

STAR LORDS

(SAMPLE)

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1.

The Universe is the Garden of the Lord, and we are tasked with its tending.

Aeyn rubbed his eyes. He had been reading the same passage over and over again, mindless repetition devoid of any meaning. Father Nem would call it contemplation, he supposed. He stole a look over the edge of his Scriptures. The prim monk was engrossed in his own copy, as usual, lips moving slightly in a silent intonation of the Holy words. His robes were gathered around him in great folds, lending him an authoritative air, even in repose.

Aeyn gave up trying to concentrate, and looked over at the panoramic view of Saint Peter's Square. The Roman sunshine gleamed off the ancient surface of the Basilica and the Egyptian obelisk that dominated the center of the piazza. The trappings of one religion become the landscaping for another, he mused.

"*Phaeton...*" Aeyn paused long enough to hear the chime that indicated that the ship's computer had registered him. "Reset wallscreen to exterior view." A second chime sounded, and in an instant the sunny Roman afternoon was replaced with the color-shifting maelstrom of the vortex. Aeyn smiled behind his Scriptures as he heard Father Nem groan at the sight.

"Well," the priest huffed, gathering his things as Aeyn walked over to the wallscreen for a better view. "I can see that today's lessons are over."

“Don’t you find it ironic, Father? That a man of the Church, the very body charged with the tending of this Garden, should hate space travel so?” Aeyn’s jibe was met only with a wordless grunt, as Nem left the lounge.

Aeyn looked out at the vortex. The colors were shifting towards blue, indicating that the ship was nearing the end of its journey, and would be transitioning into realspace soon. Aeyn wished they had more time – even just a few more days. Once this trip was over, everything would change. Father said that was what growing up was all about: change. That thought wasn’t very comforting, but then Father was never much for comfort.

“Nem looked like he swallowed a bug. Was that you, or the vortex?” The rumbling voice startled Aeyn.

“Belasz. I didn’t hear you.”

The old knight smirked slightly as he strode across the lounge to join Aeyn by the wallscreen.

Aeyn could not help but stare at the wayblade hanging from the knight’s belt. Only the pommel of the weapon was visible, wrapped tightly in cotton cord stained a deep red-brown by the blood of its wielder. Even safely within its scabbard, however, the sword seemed tensed in a predatory crouch. Aeyn had read the histories, of course, and knew what a knight was capable of, when armed with a wayblade. It was not that knowledge that made him uneasy, though.

It was the feeling that the weapon was aware of him.

Belasz had changed into his House livery, the spotless white ceremonial garments and cloak out of place in the observation lounge. We must be closer to transition than I thought, Aeyn thought with a frown. “Nem is just annoyed that I’m not entering the Church.”

“The Church is for your brother. It’s the way of things, and Nem, of all people, knows that. First to the House, Second to the Order...”

“...And Third to the Church,” Aeyn finished. “He still wants to drill me in Scriptures, even now.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Hell, he could insist on drilling you in calligraphy, and it would amount to the same thing—it teaches you discipline. You can’t get enough of that. Every bit you get now will only help you at Cathedral.”

The mention of their destination sent a rush of uncertain anticipation through Aeyn. He looked out at the vortex, trying to work up the nerve to ask the question that had plagued him since the time had come for his departure. Thoughts of the Order had been constant throughout his childhood on Aranax. The litany uttered by Belasz was the core of the House’s tradition, but even through all of that, it had been very easy for Aeyn to think of the situation as hypothetical, rather than the immediate reality that it had become. Once the decision had been made to send him offworld, one question had occupied his mind, unspoken in its enormity.

“Belasz...”he started, quieter than he had intended. Now was not the time to show weakness.

“Why am I going?” The words came, and once out of his mouth, the obstruction cleared, the rest poured out with nothing to stop them. “The Order’s purpose was the defense of the Union.... but the Union collapsed over a century ago. So why do we still send our second children to Cathedral? Most of the other Houses stopped the practice long ago.” Aeyn found himself pausing, despite everything. Don’t stop now, he thought. Say it.

“This is all just a worthless tradition.”

There. No taking it back, now. Aeyn continued to stare forward, out into the twisting ribbons of energy that carried the ship along, careful not to look in Belasz’ direction, for fear of what he would see upon the old knight’s face. He wasn’t sure what would be worse: anger, or hurt.

With a sudden blue flash, the view on the wallscreen changed. The transit through the vortex had ended, and *Phaeton* had reverted to realspace. A small planet dominated the view, close enough that it filled the lower half of the screen, the edge of the world forming a horizon between the blue-white of clouds and the diamond-strewn blackness of space.

“What the hell? That’s not Cathedral. Where the hell are...” Belasz was interrupted by a violent impact, which sent the old knight and Aeyn sprawling onto the deck. Immediately, klaxons began to sound, a shrill wail, insistent and loud.

Aeyn struggled to his feet and ran to catch up with Belasz, who was already up and out the door. “*Phaeton*,” the knight queried, barely pausing for the answering chime. “Report.”

