply, but in a few seconds the view of stars whizzing by with the first outpost ship ahead and slightly to the left came up on the screen.

"Coms, get me a patch on all information coming and going from that ship, as well as a line with their captain."

"Sir, the missing freighter still has not been located."

"Yes Vice Admiral Jenyr, I know." Shortly after having come out of transit, one of the merchant fleets reported that a freighter had gone missing, that was over a month ago, so all aboard were presumed missing or dead.

Darren heard the static that implied the link had been established. "Captain, are you there?"

"Sir," the reply came back slightly scratchy, both because of distance and the fact that civilian operators were running the connection, "You're just in time, we're coming out of hyper travel now."

"Excellent, carry on."

The stars whizzing by suddenly jolted to a halt, the target planet looming up forward and relatively down and to the right. It took Darren only a brief second to realize that there was another fleet already in orbit. It was nearly as large as his fleet, although composed of only two battleship class ships but with several more cruisers than Darren had. A cruiser came into the view screen from the top, meaning that it had come from behind the outpost ship. Boarding claws launched from the bottom of the cruiser and hooked into the hull. Darren watched in horror as enemy fighters swarmed around both ships. Bomber fleets swept in on the first outpost ship, launching hellish torpedoes. In two seconds the first outpost ship was torn to millions of shards of metal and mineral in an explosion that boiled like an angry demon.

"Sir," came the captain of the second ship, "they're transmitting to us, in English."

“Patch it through,” that was all Darren could get out.

His port viewscreen lit up as well, this time filled with a dark creature whose head was mounted by a ridge of horns. Tusks penetrated its lower lip and these had insane tattoos marked into them, infinitely complex. The beast wore some sort of battle armor, with wicked barbed spikes protruding from the shoulder plates. Darren couldn't see anything below the beast's shoulders, but he didn't want to. The voice was grating and somehow whispering while it boomed. It was a voice that was evil to its very core. “We have takenssssss your shippppp you callsssssssss a freighter, and we havvvve analysssssed your systemssssssss and language. Having been discoverrrred weeeee will now whipe your scumssssssssss from the universssssssssse.” Darren looked back to the main view screen, a wing of bombers swept in from the front and Darren saw at least a hundred torpedoes streak in at insane speed, trailing blue plasma in their wake. The first struck the shields and the energy passed harmlessly in a beautiful blue wave, but that was all that Darren saw before the rest of the torpedoes passed through the shield and ended his outpost ship.

“Vice Admiral,” Darren said, the anger in his voice showing on the edge. He had been challenged, his fleet surprise attacked for no reason. This was an outrage, no more could be tolerated. Darren stood, drawing himself up and the civilian operators shrank back at the might that was rising before them. Indeed, this was the trusted admiral of the Earth High Command. Noble and powerful he rose up before them, his shoulders drawing back and his brow drawing down until he looked like some noble creature, an eagle perhaps.

“Sir,” came the voice of a confident, although slightly shaken vice admiral.

“Call the LADY ASHLEY into position, and summon a shuttle to take us up, we're going to war.”

“Sir,” one of the civilian operators called out, “Terra 1 reports that there is a fleet coming into orbit their planet, it looks hostile.”

“Tell them to hold out as long as they can, this will not be tolerated.”

Chapter 4: The Beginning Times - The War Begins

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Chapter 5: The Beginning Times - Enter Death, Enter Dragons

Darren felt old, too old. He was only nearing his forties, but he was extremely wise and mature for such a young age. It was a wonder he was a full admiral at such a young age, but then again, everyone at the academy had known he was bound for success. He had the best technology that Earth had to offer in his control, all at the palm of his hand in the crew of the LADY ASHLEY. And instead of taking that power and using it to build colonies, he was hurtling with the monster through space, only minutes from intercepting a fair sized enemy fleet and taking the first decisive victory of this new war. Conquest was spread throughout the history of Earth, and Darren was becoming more and more of the conflict that was humanity’s expansion. This was the natural course of things. Though he didn’t like it, Darren had a natural talent for command in battle, and that was the tool he would offer to humanity and the future of mankind.

