

**First Deployment (Book 1 in the Hawk Series)**  
**by Dan Guilbert**

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## Prologue

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"Ice, break hard. Bandits on your tail!" Before the message had time to process, Lieutenant Jay Winters was pushing the flight stick to the right and pulling back on the throttle, sending his Hawk, a space capable intercept-fighter, into a tight, slow turn. Because of the speed of his turn, in comparison to that of the chasing fighters, their speed carried them in front of his fighter. Now ahead of him, rather than behind him, were two Independent Colony Blades.

The Independents were a collection of systems inhabited by humans whose ancestors had long ago broken away from the United Colonies. For years the forces of the Independent Colonies and the United Colonial Fleet often faced off against each other, always reported as skirmishes. These actions had gone on for so long that few living humans could have told the story of when the two forces first fought.

The Blade was to the Independent Fleet as the Hawk was to the Colonial Fleet's Fighter Arm, the mainstay fighter. It was adaptable to multiple combat roles, it was fast and manoeuvrable, it could fly in both space and atmosphere and it was lethal. The Hawk was armed with two 20mm cannons, built close in to either side of the fuselage. Built in to the underside were three missile bays, a central one held the AR-19 radar guided missiles, intended to be used against enemy fighters, while flanking the main central bay were two bays that were intended to hold the Hawk's strike weapons. Either three LS-15 laser guided ground attack missiles could be fitted in each, or alternatively a single AR-42 Starburst radar guided anti-cruiser missile could be placed into each one, depending on the mission requirements.

Calmly, Winters re-armed his weapons. The actions required to do this were all done using the right hand on the flight stick, which was on the right side of the cockpit. The weapons systems were armed by flicking up the trigger guard which was over the thumb trigger. Then using the toggle-stick he selected the correct aiming system by flicking the toggle up, and the correct weapons bay, though the central bay was the default selection. The twin cannons were armed similarly by flicking up the trigger guard on the front of the flight stick with the index finger. It was a simple but effective way of preventing accidental use of a weapon.

With his AR-19's armed, Winters manoeuvred behind the trailing Blade, and waited for his radar to establish a lock. The Hawk implemented a computer system known as the Avionics Battle Intelligence system, or ABI for short. It provided the pilot with a continual verbal update of their attempt to maintain a missile lock as well as written confirmations on the Head's Up Display. As the ABI spoke and the word 'shoot' appeared on his HUD, Winters pressed the trigger. An AR-19 dropped out of the central missile bay and a trail of flame ignited, shooting it out towards its target. Seconds later, the missile slammed into its target, exploding, the warhead's flames being fed by the remaining liquid oxygen fuel in the missile. A piece of superheated shrapnel penetrated the Blade's fuel tank, resulting in the fighter being ripped apart from the inside by an instant fireball.

"Ice, roll out, I have target lock on lead Blade." Again Winters reacted instantly to his wingman. As he rolled his Hawk out the way, another AR-19 shot passed him, racing in on its target. This time the missile blew out the engines on its target, leaving the Blade drifting through space.

"Nice shot, Jailbreak. Looks like the rest are bugging out."

"I reckon so, Ice." Pilot Officer 2nd Class Zoe Meyers said, bringing her Hawk back in behind Winters'. The two of them had graduated in the same flight class, spending much of training as a wing pair. They were deemed so good together that their flight instructors had endeavoured to find a posting that would keep them flying together.

"Alright, Amber Flight, let's form things up and give me a headcount." Winters was looking round, counting the members of his flight as they began to form up round him, twelve was the magic number, and twelve meant everyone had survived. He only counted ten. "Who's missing, sound off." One by one, the rest of Amber Flight signed in with their 1st Lieutenant. The only two not to report in were Captain Luke Coburn, the commanding officer for the *Aries* Air Wing, and his inexperienced rookie wingman. "Zeus, Rooster, come in."

There was no answer to Winters' repeated radio calls, Amber Flight's and the *Aries*' Air Wing commanding officer was missing in action. Winters, was in shock. How could Coburn be gone? He needed to know what he was supposed to do next, should he get the others in, or start searching for Coburn? He stopped, thought about his training and realised that through the sudden feeling of panic he'd been feeling, he knew the answers. He knew what needed to be done.

"Okay, Amber, here's what we're going to do. Trucker, you take in Three Section and what remains of One Section, get the ground crew to refit with search and rescue beacons. Two Section, we're going to look for our people. Now."

"Ice, Lightning." Captain Chris Roan's voice came through his radio. As a squadron leader, Roan could listen into flight conversations, despite them normally being limited to single flight communication. "That's a negative. I want you to pull your whole flight in now, along with the rest of Bravo. I need our intercept squadron refuelled and rearmed, follow Jade flight in.

