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Port Arthur

The United Terran Federation

TRAINING DAY

The row of waiting cadets turned to look as the two Terran officers came around the corner at the end of the hallway, their steps echoing from the walls as they marched toward them. The whispered conversations earlier by the students as to who their instructors might be quickly forgotten as the two stopped in front of the group and the door marked Holo-Simulation Room 6.

Breaking the sudden silence, the female officer quickly turned to the cadets, taking a quick step forward. "Attention on the deck!" she shouted, causing the cadets to stand up straight and stare directly ahead into the empty space before them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Tribune Garcia and this is my assistant, Primus Wessler," the male officer said. "For the next fourteen weeks, it is our duty to make you the best damned CAV pilots and weapons officers in the galaxy. We will fail!"

The Tribune paused as he looked across the row of assembled cadets. "Please enter the simulation room and take a seat."

Pushing the door open, the Primus walked through the doorway, pausing as she waited for the lights to flicker on. The cadets followed her single-file, spreading out through the semi-circle arrangement of desk and chairs in the back of the room and sitting down. The Tribune came in last, shutting the door behind him.

Stepping up to the lectern at the front of the room, the Tribune nodded to the Primus as she sat down at a nearby desk, holographic control screens lighting up in front of her as they detected her presence. As she swiped both hands across the screens, the room lights dimmed and a projection of a CAV's interior cockpit filled the area between the students and the Tribune.

"Listen up," he spoke. "We are going to run through a quick simulation of a standard patrol with a single Turma of five CAVs. The planet has just been assaulted by enemy forces and you have been ordered to sweep your assigned area, engaging any enemy forces you feel you have a reasonable expectation to defeat. There are no artillery or orbital assets available to back you up."

"Class," Wessler added. "You may now access Channel One on your sub-dermal implant and proceed with the simulation."

As the cadets activated their implants, the simulation beamed directly into their minds, causing each one to take on a "thousand-meter stare", as it was called, while they received the information through the access link, experiencing the simulation as if they were there, interacting with others also connected to the link.

Cadet Moore led his squad across the plains of grass, the wind sweeping the field like the waves of an ocean, a low ridge spread out in front of them nearly a mile away.

"Okay, team, this is Snapper One," he said as he activated the scrambled com channel. "Let's try another passive scan and see if we can find anything."

"Sir," Cadet Johnson in Snapper Three answered back. "I have a contact right behind that far ridge. Computer says it's a possible Dictator, but its power signature is so low it must be powered down."

"Well, he can't be alone all the way out here," Moore answered back. "Let's go active and sweep the other side to see what's out there."

As the squad switched to their active scanners, each pilot was rewarded with the warbling sound of a target-lock as three other powered-down enemy CAVs were detected on the other side of the ridge. The simulation suddenly froze and the voice of Tribune Garcia broadcast out from each pilot's com system.

"Class, you now have a decision to make. Deploy for the attack or pull back until you have a better idea of what you are facing, maybe even waiting for reinforcements. Each of you will now enter your decision for the record," he told them. After waiting for each cadet to enter their choice, he continued. "Well, it's unanimous—everyone chose to attack. As the suspense is killing me, let's see what happens."

The simulation resumed. "Weapons hot, Snapper team," Moore ordered "Let's clear that ridge and engage any enemy targets."

As the squad hurried to close the distance between themselves and the ridge, Moore checked his screens for any changes in the read-out. Briefly he caught the flicker of a new contact that just as quickly disappeared. "Did anyone else see that?" he asked the

FICTION

squad.

"See what?" Moore responded.

"Yeah, see what, boss?" Davis asked from

Snapper Five.

"I thought I saw something for a second... must just be an echo."

Finally the squad made it to the ridge, moving to the top to fire down on the unsuspecting enemy. With their power turned down so slow, there was no way the Dictators would be able to detect the cadets as they moved in for the kill, Moore thought to himself.

As the Terrans cleared the ridge top, each CAV's LIDAR system screamed out as multiple TAGs illuminated Moore and his squad.

Hummler in Snapper Four shouted out, "I have multiple missiles incoming, Four...eight...TWENTY!"

Each cadet rocked in their CAV as missile after missile impacted, the simulation fading out with the screams of each pilot shouting, "Eject! Eject! Eject!" in the background.

"Well, boys and girls," Garcia said as each cadet reentered the reality of the classroom, blinking as they attempted to focus on the Tribune. Garcia walked around to the front of the lectern.

"You were just sucked into what we like to call the 'Spider's Web,'" he continued. "Dozens of enemy troops under suppression blankets waiting for you to enter the kill zone."

"Any questions?"

"One, sir," Moore responded. "How did they know we were there?"

"They used portable breeders to spoof your power scans and a Spike targeting system to pinpoint your position. It passively reads any fluctuations in a planet's magnetic field, like those caused by a large concentration of moving metal. They followed you the whole way in."

The Tribune started to turn away, but paused.

"By the way, Moore...you caught wind something wasn't right. Why didn't you hold up?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Moore admitted.

"Well, never mind, next time we will make sure all of you know how to deal with this situation and many more before we are done with you. Now, let's get down to business!"