

PRAYER FOR THE TECHNOCRATS

A Tech Infantry Novella

by

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Chapter 8: Holy War

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While the Caal were moving, the Home Fleet was standing still. That was the plan, of course; use the capital planet's firepower to augment their own. However, with the fully-functional Ares Battle Group appearing one ship at a time through the digital gate, just sitting there seemed the worst of all possible options.

Ivan piloted the shuttle back to the Horadrim ship while Vin, Miranda, and Demar waited to get aboard. It didn't take long before they were back in the unnatural landing bay.

As they disembarked, Sun said to Dane, "I'm going over to the *TFS Nicodemus*. They'll need another pilot."

The colonel looked shocked. "We need you here."

"Vin, you don't need someone to pilot your ship—I *still* haven't figure out how you do that—but I *am* a pilot. If there's a battle out there, they're going to need me. They'll need everybody."

"I can't afford to lose you, Ivan." There was a roughness in Vin's voice, almost as if he was hiding his emotions. *Concern?* Sun wondered. *Desperation? Fear?*

However, the pilot shook it off. "Hell, sir, I've been expecting to die ever since I ran out of Chapman's Folly. This is no different."

"Ivan..." *Definitely desperation...*

"Vin," Ivan said, looking straight into his eyes, "I can't sit this one out. I gotta fly."

Dane met his gaze for a moment, then nodded. "See you at the victory party."

Sun winked back, then programmed the course to the *Nicodemus*.

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Vin contacted the rest of the Horadrim fleet to come in. At least, that's what Miranda *thought* he did; that language was undecipherable. She would hate to hear an opera in it; a symphony of chainsaws would be the only comparison.

Mayfield chuckled to herself as she held the cybermodem. She was the liaison between Dane and the Home Fleet. The alien craft might have been all-powerful, but its communication systems weren't fully compatible with Terran signals.

So it comes down to this, Miranda mused, *a cheap vidcomp connecting through a tachyon net relay is the only communication between an outgunned alien fleet and a barely functioning human one. And this is supposed to save humanity?*

Demar, on the other hand, had nothing to do but watch. *I do have the best seat to watch the end of the universe*, he had to admit, *but unless the Caal try to board the ship, there's not much I can do.*

Dane kept the display up so they could all see what was happening. After Vin gave the word, nine other Horadrim ships of various sizes suddenly appeared along side them. No spatial distortion, no hyperspace opening... they weren't there one second, they were the next.

Vin turned towards Miranda. "Is the connection made to Admiral Patel?"

"Yes."

"Tell him that our ships are ready."

The doctor activated the comlink, and Nirav Patel suddenly appeared in the hologram.

"Patel."

"Admiral," Mayfield repeated, "the Horadrim Fleet is ready."

Nirav didn't look impressed. "Does our commanding officer have a plan?"

Vin walked over to the screen. "Admiral Patel, your orders are to engage the enemy fleet once they've reached your position."

"And what will you be doing?"

Dane smiled. "Hitting the enemy from behind."

"Why don't we destroy the digital gate?"

"Because we want the Caal here... *all* of them. This war ends here and now."

"And if they get past us?"

Vin paused, then said, "Have one ship prepare a 3D implosion missile targeted on the sun. If the Caal land on Avalon... fire it."

“You mean...”

“If we lose, we destroy the system. The Caal *must* be stopped... at any cost.”

Nirav blinked, then nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good luck. Discom.”

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The Ares Battle Group was limited by the digital gate only allowing one ship to pass through at a time. There was only so much information that could be sent via the tachyon code, and if more than one ship went through at once, they might turn out as metallic mush. However, they quickly formed a defensive barrier around the gate. The counter-attack the Caal expected never came, and two hours later, the star control ship, its escorts, and a ton of transports had finally gathered in the Avalon system for battle.

They couldn't help but notice the Home Fleet prepared to meet them. Unlike Jennifer's Star, New Paris, or the Wilke's Star systems before, their outer system defenses weren't activated against them. It was like the humans were inviting them to attack. The Caal weren't about to refuse such an invitation.

The invading armada was massive; as the Home Fleet watched from their hastily repaired bridges, so many ship signals appeared in their tac scanners that it almost appeared as one huge blob.

An hour passed before their outer fighter screen reached weapons range. Then the fireworks began.

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Lieutenant Commander Sun was one of the few fighter pilots left to the Home Fleet. As the *Ares*' fighters came closer, Ivan could see that the defenders were hideously outnumbered. Not that the fact bothered him in the slightest. *After all, he knew, the universe is out to get me. I just didn't expect it to send a star control ship...*

Sun was once again in his element, wrapped in the total immersion of the Wraith fighter. He activated the com circuit. “All squadrons, you may fire at will. I say again, fire at will.”

Ivan smiled. *Who would believe that a lieutenant commander would control all twenty fighters squadrons? They were hard up for experienced pilots... luckily, they got me.*

The pilot targeted the nearest fighter in range and opened fire.