"Ice copies, Lightning, but..." Winters responded, not wanting to leave his commanding officer out in space. Before he could put up any real protest, Roan cut him off

"No buts, Lieutenant. If they come back, Bravo needs to be ready to go, is that clear?"

"Understood." Winters responded, knowing that he wasn't going to achieve anything by arguing. "Amber, change of plans, bring it home, we'll refuel, load up and then see what happens. Pick your landing runs at your discretion; I'll see you on deck." Winters pulled on his flight stick to bring his Hawk's nose round to face the *Aries*.

The *Aries* was a zodiac class carrier, the second most powerful type of carrier in the Fleet

and it was obvious why. At the curved bow and along the edges of the topsides and underneath of the main section of the carrier's hull, which looked like a cuboids which had its sides being pushed outwards to create convex sides, were the main offensive and defensive guns and missile batteries. The engines, at the back were a cluster of nine cylinders stacked in three rows, bulged slightly above, below and to the sides of the main hull.

The landing deck of the *Aries* was essentially a tunnel, running two thirds of the length of the carrier, from just behind the heavily armoured and armed bow, to end just before the start of the engine block. Fighters always started their landing run from the bow end, especially for landing under combat recovery, as if anything went wrong, they were already in a position to fire straight through and climb over the hump caused by the start of the carrier's engines. The Hawks landed in sections of the deck which were lift platforms which carried them down to the Hangar Deck. Not landing on those platforms carefully and correctly, could result in a Hawk being damaged as it slipped when the lift platform started moving downwards.

As Winters lined up his run for a landing, he could see the lights of engines of the Hawks of the pilots of Jade Flight and those of the other Amber Flight Hawks which had turned ahead of him heading towards the *Aries*.

He flew on almost automatic, his mind elsewhere completely as he thought about what had happened, as well as what it could mean for the future. He hoped that Coburn would be found alive. He hoped that this was just another skirmish, and that things would not escalate to something much worse. By instinct he guided his Hawk down onto a landing platform, letting his landing skids touch the deck. Only once the platform began its descent did Winters sit back and relax, slightly.

Nine helmets were lined up in front of the collected Air Wing and support personnel on the Hangar deck. They were symbolic of the pilots lost. Only two bodies had been recovered. Another five had been found alive, but none of them would have a future career in the Fighter Arm. This was a memorial service, almost rushed in a sense, to allow the rest of the Air Wing to move on and focus on the job that would be up and coming.

Winters stood to attention, feeling the stiff collar of his black and grey smart uniform jacket digging into his neck. He wasn't wearing black because it was a memorial, black and grey was the colours of the Fighter-Arm. Black and grey day uniforms, black and grey smart uniforms and black dress uniforms. Even his flight suit and helmet were a silvery shade of grey. He listened as the *Aries*' chaplain went through his sermon, as he read off the names of those had been killed. Three out of the four flight leaders lost, had been killed. The other was currently in a coma, and not expected to wake up any time soon. Even if they did, they would never fly again, their right hand severely damaged by debris after they had ejected.

There was an odd energy to the gathered crew and Air Wing, they were respecting the mood of the occasion, wanting to pay their respects to those of their 'family' which had been lost, but there was also the feeling of wanting to move past this, not necessarily to exact revenge on the Independent Colonies for what happened, but to know that their comrades, their friends, had not died in vain. That their deaths would not be pointless, that something, not nothing, would come out of this.

As the chaplain finished his sermon, the lift platform on which the helmets were sitting, began to rise up, heading up to the landing deck, to be released from the pull of the deck, left to drift through space forever. A call from one of the other Flight Leaders and the entire Air Wing

raised their hands to the side of their head in salute. They held that salute until the lift platform had passed the first level air lock.

“At ease,” Commander William Bennett said, stepping up in front of the crew. There was a loud shuffle as they moved as one, going from hands to their sides, feet together, to feet shoulder width apart with their hands behind their backs. “Today has been tough, not what we would expect to have happen. I want you to know that although it might not feel like it now, you have all done a good job. I have put that into my report which is going back to Fleet Central today. There is no need to concern yourselves with providing the *Aries* with security. The Carrier Group is heading back to rejoin more of the Third Fleet. Go and rest up, because I can tell you this is not going to be the end. Dismissed.”

“I want,” Roan raised his voice as the crew turned ninety degrees to their right, “all flight lieutenants in the conference room, now.” It seemed that this day wasn’t over yet. Winters pulled his cap off his head, rubbed his hand through his light brown hair, wanting it to sit more comfortably, before passing his cap to Meyers who’d been standing next to him, she’d put it on his bunk for him, save him from having to take it with him to the lieutenants meeting.

