

LANCERS

Chapter 1

“Warning: Ablation. Warning: Ablation.” Stoic Stella repeated as David’s Lancer fell uncontrollably into atmosphere.

David begins hearing Stella’s warnings just as his vision regains color, expanding from a pinpoint. He can feel his flight suit pulsating rhythmically, forcing blood back toward his brain. Gasping, struggling against the crushing forces pushing his lungs into his spine. “Stella... status...”

“The pilot is currently experiencing 8.5 Gs.” Stella said plainly, as if all this was just a minor data point. “Although my dampeners are offline, your flight suit is functioning at maximum capacity. Heat shielding is at sixty-seven percent. Bio-rhythms indicate seventy percent chance of panic-induced cardia-”

“Stella, display... corrected re-entry.” David said, struggling to retain consciousness.

Without a response instructions began displaying on David’s HUD.

PITCH RATE: EXCESSIVE.

REDUCE TO 12%.

"Pilot. Nose oscillation increasing. Arrest the rotation or experience structural failure in fourteen seconds. Jink left." Stella says. "Per protocol, I am administering emergency cocktail."

David jams the stick left. The air-frame can be heard straining — a horrific metal on metal shriek — but the lancer's rotation is stabilized. He can hear the hiss of an injection near his hip. His veins suddenly feeling like they're filled with ice water. The Focus-9 hit first. The cockpit becoming a higher definition and time slowing to a crawl, the screaming of the hull becoming a "fascinating" acoustic profile rather than existential threat. Then the Zenith-7 came. The impending sense of doom didn't vanish; it just became disconnected.

AOA OUTSIDE MARGINS. THERMAL LOAD INCREASING.

"Ablation critical. Smoke detected in cabin. Fire suppression system disabled to prioritize oxygen availability." Stella says. "Adjust AOA to 32.5 degrees."

David pulls up until the HUD flares green. The heat of re-entry rising through the floor, but he doesn't seem to mind. He was just "doing the work" now.

EXCESSIVE ENERGY: REDUCE SPEED.

"Pilot. You are exceeding airframe tolerances by forty percent. Bank sixty degrees to bleed." Stella instructs.

David banks. He feels the additional 6 Gs slam into him, but his vision remains high-def. David can see the orange glow beyond the canopy fading to a dull gray as the lancer drops below mach five. David levels out the lancer and deploys his airbrake. The violent vibrations smoothing into a low, heavy whistle.

"Stella, status." David says, his voice now as flat as hers.

"Vaporization successfully avoided. Heat-shield integrity at thirty-two percent." Stella responds. "Propulsion systems severely damaged. Thrust factor limited to forty percent. The flaps have melted into the neutral position and the left landing gear door has malfunctioned.

"Okay. Where can we put down?" David asks.

"Crater detected one-thousand-sixty-two kilometers due north, along current flight path. Recommend emergency landing at this position. Pilot, be advised: an asymmetrical landing is expected." she reports, adding an indicator to the HUD for the landing zone.

As David's mangled lancer drops into the crater the HUD displays an adjusted glide slope. David adjusts the engine output to prioritize the reaction control system and cuts the aft thrusters.

"Stella, further adjust the glide slope for a belly landing."

David requests, beginning to prepare the cabin for a rough landing.

Stella replies, "Affirmative. Displaying adjusted glide slope." A few moments pass before she interjects, "Pilot, be advised: The surface is primarily loess sand. Visual reference will be lost after primary contact. HUD is being slaved to ground-penetrating radar."

ALT: 500 meters

IAS: 592 km/h

David activates the air brake to bleed extra speed as he descends. Without landing gears, the lancer's smooth under belly acts as a sled. Upon contact with the ground there is no bounce as David expected, instead there is a muffled thud which vibrates through David's teeth as the lancer begins digging into the loess. As Stella predicted, a cloud of tan dust, fine as flour, engulfs the lancer. The outside world completely disappears into a tan void.

Gritting his teeth against the vibrations, David can feel the lancer wanting to pitch-pole as the belly continues catching on the silt.

