

PITCAIRN STAR

By Kevin Killiany

BATTLECORPS

Dormandaine
Outworld Alliance
September 16, 3063

It took a lot of turbulence to buck a fifty-ton *Lightning*. Jared's rattled like a reed in a windstorm.

"Not too late to sit this one out." Darin's voice crackled over his headphones.

"No, I'm fine," Jared answered his flight partner. "But you might want to go back and guard the DropShip while we tend to business."



Third Squadron of the Lone Wolves had deployed at speed from a *Leopard* CV carrier on fly-by. Their DropShip hadn't braked as hard as the others, pulling ahead and passing on the far side of Dormandaine from the rest of the rescue force. And the pirate raid. There was an outside chance the pirates thought it was an out-of-control over-shot, but it wasn't too likely.

The squadron had arched over Dormandaine's pole, slingshotting through the gravity well. Now they slashed in from the north, edging into the atmosphere at near orbital velocities. The plan was to hit the deck fat and catch the pirates from below as they braced for attack from above. But at these speeds the thin gasses of the upper atmosphere were like a wall of molten steel. If they weren't on their toes turbulence would do the pirates' job for them.

"First blood," Darin predicted.

"Yours or theirs?"

"Three-three, three-four, pipe down," warned their supervisor. Her voice weary with repetition.

Jared grinned. He and Darin had been one-upping each other since Columbia Academy. One-two at every competition they'd entered, whether organized or—more often—impromptu. Barracks gamblers had long ago decided who was best at any given time had more to do with wind direction and barometric pressure than anything else; they were that evenly matched.

Today's competition was certainly impromptu. It had been blind chance—or machinations of the deity the people of Dormandaine worshipped—that the two of them along with the rest of Third Wing's Second Regiment had been en route to jump point, headed for a martial aerobatics competition on Alpheratz when the refugee JumpShip appeared, screaming about a pirate raid on Dormandaine. As a result they'd come in-system hours behind the raiders instead of days. Quickly enough to support the nadir re-charge station in holding off pirates remaining at the jump point.

Not their fight. DropShips belonging to most of Second Regiment had been sent to head off the raiders. A two-week horserace from jump point to planet—the pirates too committed to their course at that time to change, and too far ahead for the Lone Wolves to engage. Actually, given the number of pirate DropShips, it wasn't at all clear the Second would have automatically won the engagement if they had closed.

It still wasn't a sure thing, but in atmosphere the edge definitely went to the defenders.

Common sense, Jared knew, would have been for the pirate DropShips to head back for jump point; try to force the defenders away long enough to for their JumpShips to juice up and get out before reinforcements arrived. Instead, they seemed bent on pulling off their raid; gambling the rest of the Dark Rain wing wouldn't be in position to follow to Dormandaine. Or, more likely, betting the wing wasn't going to leave Ramora unprotected.

As it happened, both were good bets, but the pirates would have no way of knowing that for sure. Jared wondered what was on Dormandaine worth that kind of risk. As far as he knew there was nothing but cows and Islamians—or whatever they were called. Neither commerce nor theology had ever interested him.

At last Third Squadron was deep enough in the atmosphere for their *Lightning's* control surfaces to grab. They leveled, hanging high enough to minimize air drag as they closed on their hopefully unsuspecting quarry. If the pirates behaved as expected, all their sensors would be focused on the forces closing from above. Inside the atmosphere, their greatest threat of detection would be someone looking out a view screen and noticing six fiery arrows slashing in from the north.

"Telemetry coming in from main force," someone said.

Sure enough, on his secondary screen a zenith view of the deploying pirate forces appeared. Jared thought of it as an active

map, with a golden arrow showing the Third's projected attack vector. They were going to cut through their heart.

On the topo projection, Jared saw the target area was a city tiered up the steep hills around a bowl-shaped bay. The DropShip landing field was spread out to the east, hidden from the city by a screen of low mountains.

"Three-one to Three Squadron," said the supervisor. "First pass, target their landers."

Made sense, they'd be moving too fast to engage targets as small and nimble as other fighters. The pirate fighters would not get off anything other than harassing fire.

"Three-three and three-four break east over land, the rest form on me, west loop over the ocean."

Jared nodded at the plan. They'd come back in a basket-weave that would strip the raider's aerospace cover out of position trying to cover everything at once. By then the First and Second should be hitting them from above. From that point it was just a matter of time.

"Program your ef-cees." The supervisor's voice cut across his thoughts. "I don't want to loose anyone to machismo."

"You know us, Supe," said Darin in a hurt tone.