“I’ll see you all after.” He said, as he thought about why Roan would want to talk to the remaining Flight Lieutenants now. Everyone was exhausted, now was not really the best time to be calling a meeting. As he was the others head towards the exit closest to the conference room, he noticed a similar thing amongst many of the flights. They were missing their senior officers. The Air Wing was going to have to pick itself up and reorganise the flights. Winters, as he exited the hangar deck, realised that, at the age of twenty-two, he was suddenly one of the most senior officers within the Air Wing. No one should be at that stage in their career, not only a year out of graduating from flight school. It would be interesting what Roan thought about that. The Fighter-Arm ran a policy of promoting officers up to fill a void, within an Air Wing, rather than bringing in people from the outside. That was why Winters, was, where he was. Whether that meant that he would go further, would depend on how this meeting went.

# Chapter 1

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"*Aries*' task group is the sixth group to report engagements with Independent forces, in the last two weeks." Commander Jules Metcalf said, as he presented the information to other high ranking officers at the Central Colonial Fleet Headquarters. "Two days previous, it was the *Yorktown*. Day before that, *Pegasus*." Metcalf was head of the Fleet's intelligence section, and it had been him who'd called the senior officers together.

"We're used to the Indies probing us like this. They have done for years, what's so different about this?" Vice-Admiral Whitworth said.

"This isn't just probing," Said Rear-Admiral Jonathan Walker, commander of the 7th Fleet, of which the *Aries* and her task group were part of. "No, Bennett on the *Aries* saw at least three heavy Indie cruisers, deeper in the system. *Pegasus*, squared off against an Indie carrier group."

"*Trinity* was found dead in the water last month, her engines destroyed by an engagement with the Indies. I agree with Walker, this is more than what we're used to. I think they might be looking for a proper offensive. What's the official line from the Diplomatic Systems?" Commander Hannah Park, one of only two female officers in the council said, looking towards the only civilian present, Mister Guy Le Pen, senior diplomat, and advisor to the United Colonies' President.

"Same as always, they claim they were defending their borders. It's the same excuse that we use on them, and we let it go because these small engagements give our pilots and crews some combat experience, which is of a higher quality than combating smugglers, pirates and mercenaries out in the Fringe. The President is reluctant to follow the path that will take the UC to open war with the Indies. Though he has been advised by the Joint-Chiefs that a show of force may be necessary, and as a result the Third Fleet, under Vice-Admiral Benzian is to be dispatched to the, what you call it, the hot zone. The President hopes that just the presence of the Third Fleet will be enough to deter the Indies from any further action. He is also urging that no Fleet or task group commanders take aggressive action, but just follows the rules of engagement."

"Rules of engagement? They've been shooting at us for the past month!" Walker, as normal, was getting animated. "While the Third sit there as a massive target, what are the rest of us supposed to be doing? I won't have Seventh sitting around doing nothing. There's going to be action and Seventh will be ready for it."

"So will the Fourth." Added Vice-Admiral Louisa Martinez.

"Come now. We can't get too aggressive here. Remember the *Columbia* incident?" Everyone round the table nodded, but none of them spoke. Few of them had been as senior as they were now when the *Columbia* had exploded, while out on patrol. Fleet had nearly jumped the gun and launched a full retaliation force before it had even been determined what had happened to the *Columbia*. The Sixth Fleet had been a mere week away from combat when it had been discovered that the *Columbia* had detonated from the inside.

"If we're going to be putting on a show of force, we need to be sending more than just the Third Fleet." Walker said, trying to force his point across.

"President feels that the Third Fleet plus support groups from the Second, Fourth and

Seventh in enough to match whatever the combined Independent Forces could put against us.”

“That’s only for what we’ve estimated they have. Intel has been very sketchy from those planets recently.” Martinez said, backing up Walker, while looking at Metcalf, expecting answers.

“True, our people have been particularly silent recently, and I have people working on establishing why that is, but what Intel we have received, is good. I can’t believe that the Independents could be building more cruisers, fighter and training people to use them without any of our agents noticing. No from what numbers we have, we have deployed a force equal to what we believe the Indies have.”

“We don’t want to match them; we want to be stronger than them. Force them to back down straight away, without conflict. If they choose to fight, we want to overpower them swiftly. Deployed like we are, they can operate hit and run tactics like we’ve already seen, and we can do nothing about it, because they’ll be gone, long before a reactionary force could be deployed. That opens things up for them to pick us off, cruiser by cruiser.”

