

Six days later, we got the go-ahead. Deep-space recon platforms detected a massive transit on the edge of the Snake-Eyes system. It was time... and in the middle of our frantic preparations, Admiral Saginov called for a short virtual 'all-hands' meeting. With thirty-thousand people in the Fleet, it would have to be virtual; with the DX Cancri fleet already calibrating their next transit, it would have to be short.

I found myself as if in open space—so real that I had to resist the urge to grab my helmet. The vast bulk of *Durga's* hull curved away below, while the rest of the fleet's drive flares lit the sky above with a thousand fusion torches. When I saw that *Durga's* immense fractal radiators were furling up in preparation for combat, I realized this was a real-time image. Behind us, the dim red suns of the Snake-Eyes system were almost lost in the glare. Ahead – darkness and the enemy, with the light from their arrival soon to reach us.

My own crewmates were standing closest to me, surrounded by the rest of our squadron. Beyond them, I saw a few faces I recognized from other squadrons in our wing – after that it was just a sea of uniforms and insignia. Admiral Saginov's avatar stood atop a nuclear missile pod where we could all see him.

The environment's software subtly squelched the murmur of the

crowd while amplifying the Admiral's voice. Finding it difficult to talk among ourselves, we all shut up and listened. None of us found it the least bit odd that his voice carried so well in a vacuum.

He looked out over the silent crowd for a moment and nodded, as if acknowledging some signal only he could hear. "I wanted all of you to see the weapon you've come together to create," He raised a hand toward the fleet over our heads, "and to know why it exists."

We were close, then—close as thirty-thousand brothers and sisters arm in arm . We all knew what the Admiral meant – the entire fleet stood as one before him. Every one of us had a home, a family, another life waiting for our return, if we could save it today.

"I want to tell all of you – everyone who can hear my voice – that you have made history just by coming here. Never since the beginning of the Celestial Guard has a fleet this large been gathered in one place. Never before has such a fleet been needed so badly, by so many. We are here today – all of us – to answer that need."

"I'll make the battle plan as simple as I can. WE are the first, last and only line of defense. The enemy is in front of you. Everything they want to take is behind you. *Keep it that way!* By any means necessary. "

"*Aye-aye, Admiral Sir!*"

"The enemy is here *now*. The Colonial Reserves' DX Cancri fleet – *the whole fleet* – has arrived in the outer reaches of this system and is preparing to transit farther into the Kruger 60 Cluster, to invade our worlds – the homes of our comrades and our families. "They are coming to impose the will of tyrants and dictators and to install a corrupt regime which exists only for the betterment of its most privileged—but not for us."

"They have come in force, with a will to destroy anyone who stands in their way. They have thousands of missiles and troops and they are prepared for almost anything—but not for us.

"This will be the beginning of the end, where everything falls apart. History will record this as the first day of the most disastrous military campaign ever undertaken—but not for us!"

The Fleet responded as one, "But not for us."

"This battle will be remembered as one of the most resounding defeats in the history of warfare – the most one-sided engagement since Agincourt—but not for us!"

"*But not for us!*"

"There will be nowhere left to hide when this entire star system becomes an inescapable killing ground—but not for us!"

"***But not for us!***" We were shouting now.

"Here and now, we make our stand, for the Guard, our homes, our people, our *freedom* – for everything we hold worth defending – I say to you: Today is a good day to die..."

"BUT NOT FOR US!" Thirty thousand voices screamed in unison; sixty thousand fists rose up against the torch-lit sky. We were capable of anything now, and the enemy would die by the thousands today, as our missiles engulfed their ships in nuclear hellfire.

If we had to, we were prepared to join them.