"Critical: Terrain. Critical: Terrain. Pilot, fire RCS and pull up." Stella says calmly, as if reading from a grocery list.

David wrestles the nose up, using what little thrust the lancer can muster to prevent a front flip. He can feel the deceleration as the screaming of the wind is replaced by the dry hiss of silt cutting the hull. In a matter of seconds the lancer goes from three-hundred-seventy kilometers per hour to zero. David is violently thrown into his harness, feeling a rib crack. The cockpit is dark, save for the flickering red of the cockpit's emergency lighting.

"Did we.. make it?" David asks, lungs burning, the Focus-9 starting to falter.

"Indicated air speed is zero kilometers per hour." Stella replies. "We have stopped 4.2 kilometers short of the target though the lancer is no longer flight-worthy."

David flips on his emergency transponder before attempting to open the canopy.

"Critical: Terrain. Pilot, sensors indicate the cockpit is submerged under several meters of sand. Recommend you await QRF." Stella chirps matter of factly. "Pilot can override this safety alert; however, chances of suffocation are 100.1 percent."

David releases his harness, letting out a heavy sigh. The adrenaline and the drugs are beginning to fade, he'll have to deal

with the “debt” he owes his body now and hope there’s somebody out there to come dig him out.

CHAPTER 2

David exited the shuttle onto the flight deck of Hangar B. The Volonte was humming — the rhythmic vibration of the fusion core felt like a heartbeat — pilots and engineers mulled about discussing performance optimizations, repairs, and even their after hours plans. Looking outside the hangar shield he could see one of their screening ships, a frigate, the Vagabond. David was reminded of their controversial introduction a few years ago. “Too many missiles, not enough hull,” was the argument some war-hawks touted. For their roles though — interdiction, trade protection, pirate suppression etc... — chances were low the threats they were going up against could dish out any meaningful damage. David’s self-awareness suddenly snapped back after a few minutes, he realized he was stationary and gawking. This wasn’t the academy, he was a voting member of the 14th Self Defense Fleet now and needed to act like it, it was time to find *his* lancer.

Having walked down and along the bays in the hangar David stopped in front of one of them, checking his orders he confirmed this was his new home — bay six. He sat his bag against a work bench and began looking around. The workstation was a bit of a mess, but David could see the method in the madness. A compressor sat half torn apart next to a half eaten

ration-pack. A spilled coffee laid atop brand new manual revisions. A socket set sat on a ravaged toolbox, the only socket missing was the 10mm by David's accounting. On second thought, maybe he only saw the madness. There in the middle of the bay though sat what he sought. David ran his hand along the surface of his new lancer. Like those back in the academy, it was unfinished save for some painted on warnings: DO NOT STEP, LIFT HERE, STAY CLEAR DURING OPERATION, etc... It missed something. David picked up a razor and some card stock. He cut for himself a stencil and grabbed a can of spray paint. Right as he prepared to add his own label to the craft a single voice cried out.

"Who the hell are you?!" the voice of a woman.

David turned. The woman confronting him was the walking personification of a grease monkey. She wore coalition overalls, top half tied at the waist and a band shirt with the arms sheared off underneath. Her arms were corded with the kind of muscles one earns by wrestling heavy machinery in low gravity. David also noted some ancient-style naval tattoos.

"David Miller," he said, voice cracking. "My orders said this was my bay — my lancer." David looked back at the lancer.

Kovacs wiped a smear of a dark lubricant across her shirt. She stepped closer, grabbing and inspecting the stencil. "Miller, huh?" Kovacs tossed the stencil into a nearby bin.

"Well you can call me Kovacs, Chief, or Chief Kovacs." she said grabbing him by the hand and shaking it firmly. "But, until you earn it, this is my lancer and my bay."

David was locked in place by Kovacs' assertiveness and he struggled to blurt out anything in response. Kovacs smirked.

"I'll take your stunned silence to be an affirmation." She patted David on the shoulder. "Have you been on a vanguard-class before?" she asked.

"Haven't even been off planet." David replied, relieved with the tone change.