“You’re talking like we’re already at war, Admiral.” Le Pen said, looking at Walker. “All the Indies have done is flex their muscles.”

“Flex their muscles? Air Wing Seven-One-Six lost thirteen pilots, killed or wounded because of that muscle flexing!” Walker said, banging the table with his fist. No one flinched at the noise. They’d heard it before, but this time, there were nods of agreement from others.

“We can shout all we want, but the decision, right or wrong, has been made. The Third Fleet has already been deployed, as have those support elements, and that is it. Those are the President’s orders.”

“Then he’s making a mistake.”

“That’s for time to decide, Walker, not you. This briefing was to allow you all to understand what stance the Fleet will be taking, not to try and change things. I suggest we break for the day, and meet again tomorrow. Once, we’ve all calmed down.”

Walker, realising that he had been told in a very polite way to shut up and let everyone get on with things, sat back in his seat without saying a word. He might be considered one of the more up and coming senior officers in the Fleet, but those more senior had made it clear to him. The decision had been made, and there is nothing more that can be done now.

Or at least there was nothing else that he could do in regards to the deployment of forces to meet the current threat of the Independents. There was, however, something that could be done to ensure that the Seventh Fleet was deployed as soon as Fleet Command realised the mistake it had made by only deploying the Third Fleet. When re-enforcements were called upon, the Seventh would be at the top of the list. Walker had a plan.

## Chapter 2

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"Coburn's loss is a massive blow." Captain Chris Roan, Air Wing 716's Alpha Squadron leader and now acting commander said, as he sat down wearily at the head of the flight leader's briefing table. Roan was a six year veteran, and his black hair was already being tinted by the first touches of grey. "I know a lot of you haven't known him as long as I have, but we've lost a great officer and to some of us, a great friend. Worse, we've gone and lost some other great pilots, good leaders." That hit home with the young officers, and the more senior members of the other flights. The *Aries*' Air Wing had been hit hard. Winters' knew that Amber Flight had been lucky, with lucky not being the best term, to lose only two pilots. Others had lost many more.

As much as Winters tried to avoid it, his eyes were itching due to fatigue, so he had to lean forwards and rub his eyes with the palms of his hands. It had been the cold shade of blue of his eyes which had earned him his call sign, over time there had developed another reason, which had only served to cement his call sign as Ice. All though his eyes might have looked cold, he was anything but. He moved to rubbing his hand through his light brown hair, one of the tell signs that he was feeling a bit stressed.

"Until further notice, we're going to have to promote from within to ensure that we have flight leaders for all flights. Winters, you're already at first lieutenant and half acting as flight leader, so you'll just move up to command Amber Flight fully. Buckley you'll move up to first and take over Violet. Trim, same for you and Teal. Denman, we'll be promoting you up from senior pilot officer up to first lieutenant, so you'll now head up Saffron. Lastly, Hernandez, in the absence of lieutenants, or the senior pilot officer, you by default take over Sapphire."

The young officers nodded. None of them had expected to suddenly have so much responsibility thrust upon them. Winters glanced over at Tom Buckley and Hailey Trim. The two of them had graduated from flight school at the same time he did, and like him, had spent three years at the Fleet Officers College, graduating as 2nd lieutenants. They, like Winters had more preparation for leadership, and Winters could see that they both looked ready. They were both good friends of his, they'd been together for over three years, and were so inseparable during the flight training stage in college, they'd earned the nickname 'Triplets'.

That friendship had been an odd one to explain. Buckley, despite the impression his tall and broad frame gave, was actually very introvert, not particularly bothered about drawing attention to himself.

Trim was completely different. At five foot six, she stood above many other women, but was still shorter than most men. That didn't faze her, nor did the fact that many people thought her short brown hair made her look young and innocent. Trim was a firecracker, ready to go off at any moment. When Trim got angry, both Winters and Buckley knew which side of the argument they wanted to be. Trim's At college, it was Trim who started more fights than them put together, but they had gotten past her defences and knew that most of it was an act, designed to keep most people at a distance. It had taken two years before they had managed to get through those defences properly. Since she'd gone into phase three of flight training, her attitude had died down a bit as her leadership began to shine through, but it was still there, in contrast to Winters laidback and cocky approach and Buckley's quiet worker attitude.

Despite those differences, it was their sense of humour and work ethic which made them

click. They'd found what they were good at during college and flight school and had worked to help the other two through what they might have struggled. It had never been said, but each of them had come to the same conclusion that they had remained together because they would keep helping and pushing each other. They were good leaders in the making and if they stayed in the Fighter-Arm, could end up creating a very close and cohesive unit.