Two days had past since the loss of the outpost ships. Terra 1 had held out valiantly for most of the two days, but had begun to fall that morning. Large amounts of the populace had died in an onslaught that had occurred after the planetary defense laser was overwhelmed by the number of approaching invasion ships. The few soldiers posted on the planet had been rapidly overrun, and it was the scientists who had turned the tide, laying down their lives fighting with their experimental technology. This had turned the alien race away, but it left only a handful of scientists and about fifty thousand colonists behind. The enemy troops had begun to descend again, and battles were raging on the planet between last minute resistances and the alien troops. In less than five hours the planet would fall on its own.

Now, the LADY ASHLEY, however, and her full escort of ships would arrive in a few minutes, and would turn the tide of the battle. Death would rain fiercely on the aliens, Darren felt the need for vengeance coursing through his veins. There was nothing to be done now, peace could not be attained. After the unprovoked attack after the Devil's Gate, and the two recent attacks, Darren wanted nothing but the blood of his foes. The black stars out the forward view port began to resolve themselves into long lines as the ships began to slow from hyper travel. Darren began to issue orders. "Coms, coordinate our attack with the rest of the fleet. Weapons, full power. Shields, Charge all power from food systems and add it to the shields. Engines, ready to travel on impulse."

Darren got a variety of responses as his crew leapt to their tasks, preparing for the battle at hand. Darren looked to Vice Admiral Jenyr, over his left shoulder, and Jenyr nodded back. "All right," Darren said, "It's time we got some blood for our fallen comrades, follow your training and we'll tear through them like a shark through minnows. Bring us out of warp."

The star field stretched a slight bit for a moment, then with a jarring thud the stars all snapped into place as the fleet came out of warp into orbit of Terra 1, appearing out of nowhere and dropping right into the rear starboard side of the enemy fleet. It was a vicious drop, and Darren felt his stomach go out for just a second. The enemy fleet was quick to respond, swinging around and powering up its shields. "Launch the fighters," Darren shouted.

The front view port filled with buzzing fighters roiling out from the belly of the battleships and cruisers, filling the space between the opposing fleets with a cloudlike fighter cover. Hundreds of fighters from the alien fleets coursed into the fray, and the space around Terra 1 began to light up with streaks of laser fire.

"Sir," a captain approached Darren, "should we launch the bombers now?"

"Ten seconds then launch," Darren calmly replied. If anything changed, or the enemy revealed a heavy frigate and fighter presence, Darren would send his frigates and destroyers in first, to save his bombers for another day. The ten seconds counted down, and the bombers launched. The fighter wings towards the center of the fray regrouped and pushed a defensive arrow through the center of the space battle, opening a passageway for the hundred bomber Darren had authorized for launch. The enemy fleets formed up and began advancing, firing randomly towards Darren's Fleet, although few of those shots made it through the cloud of fighters whirling in the middle ground. "Turn to port, they don't have any choice but to come straight at us and I want to give them a good view of our broadside."

"Aye aye, Sir," shouted the commander of the engine crew. The large ships of the fleet began to roll out to the left and form up into a defensive ring. This presented different ups and downs. The large ships were easiest to hit this way, which was only consoled by the fact that, being large ships, they were always easy to hit. The upside was that it allowed all of Darren's forward, aft, and side guns to fire, whereas it would only allow the enemy's forward guns to fire on them. In a battle like this where Darren only slightly outnumbered his opponent, it was crucial for him to use all of his weapons. The enemy drove on relentlessly, swinging into the approaching earth bombers' range. Darren saw the purple lights as each bomber released a volley of two bombs at large enemy ships. The bombs hurtled forward and slammed into the shields of the now unprotected large ships,

sending ripples of energy rounding off the shields. The bombers hadn't concentrated on any single ship, so not one was destroyed, but Darren did see that the shields had fallen on many enemy ships and that the others' shields were weakened severely.