The voice of the ship’s computer seemed to follow them as they ran through the corridors of the vessel, grabbing occasionally at hand-holds to avoid falling as a second series of jolts occurred, and then a third, each more severe than the last.

###Vessel under attack from five starships. Attack commenced upon emergence from vortex transit. Current location does not match initial navigational input. Conclusion based on that fact: The aggressors utilized a Net. Energy output analysis of one of the aggressor starships confirms hypothesis.###

“A Net?” said Aeyn.

“A harmonic energy projector,” Belasz responded. The habit of instruction was hard to fight, even during an emergency. “They set up anywhere along a path corresponding to our course heading in realspace, and send out a pulse that penetrates the vortex, and brings us out of transit early.

“They’re very expensive...whoever this is, they’re well-funded.” The knight spat out these last words, voice dripping with disdain. The Order believed in the honor of an open challenge, and a straightforward fight. Ambush was distasteful to him.

“Attacking us as we reverted.... cowardice.” Aeyn knew that the power consumption of transit required total commitment. No other major systems could be powered while the engines were at work. By attacking the moment they exited the vortex, the enemy had ensured that no defensive systems would be operating.

Thick smoke had begun to fill the corridors of the ship, carrying with it the smells of burning insulation, hot metal and worse. Aeyn choked back bile as Belasz tried unsuccessfully to block his view from the charred corpse lying in a doorway. The automated door continued to slide close, and, encountering obstruction, slid open again, only to repeat itself again and again. The face was unrecognizable, but the robes, once so stately, but now covered in burns and stains, gave no doubt as to who this had been. Aeyn whispered a prayer for Father Nem as they passed.

By now, *Phaeton* was listing hard to port, making every step feel like climbing up a steep grade. We’ve lost attitude control, thought Aeyn. He found it strange that in the midst of chaos, his mind could

settle on details like that. There was an odd sense of detachment that was almost comforting, like he was watching all of this happen to someone else.

They finally reached the bridge. There were a few members of the crew still frantically trying to bring the ship under control, trying to coax something out of smashed and overloaded systems. On the main screen, tactical displays plotted approach vectors and angles of attack.

The five vessels had effectively pinned *Phaeton* between them and the planet below. A large vessel, much larger than their own ship, hung off their bow, with its escorts, each roughly the size of *Phaeton*, closing in from port, starboard, dorsal and aft. Scarlet lances of particle beams swept across *Phaeton*'s hull, leaving behind blossoms of boiling metal, flaring briefly in the oxygen of escaping atmosphere.

“Captain Reld is dead.” A young woman reported to Belasz, the white sleeve of her uniform stained red by blood flowing from a gash on her shoulder. “I gave the order to abandon ship.... but...” She fought back tears of frustration.

Belasz nodded slowly, his eyes on the tactical display. He watched as sporadic new signals arced away from *Phaeton* – lifeboats – only to wink out as one or more of the enemy vessels opened fire upon them.

###New Information###

They had not heard the voice of the computer for some time. Aeyn had assumed that it had suffered a systems crash in one of the attacks. He had envisioned a beam tearing a hole into the depths of the ship, and vaporizing the crystalline lattices of the computer core.

###Analysis indicates that the vessels are Chessaunni in origin.###

“That makes no sense,” said Aeyn. “The Chessaunni are nomads, they don’t engage in piracy. They have no cause to attack us!”

“You’ll find, young prince, that sense is seldom a determining factor in events.” Belasz said, attempting to cheer him by using the honorific he had used since Aeyn was a child.

The knight stood in the center of the bridge, his left hand gripping the pommel of his wayblade. Aeyn saw his eyes dancing over what few readouts were still working.

“Put us into a dive.” He said finally.

The crew looked at him, shock clearly registering in their eyes.

“Plow *Phaeton* into the atmosphere, at a sharp enough angle that she burns up on re-entry...but shallow enough so that we have time to get off. I’m hoping that if we wait long enough, any escaping lifeboats will appear to be just another hunk of burning debris as the ship breaks up.”

Aeyn felt his heart trip-hammer in panic. It was a risky proposition. Lifeboats were not intended for launch within an atmosphere, and given the effects of the re-entry, it was likely that many, if not all, would burn during launch, or be struck by the very real debris that would be breaking off from the ship as she crashed.

Belasz answered the concerns that he saw in Aeyn’s eyes. “It’s our only shot. If we stay out here, we die.”

Belasz stared at him, his hand never leaving the sword at his side. Aeyn suddenly realized that the knight was waiting. They all were....waiting for him to give the order. He was the House. They served the House, and he was the sole member of the family on board. It was up to him. They were placing their lives in his hands.

Aeyn tried to draw himself up into something more closely resembling how Father would stand – something that elicited confidence, both from those whom he commanded, and confidence within himself for making the decision. To his shame, he realized that he couldn’t conjure the picture in his head.

“Do it.” The voice was quiet, barely audible over the keening of the alarms, but it was enough. The crew rushed into action, and Aeyn felt himself swept along by Belasz, as the old knight hurried to get the young prince to the lifeboats.