Kovacs let out a short, sharp laugh. "Off planet for the first time and they stick you in a combat patrol."

Crouching down toward the aft of the lancer Kovacs beckoned him over. "The trainers all have fresh dampeners and engines that never see a spec of regolith or experience the full heat of a bad atmospheric entry. This lancer though?" She said lovingly patting it, "She's a vet, she's got character. By which I mean she vibrates like a drum if you push her too long; and her voice warning system is — unique."

David stepped forward so the two were shoulder to shoulder, peering down at the exposed internals of the propulsion systems. "Unique? Aren't they all standardized?"

"Spec-wise, sure." Kovacs grunted, reaching for a spanner. "But they're designed to work with their pilots, they learn patterns. This lancer has had three pilots in three years. Two voted to retire; one didn't get the chance. Pilots are meant to be paired with them for years. So this ones — given up — on being polite. Statistically honest."

The two stood there solemnly for a moment.

"Anyway, Miller, follow the blue line to reach the sleeping quarters and stow your shit." She said, pointing out the multi-colored lines on the floor. "After that, follow the yellow line to the chow-hall. We've an assembly meeting in an hour to vote on the patrol route, among other things. If you don't vote I'll kick your ass."

Following the blue line towards the bunks, David's mind raced with excitement. He couldn't believe he'd made it. Four years in the academy flew by now that he was on station. David fantasized about taking his — Kovacs' — lancer out for a spin. He took out his orders again to see which flight he was on. Fourteenth fleet, first wing, second squadron, and assigned to the second flight.

"Damn." David said under his breath as he realized he wouldn't be on duty until the next day.

Looking up for a moment, David realized he was standing in front of a door. The sign above it read "FLIGHT 2 – BERTHING". One thing the academy prepared him well for was the communal living aspect of ship life. David slid his auth-key into a receptacle which, upon flashing green, opened the door. As the door hissed open, he didn't find the academic silence he was familiar with rather he heard the sharp clack of playing cards as they hit a table and the smell of toasted protein bars. David stepped inside, greeting the gaze of his new compatriots. Two of them were in athletic wear and the third a mechanics flight suit, though far cleaner than Kovacs'. One of them perked up. A clean cut man sporting a high and tight. His head was distinct in that it was the most squared head David had ever seen. You could pass it off on his meticulously maintained side burns and hair cut; however, even his chin was a near perfect square.

"Hey, new guy on deck" he blurted.

"David Miller." David replied offering his hand to no one in particular.

"We know." A voice said. "I'm Kala." The voice belonged to a short feminine person, whose shaved head caught David off guard. Kala's eyes returned to a datapad. "Kovacs already message the group chat. She said you've got 'study hands'."

"Don't mind them," the square jawed man said. "Just jealous we're planning to vote for the fun route tonight." He got up

and approached David with his hand out, taking David up on his unspoken offer. "I'm Mike, was the rook until you showed up." He said smiling.

An older man sighed as stood up, the cracking of his knees could be heard over the air return.

"This is our old man, Aris." Mike said, gesturing toward the older man.

"I'm your flight lead, if you need anything or need to talk to someone in confidence just let me know." Aris stated. "I'm sure Kovacs mentioned it, but we have an assembly in about ... forty minutes." Aris informed David, checking his watch.

"Thanks," David said, still shaking Mike's hand. "Is there somewhere I can put my stuff?"

Aris gestured down the hall, "Your room is the last on the left."

David gave a feint grin and a subtle nod. He had never been good at first time interactions. It kind of put a damper on this otherwise great day. David headed toward the last room on the left. As the door slid open he was greeted with more of a closet than a room. A single full bed and a desk. David tossed his pack on top of the desk and sat down on the edge of the bed. Which, to the coalition's credit, they obviously valued a good mattress. Just

above the desk David noticed something had been etched: "The vacuum doesn't care how you voted."

David sat on the edge of the bed and pondered the scrawling for a moment. Though he didn't dwell on it for long. David grabbed his data-pad from his bag. After unlocking it he could see the message from Kovacs that Kalu mentioned. His flight members work fast it seemed. A notification popped up at the top of the screen. It was the Assembly agenda.