All of a sudden Darren felt the LADY ASHLEY rock violently as enemy torpedoes slammed into her aft and port shields, draining away energy. "What was that?"

"Sir, they had bombers pre deployed, and they ended up behind us when we dropped into system."

"This was a shield maneuver, just like ours sir."

Darren was furious, this should have been noticed. "Shunt all energy from non mandatory systems to shields, I want the defenses back online ASAP. Move the frigates into firing position and have them hold off any further bomber attacks."

As his orders were carried out, Darren looked back to the view port. He saw something then that he never thought he would see. The enemy ships dove headlong into the fighter cloud at a fast rate, tearing into any fighters in their path. Both friendly and enemy explosions surrounded the enemy ships as they battered fighters out of their way. Darren could see that some of the shields had come back up on the enemy ships, but that many hadn't. It really wasn't that hard to tell, as the fighters exploded on either shields, or tore back sheets of armored hull from unshielded ships. "Launch the second wing of bombers and have them circle around the port side. Have what's left of the first wing reload and circle around their starboard. Open fire on my mark." Darren held his hand up, signaling to the weapons controller not to fire yet. As the enemy ships began to come in range they fired sporadically, the energy washing a bright red over the shields. At this range shots bled energy off through space until they were almost useless. Darren waited, tense long moments as the enemy fleet formed up and came into effective range. As he thought, they began to roll to their port, allowing them the same vantage that Darren had, but he was not going to allow that. Before they could get even ten degrees into the rolling maneuver Darren dropped his hand and a wall of deadly light radiated out from his fleet to converge on the forming enemies. It was a lethal attack at such a range, and with such massive fire power concentrated, he could see the armor peel off on many ships. Internal fires raged on more than half of his foes ships, and lights flickered on more than a few large ships. A cruiser began to drift down from the main fleet, slowly colliding with a destroyer as its hull crumpled under terrible strains. Suddenly the engine core ignited and an explosion roiled out from the midsection, ripping the cruiser into tiny pieces and sheering the destroyer into two equal slices. Elsewhere, an enemy Destroyer finally succumbed to its internal fires and came apart in a deadly silent crumbling. No explosion was needed, and Darren could see the enemy bodies drift into space.

The enemy fleet, what still was operational, finished their roll. More than a dozen capital class ships, and at least thirty frigates were left inoperable after that first volley. Darren signaled to boost full power to shields as the enemy released a volley at the Earth Fleet. The LADY ASHLEY skipped like a boat in the ocean waves as laser after laser tore at her shields. The shields held though, although that couldn't be said for all of the ships in the fleet. Ten heavy damage reports came in from capitol ships, and one destroyer was reported as destroyed. Five frigates crumpled under the onslaught and another twenty reported serious damage.

The enemy bombers approached again and Darren wished there was more power he could shunt to shields. His fighters looked to be winning their battle, however, and many of them followed closely behind the bombers, destroying them as they flew in. The remaining combat ready frigates, nearly eighty of them, fired with devastating accuracy into the bomber fleet, and by the time the bombers got within range, only a few bombs were released. It was still enough though, to crumple a few more hulls, taking another destroyer and two more frigates.

The enemy fleet lined its frigates around the starboard side, apparently warding off against the attack of the first wing of bombers returning, not having seen the second launch. They unleashed punishing waves of lasers into the oncoming bombers, but they had less than fifty frigates remaining, and their fighters didn't have the escape luxury to engage the bombers. As soon as Darren saw the lights of the bombs released, he again signaled to launch a laser broadside. The waves of energy now coursed into the fully unshielded opponents, tearing their armored hull to shreds and eating away at what looked like command nodes and com centers. The bombs slammed heavily into engine compartments and bows alike, crumpling the engine cores on many enemy ships, and destroying the maneuvers on others. Those ships lucky enough to avoid the bombs began to pull up and away, continuing their portside rolls, and getting out of effective range of the Earth fleet. Darren watched as they gathered their remaining fighters and left the system. Many of their ships were left floating in pieces, with near a dozen left intact but without either engines or maneuvering power. It had been a glorious victory. More than half of the enemy fleet had been wiped out, and not one of their bombers had returned to their fleet. Darren would have to wait for a final assessment of the fleet before he would know their losses and the enemy confirmed kills, but it was a great battle.