Ezra Denman and Olivia Hernandez, however, were different matters. Denman had reached the rank of pilot officer 1st class and was the senior pilot officer in his flight, due to pilots leaving after their time of service had expired, or transferring to other air wings. He was also two years older than Winters.

Hernandez was the same age as Winters; she'd graduated the same year, but had worked herself up to pilot officer 2nd class. Sapphire Flight, one of the two Falcon flights on-board the *Aries*, had been decimated, and five Falcons had been destroyed, resulting in the deaths of ten members of the flight, five pilots and five weapon systems officers. This left Hernandez, who'd been middle of the pack in terms of rank, as the most senior pilot in the flight.

Neither of them looked as if they felt ready to take command, neither of them had received the training the other three had to take command. However, if they weren't considered capable, then Roan, as the new commanding officer, would never had considered providing them with this opportunity if anything indicated that they wouldn't be able to cope.

"As of now, Holt, you'll move up to captain, and head up Bravo Squadron, so that means that Williams will be moved up to 1st and Adams up to 2nd. You'll have a couple of pilot officers to pick from for the senior role." Holt, commander of Jade flight nodded. Everyone knew that he'd been waiting for promotion for a while, and had been actively looking elsewhere, but no air wing would take him, as a commanding officer for the whole air wing, without spending time at captain first. "Garson, you'll now act as Alpha's second in command, and you're also senior lieutenant and flight leader." Jennifer Garson, 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant of Scarlet Flight, who was the only other long serving officer present, nodded, aware that she was being given a large boost to her career. Falcon pilots were often passed over for squadron leadership roles, despite seniority, when in Hawk dominated Air Wings. "Winters," Roan said, turning back to the young lieutenant, his voice sounding a mixture of resignation and tiredness. "For lack of anyone with more seniority, once again, by default, you're second in command of Bravo."

# Chapter 3

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"With Coburn gone, does that mean you'll be taking over?" Meyers said, towelling her damp black hair, as she sat down next to Winters, who was perched on the edge of his bunk. Although they'd passed through flight school in the same class, she was a year younger than him, having been skipped ahead in high school. At twenty years old, she was equal youngest member of the Air Wing. Sometimes it showed, but never in a combat situation simulated or real, and never in these situations.

"Looks that way, Roan's said I'll move up to take full command. I didn't think that this would happen. I thought I'd sit in behind Coburn till he retired. There's been little action for anyone on the entire carrier service, I hadn't expected for us to see any action, now I've got three kills, and now I'm expected to lead the rest of this flight, possibly into more combat. You all have been talking while we were in the flight lieutenants meeting, what's everyone got to say about it?" Winters knew that with the fact that all pilots in Amber Flight, apart from Coburn slept in the same quarters, opinions would be quickly shared. With two dead and the two lieutenants summoned away by the Air Wing's ranking officer, the rest would start talking quickly.

"We'll follow you, don't worry about that. Sure Newman's older, but you've got the rank and flight seniority, even he's behind you. Isn't that right Trucker?"

"Hell, I don't want the job, I haven't been here that long, besides we don't get paid much differently anyway." 2nd Lieutenant Scott Newman said unseen in his bunk. Newman was four years older than Winters, and had transferred from instructing to the carrier service because the pay was higher. Pay he needed to support his young family. Newman, who might have been expected to be Winters' biggest opposition, was in fact his biggest supporter. Newman recognised Winters natural leadership ability, as well as his skills in the cockpit.

"Besides, we've got used to you being around, so if they brought in someone else, they'd have to get rid of you." Pilot Officer Second Class Daniela Cohen said sitting down on her bunk, which was opposite Winters'. Although the Fleet segregated its sleeping quarters by gender, the Fighter-Arm didn't, as it was believed that living together as much as possible created a stronger bond. Bathrooms and showers were still segregated, but everything else within the Fighter-Arm was open and shared. "We don't want you gone." Cohen was another graduate from the same year as Winters and Meyers, but had graduated from a different training base, from the same planet.

"You all feel that way?" The other pilots in the flight, who'd been pretending to be doing other things, added their own views, all of them supportive. Winters nodded, appreciating the support from his fellow pilots. "I'm sorry to bring this up now, but I need to talk to you all." The other members of the flight gathered around, by sitting on the edges of Winters' Cohen's and Pilot Officer 2nd Class Hal Morrison's bunks. "We can't escape the fact that we lost two pilots today, one with a lot of experience, one green. That means we're going to get two green pilots in return. I don't like asking because I don't think it should be done unless necessary, but we need to break a wing-pair. I want one experienced pilot to partner each of the new pilots. Any volunteers?"