AGENDA: PATROL ROTATION 44-B

>ROUTE SELECTION

>RATION RE-ALLOCATION

>PILOT INDUCTION – D. MILLER

David's heart skipped. He had only the rhythmic pulse of the engine to focus on. "I hate public speaking."

CHAPTER 3

David's flight suit was obviously the newest one—and potentially the cheapest one—in the fleet. As he trailed behind the other members of his flight, he couldn't help but notice the swoosh-swoosh-swoosh of the synthetic fabric. Looking around, he realized none of the other pilots were wearing theirs; the "uniform" of the 14th seemed to be anything but what the Academy had issued. Mike seemed the most approachable, so David picked up his pace until he was walking shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

"Hey, Mike," David began, hoping he had the man's attention. "Why doesn't anyone wear their flight suit?"

"We voted them out," Mike said. He reached over and rubbed a hand against David's sleeve, producing an extra-loud swoosh. "You're welcome to wear it, but most of us buy mechanic's overalls then swap our patches and the sub-layers over."

"Voted them out? I thought they were mandated PPE," David said, his brow furrowed.

"If a fleet votes something out, it's pretty difficult for the Defense Council to override it." Mike smirked. "Besides, they aren't really flame-retardant like mechanic digs."

That stopped David in his tracks. "I'm sorry? They aren't?"

Mike chuckled. "Nah. They melt to your skin when the heat goes up. The overalls are the way to go." Mike eyed David up and down for a moment, measuring his frame. "You're roughly Kovacs' size. I'll get you squared away, newbie."

"Huh," David said, his voice trailing off. "That's—scummy."

He thought back to the Academy. The instructors had hammered it into them: Trust your equipment. They claimed the Coalition spent hundreds of thousands of credits per pilot to ensure they were safe, secure, and effective. It had all been a lie of omission.

He was still chewing on that betrayal as Second Flight entered the mess hall, which had been converted into the Assembly floor. They sat at a vacant table, Mike brazenly claiming an extra chair as a footrest. Looking toward their lead, Aris, David saw a man who had seen both the safe route and the Pipe—a man sitting with arms crossed, watching the room with the tired eyes of someone who had seen too many of these meetings devolve into shouting matches. The room was packed with hundreds of crew members; the pilots were a distinct minority, dwarfed by the massive voting bloc of Engineering.

Kovacs appeared suddenly, forcefully shoving Mike's feet off the chair to usurp it for herself. As she sat, David noticed her left arm was heavily inked; intricate geometric designs accented her otherwise flawless, beige skin. He tried to focus on the tattoos, but his attention kept drifting back to the polyester of his suit sticking to his ribs in the humid air of the mess.

He thought about the etching back in his room. It wasn't a warning about the enemy; it was a warning about consequences. Whether the debate was the Pipe versus Solis, or standard-issue versus modified gear, the core problem remained: he would still have to trust his life to equipment that a veteran had just informed him was a death trap.

The people around him weren't just sailors and pilots; they were survivors, forced to rig their own gear to survive the negligence of the people who built it. Even the crowd sourced decision making process felt like a futile attempt to circumvent the judgment of the void. Because the vacuum didn't care what they chose. The vacuum was cold, indifferent, and final. His vote was just an exercise of human choice made in a desperate effort to mitigate the failures of the very system that granted him the freedom to choose.

The vacuum was the consequence. And it was waiting.

Caught up in his head, David missed the changes going on around him. A creeping silence grew over various groups, the

Consul was making her way to the front of the room. The Consul wore a relaxed version of the fleet tunic, sleeves rolled up, carrying a mug in one hand —which bore uncanny resemblance to the one knocked over in bay six— and a datapad in the other. As she shifted between tables, the Consul nodded to veterans and acknowledged newcomers. Wherever she went, the energy changed to that of a town hall. She had finally reached the front of the hall, leaned against a bulkhead and took a sip from her mug.

“Alright, everyone, settle in.” she said, her voice warm and conversational.