"Establish contact with Terra 1, Jenyr, you have the helm," Darren said and turned to walk from the bridge.

Chapter 6: The Beginning Times - The Long Awaited

This was a tiresome war. Darren was moving fleets around, jumping system to system to destroy whatever fleets he could. His enemies were fast learners. After the battle of Terra 1, Darren had ordered an immediate evacuation of the planet. Once all the citizens were gone he had sent in marines and the planet had been set with traps and explosives everywhere. A small ship had remained behind, and when the unknown enemy had returned and landed a massive fleet of invasion ships, the explosives had been set off. The total number of casualties for the enemy had been unclear, but estimates regarding the number of ships ranged in the hundreds of thousands. After that, the war had become strictly guerilla in nature.

A supply fleet at Terra 6 had been assaulted, but when Darren had arrived with a fleet, the ambushers had fled. Once he had left an invasion fleet had arrived and taken out most of Terra 6's defenses. Darren had ordered the evacuation and trapping of the planet, but instead of attempting to invade a second time, the enemy sent a fleet of orbital bombers, and the planet was reduced to

slag. When Darren finally managed to get a com sat upgraded, and found a planet he quickly moved in and crushed the resistance, setting up a new human colony that would research the lifestyles of the enemy in order to learn something of their weaknesses. The enemy fleets then captured Terra 5 in a surprise attack.

So, both sides were using satellites to monitor the movement of fleets, and surprise attacks on cargo fleets seemed to be the mode of the battles. Nothing significant had happened in a week, and data from Rapture 1, the former enemy planet had yet to give any helpful information.

Darren had fallen to closely watching enemy fleet movements. There were several central planets, and one in particular caught his attention. Massive numbers of small fleets had been going to and from this planet, making it obvious to Darren that this was either a major source of resources, or that it was a huge production planet. One thing was sure, however: that taking this planet would have a crippling effect on enemy operations in the galaxy. Darren had waited a full week, watching the fleet movement in and out, and finally he saw something important. A medium sized fleet was moving to the planet. The enemy military fleets generally traveled in medium to large fleets, while the merchant fleets were more or less small fleets. This presented Darren with an opportunity to wipe out a military target. So the fleet course had been set, and they would arrive within minutes of the enemy fleet. Get in, shoot them up, and get out was the plan.

Dragon Fire fleet was approaching now to that deadly rendezvous, and in about thirty seconds the fleet would arrive. Darren swung his chair around and called to his com units. "Broadcast the fleet to prepare for battle, weapons power up full, divert all non life-support energy to increase the shields. We're going to battle."

A hush fell over the bridge and the orders were carried out quickly. The men and women of the bridge crew knew their job well, and they worked hard. Darren was steely eyed and ready to destroy his opponent's fleet and take an important planet. The star tunnel out the forward viewscreen snapped into place and the stars went from gracefully spinning lines to sharp points in an instant. When his mind cleared and Darren looked around, he could see instantly that there had been a grave intelligence error. The enemy fleet that had just arrive was indeed only a mid sized fleet, but below and rising fast to meet them was a huge enemy fleet coming to meet them. Darren was awed by the sheer size of the approaching enemy force. Five battleships was all that had come in, a paltry force compared to his massive fleet, even though he only had three battleships. But the approaching fleet was over twenty cruisers, sixty destroyers, and around a hundred and fifty frigates. The whole fleet was over three times the size of his own. Darren watched as the Battleships and cruisers lined up on their approach to his fleet and was awed by the sheer number of fighters and bombers spewing out the sides of the huge ships.