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“Are we just gonna sit here?” Palencia asked, watching the plasma blasts grow more intense. The Horadrim fleet hid in the shadow of the capital planet’s moon and waited.

Vin walked over to the wall and massaged it with his hand. An overlay appeared on the screen, showing routes of movement. There was an alien symbol beneath it, surrounded by four smaller symbols, constantly rotating. Suddenly the big symbol changed, but the smaller ones kept shifting. As Demar stared at it, he realized what it was. “A countdown.”

Dane looked back at Mayfield. “Open a link to the admiral.”

The doctor activated the cybermodem and the thin tanned face appeared. “Patel.”

“Prepare to fire everything in two minutes.”

“I know,” Nirav grunted, “outer system defenses, as well as the local battlestations, are online.”

“Good. Time to roast the Caal.”

Patel wasn’t impressed by his confidence. “Discom.”

Dane turned back to his own screen and said another incomprehensible alien word. There returned a flurry of grinding sounds and the ship writhed in acknowledgement.

“We’re moving,” Demar noticed.

Vin smiled. “Now we spring our trap.”

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As the Horadrim fleet came out from behind the moon, the Ares Battle Group was moving within optimal firing range of the Home Fleet.

“Fire in the hole!” rang out to the fighters already engaged.

Ivan Sun was barreling after two fighters when he heard the call. He had been firing blindly at them to keep them off his wingman's tail. "Damn!" he cursed, then launched one of his precious missiles and bolted out.

"Get out!" he screamed over the comm line. "All units, withdraw, full throttle!"

Sun kept his engine under full thrust until he passed the first cruiser, then he curved his maneuvering thrusters to watch the show.

At one glorious moment, the battlestations, outer defenses, and the Home Fleet opened up a barrage. The Ares Battle Group was encased in a cat's cradle of interlocking fire. As laser and plasma hit metal, fire burst in a cascade of explosions. A few of the escort destroyers were hit in the engines and their fusion bottles burst, creating brief stars in the vacuum of battle.

The slaughter didn't last long. The battle group returned fire, adding to the chaos. Although the Home Fleet had more ships, were less functional. In the crossfire, more of the humans were being incinerated.

As the smaller Horadrim fleet rounded the battlezone, their scanners showed two enemy squadrons trying to break out. Their black ships accelerated and unleashed their energy beams. The alien destroyers and light cruisers sliced through them, leaving them as fusion balls or carcasses dead in space.

Meanwhile, the pounding continued. The Horadrim vessels continued to pick off enemy ships in the rear, where the outer system batteries were firing. The defender's firepower was weaker here, and so the enemy tried to escape that way—only to be eaten by the alien crafts.

Trapped between such lethal powers, the Caal went after the weaker of the two: the Home Fleet. The Ares Battle Group surged forward, focusing their fire ahead, trying to break out of the trap. Entire squadrons disappeared as the star control ship punched its way towards the capital planet.

Nirav watched on the flag bridge of the *Hachiman* as the *Ares* destroyed his fleet piece by piece. He knew if he did nothing, they would be able to land on Avalon itself. "Signal the *Zeus*," he told the lieutenant. "Order them to close the gap."

The *TFS Zeus* fired its aging engines and surged forward. Its main guns pounded the *Ares*' escorts that tried to take advantage of the gap. Soon, the star control ship faced its sister ship head-on.

Ares turned and unleashed hell. Although the seven-mile long ship had impressive weaponry, the *Zeus* had taken a lot of battle damage in its fight with the *Vulthra*. As the two massive ships pounded each other, the *Ares* proved better equipped. Grasers tore into the heart of the *Zeus*, and after two minutes of engagement, the star control ship was gutted.

Patel was stunned. With the *Zeus* finished, the gap was widening again. There was only one thing to do. "Order the captain to intercept the *Ares*, maximum speed."

Dane also watched as the *Zeus* became a useless hunk of metal. "The trap cannot be contained."

"The *Hachiman* is going after the *Ares*," Miranda announced.

"Doesn't matter," Vin replied. "They'll be able to punch through anywhere. There's not enough ships to maintain the barrage. We've got to go in and finish them."

"That's insane!" Mayfield replied. "Even with your speed, if you send the Horadrim ships in, they're going to get shot to hell by the flanking squadrons here," she pointed to the readout, "and here. What good are your ships if they're dead?"

"If we don't close that gap, we're dead anyway!"

"What about the Orb?" Demar offered.

Dane stared at him. "What?"

"The doctor said when it was first used, the Orb managed to destroy half a K'Nes invasion fleet. Why can't you do the same?"

At first, Vin seemed to ignore them, turning to his comm screen and uttering that buzzsaw noise to the companion ships.

While the *Ares* and the *Hachiman* faced off, the Horadrim fleet rushed in, cutting a blazing swath through the Caal-infested ships. As they were warned, however, the flanking enemy squadrons turned their guns toward the black alien ships.

Suddenly the colonel raised his gloved hand straight ahead. He clenched his hand into a fist, then slowly released it. As he did, the flanking squadrons' ships began to detonate; fusion bottles lit their way into the center of the battle group.