"Not that it's my place to tell you how to do things," Morrison began. He, like all the others, was happy to approach Winters in a more casual way than other officers. "Shouldn't you and JB be the ones breaking? Only because you're the flight leader, that's all."

"You're right. I should take responsibility for one of them. The reason I'm asking is because this gives a number two a chance to move to lead fighter, I wanted to see if anyone else wanted the opportunity before I automatically gave it to JB." Secretly, Winters didn't want to lose his pairing with Meyers, but knew he'd have to if no one else wanted to end their wing-pairing.

"I don't mind," Cohen said, looking over at her current wingman Pilot Officer 2nd Class Freddy Johnson. Apart from Winters and Newman, who were Lieutenants, all the pilots remaining in Amber Flight were all Pilot Officers 2nd Class. Currently they were all of equal rank, so none of them could order a split, Winters and Newman were settled, just like everyone else, neither of them had to split really, because they were both partnered with a PO 2nd Class, currently the lowest rank of the flight.

"Nah, I guess we could give it a go," Johnson said looking between Cohen and Winters. "We can always switch back if it doesn't work out right?"

"Sure. If it doesn't work, I'll take over. Other thing, at least one of you will get promoted to PO First Class. The flight needs a senior pilot officer to lead three section, and with a couple of PO Third Classes coming in, Amber's going to need to be more structured than it is. I know it didn't matter so much with Colburn in charge, we had a captain and two lieutenants, but now we don't, so the chain of command needs to be re-established beyond the lieutenants again. I've asked Roan and Holt to look into it, so all promotions will be coming from them, none of them are my choices, just so that you know things have been done fairly."

The Flight nodded, understanding that Winters was trying his hardest to keep Amber as it was. He might have been their 1st Lieutenant for some time, but he'd never been serious about the formalities of command. Now he was the one in charge, things were different and he wanted them to know that whoever was promoted, it was so by their merit and abilities, not because he preferred them over the others.

He felt that he was too new to be deciding on what was going to be the future command structure of his Flight. He could provide input into character and knew how they flew, but he had yet to learn exactly how to pick out the leaders from the rest, in a way that would be accepted by Fighter-Arm Central Command. That was another reason why he had handed the task over to his senior officers. What was done now, would affect his Flight for the long term. If he chose those he thought best for promotion, and got it wrong, he couldn't reverse the decision at a later date, without justifiable cause. Just because another Flight member seemed better, was not justifiable cause.

# Chapter 4

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He'd been lying in his bunk for the last four hours, unable to sleep. The adrenaline had long worn off, his body was tired, but his mind was still wide awake. The Fleet had become accustomed to Independent raids into United Colonial space, as they were mainly just to test the readiness of the Fleet to respond, but as of late those raids had resulted in death. The *Aries* wasn't even supposed to be on the border. It and the rest of the task group had been ordered to help police the Fringe territories, but the attack on the *Trinity* had seen the *Aries* redeployed as it was the only task force ready for deployment into a combat zone. The Independents had become too aggressive, they weren't probing any more, and they were looking for all out combat.

That had to mean that some form of retaliation had to be coming didn't it? Surely the Fleet would be looking for retaliation, looking to avenge the lives lost today? It was that question that Winters dreaded the answer to. He'd expected to be a peace keeper; he joined the Fighter-Arm to fly, not to fight. He was a foster kid, his parents had died when he was ten, and Maddy, his younger sister was six. His older sister, Brooke who'd been fourteen at the time, had run away from the child services and he hadn't heard from her since that day. He and Maddy had been moved from the Fringe, to Renia, one of the core planets of the United Colonies, where they'd been bounced around foster homes till Winters was fourteen, from then they'd had a stable home, and both had thrived. He'd thought for hours about going back to the Fringe since he'd become a pilot, to help stabilise the region, but now instead he was going to war. His sister wouldn't be happy; she'd be worried for his safety. Maddy, however, had always been supportive of his career.

His girlfriend, Lissy, was the same, although it had taken more time. She was his high-school girlfriend; they'd now been together for four years. For the last two, they'd barely seen each other. He'd been at one of the Fleet Colleges, and then at Flight School, now he was on deployment. She was beginning her career as an elementary school teacher, having graduated from Renia Province College, just a few months before.

He looked up at the picture of Lissy he had taped to the roof of his bunk. She was the last thing he saw at night, and the first thing he saw in the morning. He had another one of her taped to the inside of the locker which contained his flight gear. This one though was his favourite photo he had of her. It had been when they had just gone away for the weekend while they were both still in college. It had been the beginning of autumn, orange-red leaves were scattered everywhere, and he'd just been goofing around with their camera. It was just of her walking down the sidewalk towards him, but her smile as she laughed at what he'd been saying, never failed to make him feel better when he was feeling low.