In a flash everything became clear. The merchant fleets coming in and out of the system had been more than just transport ships. Intermingled here and there had been fighters, bombers, cruisers, and other such mid to large ships. When they arrived at the planets, the merchant ships had loaded up and left, and the military ships had stayed behind. When Darren thought about it, it was a great plan, and obviously it had worked out well on his enemy's part. Darren jolted, there was a fleet to command now.

"Scanners, take a look at the planet and see what they're using it for. Once you've done that, get me a reading of the enemy ships and scan for weaknesses. Weapons, get ready to fire, Coms tell the frigates to get out there and stop all the bombers that they can."

"Yes sir," shouted several members of the crew.

"Scramble all the fighters to help the frigates," said Darren, "scramble the bombers, but have them hold back for later in the fight. We're going to get out of here."

Chapter 7: The Beginning Times

It was almost too much. Darren saw the approaching cloud of enemy fighters and knew instantly that they would overwhelm his frigates and fighters. There was nothing he could do to stop that, and the bombers and heavy ships would move in after the massive wave of fighters. It was unwinnable, and trying to fight it would mean that they would all die in a hopeless battle. With such devastatingly overwhelming firepower the enemy fleet would probably not even feel a scratch from his battle group. There was only one option: an organized and costly retreat.

Darren considered his options quickly, "Divert the bombers half a click on vector 90N, have them hold there." He could already see the enemy fighters beginning to swarm around his frigates, and the shields from his frigates began to light up a brilliant iridescent purple as thousands of laser burst rained down on their shields. Darren had sent his bombers half a kilometer in a relative straight up direction, hoping that the opportunity would present itself to jump over the enemy fighter screen and do some heavy damage to larger ships. His frigates opened fire with their laser batteries and several enemy fighters were blasted to shrapnel in the first salvo, then the space in front of the Lady Ashley went mad with a frenzy of space fire from both friendly and enemy forces. Darren's fighters arrived and opened up, providing something of a screen for his heavily outgunned freighters. Having the added fighters made the fight between the enemy fighter force and the fielded earth forces fairly even, so the enemy frigates began to move forward and engage Darren's fighters. And that was exactly what Darren had been waiting for.

"Send the bombers over the fighter battle, have them target the lead battleship"

"Sir," a com tech shouted, "got the readout on the planet, its..."

Darren cut him off, "That's fine, give me the report later, get on the other scans," then, turning his chair the other direction, "Nav, how long till we can back to the jump point out of here?"

"Five minutes, Sir"

That was a hell of a long time. John keyed some commands into his com pad, ordering the frigates and fighters to start falling back at a faster rate, closing the distance between the firefight and the retreating heavy ships. Darren saw his bombers despite their losses, engage the first Battleship

and inflict heavy damage. The first two wings side slipped between the insane number of laser bolts, targeted the shield generators and knocked out much of the ships defensive capability, and then the third assault wave cut down the engines. The Battleship was dead in space, and it wouldn't have many laser shots to fire before its capacitors would run out. The bombers then decapitated the battleship with a salvo of torpedoes that punctured the forward view screen and blasted a hole in the fore end of the destructive ship. Laser fire poured out from the battleship, but it was thinning out, and there were still a large number of bombs pummeling it. The ship was far beyond repair.

Even as he celebrated the minor victory to himself, he saw the other battleships fall in with and be surrounded by the cruisers. That was the end of that tactic. A battleship alone was a lot of firepower, but they were severely lacking in shields. The enemy was using an age old tactic, surrounding their battleships with heavily shielded cruisers, allowing their battleships to fire out from the protection of the cruisers. Darren knew that it was hopeless to engage the enemy cruisers so he punched in an order for his bombers to desist and engage the advancing destroyers instead. And then he saw it coming.

Through the thick of the firefight a column of enemy bombers had formed into a wedge that had driven through the firestorm. Although the column had suffered heavy losses they had punched the barrier and there was nothing separating the enemy bombers and the earth heavy fleet. Darren dropped his jaw as he saw the two hundred bombers barreling towards his now vulnerable fleet...