"Precisely."

The flight computers, safe in the center of the *Lightning's* mass, could be programmed to pull the plane out of a high-gee turn if the pilot blacked out.

"Contact in thirty seconds," Darin said. "Mark."

Checking the overhead view of the pirates and their own geolocator numbers, Jared shook his head.

"Thirty-thee," he countered. Still he held his breath until the thirty seconds passed.

"You win that one," Darin conceded as their targeting screens went live at thirty-four seconds.

"I always do, Bro."

"So explain again why you are my wing man?"

"The way you fly," Jared programmed primary and secondary targets as he spoke. "I want to stay where I can keep an eye on you."

"Well then by all means, Bro," Darin laughed. "Watch and learn; watch and learn."

Jared only had time for a snort of derision before battle was joined.

The Third Squadron's first pass gouged across the bottom of the pirates' descending formation so quickly the enemy was nothing more than a momentary blur against the indigo blue of high air. Jared relied on his computer to target and fire all weapons, then accepted its testimony it had scored two direct hits and a partial.

He peeled left, toward the east and deeper into the atmosphere on Darin's wing. Now the real fighting—and real flying—began.

Jared was pressed forward against the restraint harness as the thicker air dragged against his *Lightning*. Around him the fighter seemed to buck, then settle in; the stick became more lively in his hand. Now it wasn't the cold numbers of thrust and gravity directing his flight, but the currents of the living wind.

Intellectually he knew he was at the bottom of a gravity well plowing through gasses at a fraction of the speeds the *Lightning* attained in open space, but somehow atmospheric flight felt like freedom. In the air his ship came alive. He knew other pilots felt it, too. It was something known but never discussed.

Angular acceleration threatened to pull the blood from his brain as they completed their tight turn. His vision tinged with red as he held on to consciousness.

"Still awake?" Darin asked.

"What?" Jared feigned a noisy yawn. "Are we there yet?"

Battle chatter filled the Wing's general channel. The main forces had come together above them.

"Heads up," Darin's tone became crisp. "I tally two bogies, both solos, vectoring to meet us."

"Got 'em," Jared shed the banter as quickly. "I make it a *Slayer* at eleven o'clock and a *Shilone* at twelve."

"Confirmed," said Darin. "Need a little more practice before the meet?"

Jared had been training in anti-*Slayer* tactics for the last several weeks. The squadrons from the First Wing they were slotted to be up against in the opening round of the competition relied on the heavy fighters.

"Sounds good," Jared accepted the target assignment and veered left. "I'll come bail you out when I'm done."

"Got it backwards, Bro," Darin countered. "I'll try not to be too long."

Jared grunted, focused on the oncoming *Slayer*.

The heavy fighter outweighed his *Lightning* by thirty tons and had enough firepower to take on fighters twice his size. Something to think about and something he could use. *Slayer* pilots loved their knockout punch. Nine out of ten would fire a full salvo at their weapons' extreme range, enough to blow most medium fighters to flinders. The trick was to hold steady enough for them to think they had a hard lock, trick them into thinking you were a sitting duck, then get out of the way a microsecond before they fired. Jump too soon and they'd follow your jig and nail you; wait 'til they fired and you wouldn't live long enough to learn from your mistake.

Alarms warned him the *Slayer* had a lock.

Hold. Hold. *Now*.

Jared snapped his ship left in a barrel roll just as five medium lasers lashed out, boiling the air where he had been. No autocannon? Jared's confusion lasted less than a breath. The pirate brought his heavier craft around pulling it through a few degrees, tracking Jared's general path before launching a rack of missiles. LRM-15s; a variant. Jared pulled the nose of his *Lightning* up, slowing to a near-stall. As it started to lose air, he cut in the afterburners and the medium fighter leapt upwards.

The pirate had played the odds, directing his spread ahead and below the *Lightning* anticipating a dive-and-run. The flight of missiles flashed harmlessly beneath Jared's wings.

As the pirate passed, he drove his *Slayer* down and around, driving through a horizontal loop to come up behind Jared. Jared pulled his stick back and kicked the rudder. On full thrust, he pulled the *Lightning* through a tight loop inside the larger plane's turn.

"This is a *Ramora Lightning*," Jared told the pirate. "You don't out-fly *this*."

His guns came to bear on the upper hull of the steeply banked *Slayer*. There wasn't enough lead for the autocannon slugs to hit, but his medium lasers were line-of-sight and speed-of-light. Three ruby beams chewed into the armor behind the canopy and raked along its stubby left wing.