There was nothing posed or overly sexy about it. She was just walking along, wearing her grey coat, her straight blonde hair being caught by the wind and coffee in her hand. It was real, that's why it was his favourite. It wasn't staged, it wasn't faked, it was her as she really was. It was the Lissy that he knew, that he saw.

More than once he'd thought about proposing to her, but every time gotten warm to the idea, he'd backed out of it again. He couldn't justify committing himself to someone, then never being there. They were happy enough as they were. It wasn't the choice for either of them, but they'd learnt to live with it. The closest he'd come was just before the *Aries* had deployed. He wanted her to know that he would be coming back for her, but the *Aries* had recalled all

personnel before he'd had the chance to ask. He'd bought the ring, and it was sitting in his locker, just waiting for him to get home again and work up the courage to ask her.

He knew that Maddy would probably tell him that he was afraid to commit, because he'd had few things in his life last for more than a year. It had taken four years, over fifty foster home and numerous schools before Winters had settled down. He'd been full of anger after his parents had died and had gotten into fights almost every day at every school he'd gone to. He'd been never been expelled, but that was probably because social services moved him on before he could be.

At fourteen he and Maddy had found themselves living with the Wilkes in Renia City and everything changed for them then. Instead of people giving up on him because he was prone to violence, there were people there to help him through it. He'd been introduced to the sport of Slamball, which allowed him an outlet for his energy, gave him discipline, which he so clearly needed, gave him a male role model in his coach. When he found out the entry requirements to become a pilot, he began to apply himself more in school, with the help of the Wilkes at home. Although he was never a standout student, he greatly improved on what he had been before.

Maddy was finally given stable home, where she felt safe enough to not have to sleep in the same room as Winters. She discovered music and a talent for playing the piano and was now staring at a career as a musician and singer. No one had bothered to take the time to discover these talents before, but the Wilkes did.

That was also when he first met his best friend and Lissy for the first time. His life had become focused for the first time in years. Lissy was a major factor in that, both as a friend when they were younger and as his girlfriend in more recent years. He wanted to make sure that he didn't lose her, he just didn't know if he could keep her while he was so far away.

He looked over at the second picture taped to his bunk. It was of his daughter Kaylee-Jo. Lissy had become pregnant during their sophomore year in college, and KJ was born as Winters shipped out to flight school. She had his eyes, and as it grew, it was clear she was going to have her mother's hair. In fact, apart from her eyes, everything about KJ looked like her mother. If there was one thing that was going to keep him and Lissy together, then it was going to be KJ. Not because they would force themselves to stay together, but because in a time when their lives were driving in opposite directions, KJ was the one thing that they always knew they'd have in common.

Knowing that he was missing his daughter growing up was one of the worst things for Winters. Whenever he went home to Lissy while at Flight School, KJ always seemed to be getting bigger. Now she was talking, walking and looking like more and more like a young girl than the baby that she used to be. When he went home, she would be three years old, and Winters would have spent less than twelve months with his daughter and girlfriend in that time.

As much as he felt that he was living his dream job right now, he was suffering the hidden consequences that he'd not really considered when he'd committed to the Fighter-Arm, while still in high-school. He recorded a message for them every single day, knowing that they wouldn't see them. He recorded them as a set of messages to be released if he was killed, or until he left the Fighter-Arm. These messages were to ensure that nothing was ever left unsaid and Winters hoped that one day, he would be able to give them to KJ, when she was old enough to understand why he'd not been there, and show that he loved her, even if it was from afar. Of course he still sent them messages; they were not the same ones that he had stored away.

"You look like hell. Did you get much sleep last night?" Meyers said, sitting down next to Winters in the pilot's mess. For once, she wasn't joking with Winters. With dark bags under his eyes and his face looking paler than normal, people could have been forgiven for thinking that he was sick. Meyers had learned that Winters might not show the signs of stress emotionally, but instead wore it physically, his body taking the hits for his mind.

"Not really, you?" Winters said, poking his spoon into his breakfast, playing with it, rather than wanting to eat. He knew he had to, he just didn't feel like it. That was one of the hardest things for him to do, force himself to eat to keep energy levels up; when his body was telling him he wasn't hungry.

"Lots, thanks." Meyers said, keeping her voice happier than she felt. The whole Air Wing felt sombre, still coming to terms with the previous events. They were going through the routines, carrying on as normal, or trying to.

"Then it was your snoring that kept me awake then." Winters was rewarded for that comment by Meyers hitting him on the chest with the back of her hand. She accepted the joke, but knew that he was diverting the conversation, because he did not want to talk about why his mind was refusing to shut down at night.