Chapter 8: The Beginning Times

This was where the retreat was going to become costly. There was no way his fleet could stand up for long against two hundred bombers. Not even with his cruisers protecting the battleships could Darren hope to put up much of a fight. This was going to be a lot of damage control.

"Keep the engines full, get us to that jump point. Nav, plot us a course to Iota prime, Coms, get us a line to Earth High command and inform them of these new enemy resources. Get us heavy reinforcements," Darren snapped. "Weapons, target the bombers and try to pick them off until they launch torps, then try to eliminate as many of the missiles as you can."

Lasers flashed from every ship in the fleet, blasting into the approaching bombers. At first the lasers were effective, until the tight core of bombers broke apart into a weaving cloud through which the lasers passed almost harmlessly. At maximum range the enemy bombers cut loose a full salvo of missiles trailing blue wakes behind them, the deadly bolts sailed rapidly towards the retreating capital ships as the bombers looped around for another pass. Again the lasers flared out trying with slightly higher success to pick off some of the incoming torpedoes. Darren could see, however, that it wouldn't be enough.

"Order the fighters and frigates to fall back and attempt to reengage their bombers. Have our bombers try to eliminate as many of their destroyers as possible then rejoin us in two minutes. What's our time to jump?"

“Two and a half minutes, Sir,” shouted a crewman.

Before Darren could continue the first set of torpedoes slammed into the shields and rocked the ship hard to starboard, flinging more than one crew member to the ground. With that many bombers Darren knew that they didn't need to concentrate on any one ship, with a couple more salvos they would be able to take out the entire fleet by shooting several dozen torps at a time per ship. Darren didn't need to even look at his damage screen to see that his shields were already at fifty percent. Errant laser fire from the fighter and frigate battle that edged closer and closer splashed in blue waves over his shields, and Darren had a sick feeling. He saw then, that the enemy bombers were lining up targeting the two battleships, LA KATANA and LADY ASHLEY, at the rear of the retreating column. If this salvo didn't take him out of commission, then the next would certainly do so, and finish the ship off. Then he saw the bursts of missiles fired and braced for the impact he knew would come. At least maybe with the bombers concentrating on the two battleships, the rest of the heavy fleet might get away. This time the bombers closed in, trying to get in a second salvo without having to loop around again. They had the numbers for a clean kill, and the enemy commander was pressing hard for it. Even with lasers picking off as many torps as possible, when the ship rocked again Darren felt the shields go down, and heard the sickening peel of armor plating being burned and ripped off by torpedoes that broke through. One more blast like that and there were going to be two large lumps of scrap metal in space. Just as the bombers launched their third salvo, the killing blow, Darren knew there wasn't much he could do.

Then something unexpected happened. LA KATANA broke formation and swung up behind LADY ASHLEY, coming between the enemy bombers and the flagship. Massive numbers of torpedoes smashed into LA KATANA, which, save for a few, took the bombs meant for both ships. Sparks flew from LA KATANA's engines, an electricity played in blue lightning over the smoking hull of the ship. Darren ordered his coms to try and make contact, but he knew already that everyone was dead. As its engines died out LA KATANA slowed and fell behind the flagship, slowly rolling to its starboard side. Darren saw, as the ship lulled over, the fires pouring out from the massive hole that ate almost a third off the side of the ship. Charred bodies drifted slowly from the rent open hatches and rumbling explosions swelled the remaining slag with intense heat. Darren saw a few more flashes as stray torps hit the hulk, then he saw several pound into the now exposed fusion reactor. In a swell of unstoppable power the hulk of ship blasted into a million metal fragments as raw nuclear energy unleashed tongues of red fury. Darren keyed all weapons power into the shields and managed to bring something of a defense back up before the shockwave of the explosion caught up to the LADY ASHLEY. He could see that the enemy bombers were not so lucky. Their unshielded hulls left them vulnerable, and even as they wheeled about to head away from their unintended blast, it was too late. With grim satisfaction at revenge Darren watched the shards of metal rip through the enemy bomber component tearing all but a few of the bombers to pieces.