David still felt the rhythmic vibration of the fusion core through the deck, a heartbeat that seemed to pulse in time with his own racing chest. He tried to sit still but every minor adjustment of posture produced a loud, synthetic swoosh that felt like a blaring alarm attracting all the attention in the room.

“According to our manifest we’ve more than a few new sailors, mechanics, and a pilot this rotation.”

A pilot. The word didn’t fit. It was unearned. Mind again returning to the etching in his room: The vacuum doesn’t care how you voted. Did the vacuum care if his hands were shaking? Or that he had spent four years in academy just to realize he’d been shipped out in a suit of kindling?

She turned and raised a hand as she began introducing new members of the Volante. Kovacs jabbed David in the ribs, right where the polyester felt the most restrictive.

"That's you cadet!" Kovacs hissed, a smirk playing on her face.

The shock of the jab caused David to shoot up and stand to attention. Realizing what had transpired, David's stomach felt like it dropped. Now, under the Consul's observant, almost maternal gaze, the room had shrunk. David's new comrades felt like a mountain of judgment suddenly come to rest on his shoulders. He gripped his data-pad, his heart skipping as he began searching his mind for any kind of relevant facts about himself to share.

"Ah a volunteer!" The Consul remarked, "Looks like David Miller will be the first." The Consul approached Second Flight's table.

"So fresh that you're still in the original packaging." She joked, a low laughter erupted. "Don't worry, I'm sure your flight will get you squared away." She locked eye contact with David, offering him a small, supportive nod as if sensing his anxiety.

"Take a breath, Miller. You're among peers here. We vote, sweat, and bleed together." The remark did little to relieve the anxiety as a cold sweat began to stream down his spine, only exacerbating the clingyness of the polyester.

"Now" she said, setting her mug on Second Flight's table with a thunk that silenced what remained of hushed conversation in the hall. "Before we get to the fun stuff —like arguing over why or why not we should all die in the Pipe— we have to make it official."

The Consul beckoned David and the other newcomers forward, to the front of the hall. David stood, his knees feeling like they'd fall out from under him. The swooshing of his trousers, though initially immutable, began to fade as if giving way to the overwhelming sound of silence. As he sojourned forward David caught eyes with Aris. His tired, veteran eyes instilled doubt. Was that David in a decade? A husk of a new recruit. Surviving when so many other pilots were returned to star dust.

There was no podium and no flags. The Consul stood in front of them, addressing them but speaking to the crew.

"The Academy prepares you for planetary service. They instill loyalty, duty, and honor. Once you're part of the coalition fleets, that's all behind you." The Consul paced up and down the line of new faces. "We don't swear to a piece of cloth like you may have before leaving for the academy. Because the void doesn't care about your allegiances, how tidy your dress uniform is, or how well you served. So we swear an oath to each other and in turn hold each other to that oath.

David prepared to raise his hand and recite his oath. He caught himself just as the entirety of the crew began reciting the oath, not to be repeated, but to be heard.

“To my siblings aboard this vessel I swear this oath.” The crew began, the unexpected vibration of hundreds of voices in his chest drove out what remained of his anxiety. “Though the cold emptiness beyond this hull may be our final resting place I will fight, unrelenting, to see you returned safely home.”

Aris, Mike, Kovacs, and even Kala looked directly into David’s eyes, as if speaking directly to him, “Your enemies are now my enemies; your people are now my people; and your honor my honor. I will bring no shame to you and I promise to exercise my will in a way that will not bring you harm.”

The throng didn’t just fill the room; it pressurized it. They weren’t a mountain of judgment resting on his shoulders. They were the giants upon which he could stand. The room once again erupted, this time in applause and whistling. The crew made their oath to the new comers and accepted them into their family.

The Consul clapped along, beaming with a supportive smile as she watched the newest—now vested—crew members slowly trickle back to their tables.

“Okay everyone,” the Consul spoke loudly, raising her hands to once again hush the crowd. “It’s time for the main event. Navigation! You’re up. Present your proposed routes to the crew

for consideration." She said, yielding the floor to several members of the navigation crew.