The *Slayer* tried to hit him with its rear mounted laser but couldn't elevate. The two ships held the spiral for a half-dozen heartbeats, Jared overriding heat lock-outs to keep firing, targeting the left wing. Then the pirate had the wit to pull out of the loop and run for it.

Jared's first thought was to let the lone fighter run and get back to the battle. But leaving an essentially undamaged *Slayer* free to double back was too big a risk. Opening his throttles wide, he gave chase.

A straight running fight let the pirate's rear laser bear on Jared, but it also gave Jared's autocannon the lead it needed. He rocked his fighter from side to side, spoiling the pirate's targeting solution and letting his heat sinks cycle.

Targeting the *Slayer's* left wing and tail, Jared cut loose two quick salvos of cannon fire. He accepted a single laser blast scorching across his cowl as a fair trade for destroying the *Slayer's* left aileron and rudder.

At that point it was over, but Jared hung on a moment longer, his lighter craft harrying the wallowing fighter like a mockingbird on a crow. He piled on damage until the pilot ejected, sending the other craft spiraling into the ocean below. Then checked his combat computer. Total time from first shot to last ... he shook his head. Two seconds longer and it would have been called a draw. He was going to have to work on his efficiency if he wanted to get past the preliminary round against First Wing.

But as he circled back, above and ahead, high over the landing field to the southeast, were the tiny flashes and motes of smoke to remind him of *today's* competition. The high altitude air battle. One of the wisps of smoke became a trace, then grew to a streak as something fell toward earth.

Climbing as he approached the coast from the northwest, Jared's perspective was distorted. It took him a moment to realize the size

of the object falling east-to-west across the sky; something struggling to fly as it fell.

A DropShip.

Stepping up his magnification he confirmed it was *Leopard*—not a CV like Third Squadron's, but a 'Mech carrier. Smoke trailed from a dozen hull breaches and the dorsal turret was gone. Only one engine seemed to be working, but it was apparently at full boost.

Too much thrust. Jared checked the flight computer, confirming in a second what his instincts already knew. The DropShip would overshoot the landing field.

"Scratch one—" Jared broke off as the final trajectory of the falling DropShip registered. It was going to hit the upper tier of the city, at the rim of the bowl of mountains. At that angle it would slide down the hillside into the bay. Eighteen hundred tons of metal, gouging the earth and dragging hundreds of buildings—and how many lives?—with it into the sea.

"Three-four to Three-one," he reported quickly. "Supe! We have a situation over the city."

"Don't worry, Bro." Daren's voice, cutting across the squadron channel. "I've got it."

A *Lightning* came boiling up from the east, on the deck and almost directly on the same course as the falling *Leopard*. It had to be Darin, returning from wherever the dogfight with the *Shilone* had carried him. The fighter pulled up at full burn, overtaking the DropShip as it rose.

"Lone Wolf Three-three, break off," Supe ordered. "Darin, pull out."

No answer.

A *Leopard* was an aerodyne, a blunt but effective lift body designed so the air currents rushing around it in flight bore it up. But for the flight dynamics to work, there had to be a leading edge, a wedge to slice through the air. Without that wedge the face of the DropShip became a sail and the air that had supported it a brick wall.

Darin's *Lightning* drove up under the bow of the *Leopard* at full throttle. A fifty-ton battering ram, it tore through the DropShip, splitting the vital wedge, and bursting from the bridge as a flaming arrow of twisted metal.

The hypersonic wind caught at the ragged edges of the gash, drag pulling the nose of the DropShip downward. The ship up-ended. The powerful engine that had been pushing forward now shoved the *Leopard* down toward the barren base of the mountains.

Well short of the landing field. The city.

Jared didn't watch the fall. Had no interest in the inevitable destruction of the pirate DropShip. His eyes were on the spear of metal still rising—impossibly—on engines that should have been destroyed on impact.

Their flare fluttered and died even as he coaxed his *Lightning* onto an intercept course. It wasn't all of Darin's fighter. In the one hard glance he gave it, he saw the spine of the endoskeleton, the engine pods, and perhaps remnants of the wing anchors still rising on a shallow, ballistic arc.

"Three-one to Three-four—"

Jared cut off his Supervisor's voice with a *click*.

As the port city passed behind and the ocean opened up before them, Jared feathered his throttle, taking tight wing position as the silver spear began its long final descent.

The underbelly of his *Lightning* clipped the wave tops as the last of Darin's fighter tumbled into the water. He flew level for a moment, then keyed his lancemate's channel one last time.

"You win, Bro."

Pulling the stick back into his gut, he plunged upward into battle.