When the shockwave reached his ship it was no easy ride. The LADY ASHLEY tilted at a ridiculous angle as it was thrown forward. With no small amount of luck the helm officer managed to steer clear of blasting into any of the other Dragon Fire fleet ships which had been swept up and were now similarly riding the shockwave caused by the horrendous loss of LA KATANA. As the ship leveled out Darren looked at his battle schematics. The explosion had reached as far as the fighter battle, and many of the fighters, friend and foe alike, were now no more than clouds of floating debris. Darren ordered the frigates and bombers, less than half of those committed to the battle, to

fall back as fast as possible and set a course for Iota Prime.

“Sir,” the nav officer interrupted him, “With the added speed from the shockwave we’ve cut forty seconds off our time to jump. We’ll be clear in thirty more.”

Darren looked at the battle schematic again. There was nothing significant in range of attack, and his returning frigates were already mopping up the remaining fighters. Apparently the enemy knew they couldn’t catch up and engage again, because their capitol ships were holding their position and the enemy fighters were falling back. Fortunately, there were no bombers left for them to recall.

“Seal any airlocks leading to leaking sections. Notify Iota prime to prepare all its defenses and ready all available fighters and bombers to hold off an attack. We may be out of this fire, but that doesn’t mean this one won’t spread. Remember what you’ve seen today, people. A lot of good men and women died to get us home.”

Chapter 9: The Beginning Times - Friends and Foes

The Devil’s Gate was cold: too far in deep space to allow Darren a little more at ease. If something happened at Iota Prime there was no way to make it back in time to save the colony. After the huge fleet he had just seen, Darren had little doubt that the alien race had the manpower to take even the largest colony. Things had been relatively calm in the last two weeks, however. Minor raids had continued, a few skirmishes here and there for minor colonies on planets that hardly counted for asteroids. Every scope Darren had was pointed to monitoring for motions of large fleets, especially coming from the planet DragonBane, as the pilots had now taken to calling the location of their last battle. Nothing. It seemed as if the whole battle rested now on seeing what the other side would do... a proverbial stalemate, regardless of the fact that Darren was hopelessly outnumbered.

Orders had come to report to the Devil’s Gate with all but a small contingent of forces, and Darren had to assume he would be reinforced. He guessed that there would be a make up of all the ships he had lost, perhaps even a battleship to fill in for the horrendous loss of the LA KATANA. Still, he almost knew it wouldn’t be enough. Even once again armed with three battleships, he would never be able to take down the fleet he had seen at DragonBane. He knew, already, from his experience and reviewing of battle records that aside from the five battleships at DragonBane, there were eleven more battleships available to the enemy. That was fifteen serviceable battleships in all. Even all the tactics in the world wouldn’t stop that size fleet with only three battleships.

At the very least the reinforcements could help keep his people fresh. With almost all of his fighters annihilated, and more than sixty five percent of the frigates destroyed or being repaired for serious damage, even his destroyers and cruisers were having to go on escort duty. That type of heavy use was more than the ships were designed to see, and Darren was sure it was wearing their crews and engineers down over time.

“Sir,” one of the deck officers intruded into his thoughts, “ships coming through the gate.” Darren sat forward. This was what he needed to break his mood.

A flash of incandescent light illuminated the space around the gate, and a battleship shot through the tunnel that Darren had aligned his fleet into around the gate. Darren’s heart leaped, at least the LA KATANA, and older ship, would be replaced by one of the newer battleships with more firepower. The battleship swung out of the formation and slowly moved to the side of the gate path where other ships might come through, but Darren was dismayed to see that there were no other ships immediately following.

“Coms coming through, Sir,” shouted one of the satellite managers, and Darren shouted back “Put it through to the main screen.”

Admiral Halk’s weathered face appeared on the forward screen, battle aged and lined, although a spark in the eyes showed Darren once again that Halk was not beyond his fighting years. But Halk also outranked Darren, by a couple of ranks. Darren was being benched. Not that he minded, in this case, this was a tough battle.