Vin, Miranda, and Demar were all stunned at the power unleashed. Fifteen ships... gone on a whim. The sergeant was the only one who could speak. "Then all the stars lit their way home."

The doctor looked at him. "What?"

“A story... I read as a child.”

An eerie voice came from Dane’s lips. “*When all seemed dark and all alone / The children gnashed and did they groan / They feared that they were on their own / Then all the stars lit their way home.*”

Palencia’s eyes went wide. “You read that story too?”

Vin shook his head with equal disbelief. “No. Never read it.”

* * * * *

Commander Sun had been dodging death the whole battle. His Wraith’s energy was getting low and he had only one missile left. Through inertia, saving his engine thrust, he now had a bird’s-eye view of the two battling juggernauts. The *Hachiman* was losing badly, but after taking on two star control ships, the *Ares* had several gashes in its armor and was leaking atmosphere at a hideous rate.

Ivan zoomed in on the *Ares*, his old ship, and held back the tears at the damage he had wrought. Then... he noticed it. There was a hole in the rear of the ship, leading right towards one of the fusion reactors. *One missile, he knew, would rip that behemoth open. Of course, the only way he could make sure it would succeed was to get dangerously close... and there was no way to do that and get out alive...*

The fighter pilot thought about it for a second before he made his decision. *Fuck it, he thought, the universe was out to get me anyway.*

Sun hit the engines on full burn and barreled towards the *Ares*.

Ivan watched as space disappeared and the enormous bulk of the *Ares* replaced it. With a quick spin, the fighter ducked into the gash. Sun reveled in the tight maneuvering of the gap. Seconds became minutes as he approached the target. The scorched metal of the final engine armor revealed itself to him. There was no need for a missile lock; the pilot fired the missile and rode it in to the target.

The missile penetrated the engineering deck, incinerating the techs and controls before finally penetrating one of the fusion reactors. The bottle burst, causing a star of bright light to erupt. This pierced the other fusion reactors, one after the other, until the *Ares* burned like a new sun.

The fallout of the explosion caused the *Hachiman* to also explode, as well as several ship squadrons following the star control ship out of the trap. When the glow disappeared, all that remained was space and a few fragments of metal.

With their main ship and escorts gone, the Caal only had one thing left to do. Their small mass of transports, filled with the possessed people they had taken from Jennifer's Star, made for the planet. If they reached the planet and unloaded their people, the Caal could disappear once again and return later in force for the Orb.

Despite the damage they were causing, the Horadrim fleet couldn't cut through fast enough. A million Caal were about to be deposited on the capital planet and they were too far away.

Or were they? Dane growled that whine into his comm line and an angry Horadrim replied. Vin insisted, and the other ship's captain relented.

Demar watched in awe as the colonel rushed around the bridge, getting ready to do... something. Then the ship writhed while the sergeant watched, as they passed through a tunnel, and were suddenly in front of the transports.

Now Palencia knew why the alien was mad. With their ships suddenly in front of the fleet, they were within the weapons arc of any surviving warships. As the black ships carved their way through the transports, a rain of weapons fire fell upon them. The Horadrim fleet ignored the remainder of the battle group, focused on destroying the freighter craft.

"Why don't you use the Orb?!" Demar screamed as they were slowly getting carved up.

"I can't control it!" Vin shouted back. "One false move, and I could wipe out this entire *solar system!* I can't afford to take that chance."

"You'd rather sacrifice us then use it?"

"Yes, damn it! Now sit down!"

The Home Fleet was closing down on them, running in to the Horadrim Fleet's rescue... or what was left of it. But they were still minutes away. As freighters boiled away to vacuum, the alien ships took the toll. Soon one, then two, then four of the Horadrim were destroyed, crushed by the weight of the plasma.

Vin's ship was no exception; Dane began to weave through the transports, using their exploding carcasses as cover. The other ships followed suit, although their large dreadnought

didn't quite make it. As it slowed behind its faster sister ships, fire concentrated on it until it disintegrated into writhing black ash.

Their sacrifice was not in vain, however; the transports were finished by the time the Home Fleet caught up. Then Horadrim ships jumped behind the remnants of the battle group and pounded the enemy from both ends.

The damaged fleets bashed each other into oblivion, with the aliens picking off those who tried to flee. A few more minutes passed and the Caal were destroyed; their inhuman essences lost in the empty vacuum of space.

Of the Home Fleet, there were only seven ships operational; with five others being abandoned. Another alien ship perished, leaving only three Horadrim remaining.

Vin stood in silence for a moment, watching the billions of pieces that were once ships scatter throughout the Avalon system. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find the words. Never had he felt so triumphant and so despondent at the same time.

When he could finally speak, Dane told Miranda, "Open a channel to the Grand Council."

The doctor hit a few buttons and nodded. The image of Amanda Kait appeared. "Yes, sir?"

"The Caal are defeated," he whispered solemnly. "We're coming home."

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