"I do *not* snore. Now eat your goop before it goes cold."

"It's called oatmeal."

"I know that. It just looks disgusting. Always has done."

"Still better than eating cereal aimed at six year olds. Ralph was eating that stuff last time I saw him." Winters said, talking about his adoptive parents latest ward, while looking down into Meyers' bowl, which was filled with little cereal O's and a rainbow of coloured marshmallows.

"He's not even six yet. You said cereal for six year olds."

"So he's younger, it's hardly helping your case here." There was a moment's silence, as Meyers pouted. Winters chuckled and began to eat his breakfast, feeling a little better, now that he had managed to laugh for the first time today.

"Hey, Thundermice Marshmallow Clusters, my kids love them." Newman said, sitting down opposite them. He took one look from Meyers to Winters and guessed exactly what had been said a few seconds earlier. "We're having this conversation again."

"We are?" Meyers said, looking puzzled.

"You comment on my appearance, I insult you back, you make fun of my food, I make fun of the fact that you're younger than the rest of us, you pout and then Scott comes over and accidentally backs one of us up, without knowing it." Winters said, waving his spoon back and forth as he counted off each point.

"That's what spending six months together does for you, we've all become predictable." Newman said, sipping his coffee, taking in the aroma, while looking between the two of them, waiting for one of them to continue the conversation.

"Six months, we should be done soon. No?" Meyers said, looking between her two lieutenants.

"Doubt it, if that was the case, then we'd already be heading home, we were due to head to the Fringe before we came here." Winters said, his eyes met Newman's and he could see that the older lieutenant understood where he was going. "We're here for the duration I reckon."

"I thought the longest we could be deployed was nine months?"

"We've only been on actual deployment for three, with another three on station, that doesn't count as deployment time. So, in theory, we've got a whole year before we could see home again."

“They can’t keep us away from home for a full year though can they?”

“They,” Winters said, spooning a large clump of oatmeal into his mouth. “Can do whatever they like.” He said, with his mouth full of food.

“But aren’t there regulations?”

“There are.” Said Newman, he’d been in the Fighter-Arm longer than Winters, so knew then the inner working better. “But it doesn’t mean that Command has to follow them to the letter. We diverted under emergency circumstances, so we’re not here under normal deployment, that’s one thing. If we were scheduled to be here, then yes, we’d only be here for six months because there’d be another carrier scheduled to replace us. We’re a supernumerary at the moment.”

“A what?” Cohen said, sitting the other side of Meyers. Amber Flight, like most of the others, spent their meals together as well. They were free to sit with whoever they liked, but when each of them had come aboard, there had been a real sense of unity within the Flight, and none of them broke that more than a couple of days a week, but never at breakfast.

“An extra.” Meyers said, leaning over to her, before going back to her cereal.

“Thanks.” Newman said, before continuing. “As it is, we could get lost in the bureaucracy and paper work, simply because we’re not where we were scheduled to be.”

“Not to mention the fact that Admiral Walker probably likes the fact that he has some eyes and ears out on the front. He probably won’t let us go home until the Seventh Fleet gets some more cruisers up to the hot zone. I reckon there were other cruisers that could have been deployed instead of us, but Walker made sure that we got diverted. We all know his rep, he doesn’t like being made to stand outside and we’re his foot in the door right now.”

“How do you figure?”

“There are seven fleets, plus the smaller Home Fleet which makes up the Fleet as a whole right?”

“Yeah.”

“And only the *Aries* carrier group was in a fit and ready state to redeploy to the hot zone? I don’t think so. Someone wanted us here.”

“How many carriers are there in the Fleet, do you know?”

“There’s nineteen Air Wings in the Seventh, so nineteen carriers. So take that as an average. Twenty is easier to work out, plus it accounts for the Home Fleet, so say one hundred and forty carriers in total.”

“I see what you’re saying. Out of one hundred and forty carriers, ours was the only one considered ready to go? Even though we already had an assignment?”

“Probably not, but the choices would have been limited a bit. I’m just saying that Walker’s probably just made sure that it was us at the top of the pile, that’s all.”

“How could he do that?”

“Well, we might have one hundred and forty carriers on strength, but it doesn’t mean they’ll all be active.”

“The Fleet likes to keep names and numbers attached to things, even after their gone.” Roan said, turning round from the table behind the Amber pilots. None of the pilots had even noticed he was there, but then again, Roan seemed to have the ability to blend in. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear the speculation. You’re right, we were chosen out of a small pool, and the Admiral probably did have some influence in it, but if you want, I can break down the system for you and you’ll see there’s no conspiracy.”

“Only if you don’t mind, sir.”