“Sir,” Darren began, “I take it you are here to take charge of the Dragon Fire fleet?”

“Ha,” Halk snuffed, in a grandfatherly way, “Darren, you know I spent my whole life fighting the Minerians, I’ve no patience left to learn the tactics of a whole new enemy species.” It was true. In the ongoing war against the Minerians, which humans were now decidedly winning, Halk had been the pivotal leader who had turned the tide in many battles. The Minerians were still a strong force, with seven battleships and an ally, the Tankala, who had three more Battleships. But Darren had been there too, and knew that the Minerians were nothing like the enemy they fought now. “I’m here,” Halk continued, “to report under your command, along with my battle group.”

“Sir, your battleship will go a long way to help us in our fight against these monsters...” Darren trailed off as Halk waved a hand to silence him.

“First off, High Command has named them Nosgul. Second, you should know that us older admirals pack a little more punch in the High Command’s Council. After reviewing the schematics of your battles, I concluded you would need more than just a simple reinforcement, you needed bolstering. So I got a few more battleships transferred under your command.”

As if on queue, four more Earth Battleships blasted through the gate, slowing to fall in line with the rest of the formed fleet. Darren held back his increasing excitement as various admirals he knew reported into his command, heroes all from the Minerian War. Darren keyed up the com to Halk, who was smiling triumphantly, and asked how High Command could afford to divert all these resources from the war to help out on this front.

“Well,” Halk informed him, “in the months since you left, a disease struck the Minerians pretty hard, started getting the Tankala too. Turns out, Nosgul had something to do with it. They sent a ship through the gate loaded with virus targeted for humans. Buggers didn’t work though, and infected the Minerians. Our scientists developed a cure, and in return the war was ended and an alliance was made. My next surprise, Darren,” Halk trailed off as four more battleships exited the

gate, the leading three were Minerian build, and the third was a slightly smaller Tankala Battleship. Darren couldn't believe his eyes as four former enemies, all of whom he had fought against, and knew very well, even secretly respected, reported in to his command.

"Darren," Halk continued, "our battle groups as well." And flashes lit space as hundreds of ships coursed through the gate. Thirty cruisers were followed by 120 destroyers, who in turn led well over five hundred frigates, a thousand bombers, and two thousand fighters. Not all of the ships were of earth design, but all looked battle ready, and capable.

Finally, three more battleships flashed through the gate, two newer model and one older, along with their respective battle groups. To Darren's dismay these formed up in a separate mass away from Darren's fleet. The com chimed and Darren hit the receiver. Admiral Janyx flashed on screen, and Darren cringed. He never could trust Janyx. In battles past Janyx had shown initiative, but little in the way of loyalty and honor. If anything, this was the first bit of bad news Darren had since the reinforcements began to arrive. Janyx smiled in that devious way and began to speak, "Darren, my colleague," it was true, they did share the same rank, but Darren would never consider Janyx an equal. "I trust you don't want to work with me as much as I don't want to work with you. That is why it is my pleasure to inform you that we will both be satisfied in this endeavor."

Darren leaned forward in his command chair. "How so?"

"I have been assigned here along with Admirals Benson and Caytla to serve as a special independent strike force operating to remove enemy support structures. I will not need orders from you, nor will you need orders from me. High command thought it best that I and my admirals operate independently."

The lack of ability to use those three ships and their escorts was a sad thing, but Darren would not miss any of those commanders. Their ability and honor in the field had shown time and again that they would not follow orders with the precision and speed needed to win a major battle in this war. Ten battleships to his command would be enough, he could overcome the difference.

"Sir," said a coms officer with a hint of worry to his voice, "our forces report attack on Iota Prime is in progress with scans showing an incoming fleet from DragonBane. It's the one we fought last time, sir."

Time to get back to Iota Prime, Darren thought with grim satisfaction at the surprise he had in store.

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