

TIDES OF WAR

THE HPA SAGA PART 3

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 4

by
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One Last Card Trick To Play Part 1

[Lucky]

Lucky's breath ran ragged in his lungs as he raced down the endless corridors, wall after wall flashing by in an endless blur.

Anders and Wafturn ran ahead, Scatterguns up, searching for targets. Anders mumbled something, but Lucky couldn't hear him past the blood rushing in his ears.

Battle. They were running straight into a fight with people that for all Lucky knew were professional soldiers. And even if the *Sunset* was friendly territory, they were still on enemy ground; surrounded, unable to escape, regardless of what happened in the next few minutes.

Wafturn stopped at a ladder, dropped to one knee, swivelled around, scanning the corridor with the gun, while Anders slipped his gun over his shoulder and flew up the ladder. Lucky stopped at the ladders base, trying to regather his breath. Had these two been practising this move while he'd been busting his ass fixing the ship?

"Get up there, Lucky," Wafturn hissed. His cheeks were flushed, but his voice was calm, flat.

Lucky nodded and scaled the ladder. The rungs were cold, stinging his fingers. Or maybe he was hot. He felt a million degrees and sweat drained down his face, but he knew it had nothing to do with the atmospheric control settings.

Anders pulled Lucky up the final step. Wafturn immediately turned and swam up the ladder. At the top, he whispered, "the control room's one sector that way. Shall we all hit that or should we check the HPA first?"

"The control room is more important. The HPA is nothing without it. If we don't have any joy there, we'll check the HPA," Anders said.

For once, Lucky agreed. "Let's go."

Their run grew to a sprint. Lucky struggled to keep up. The megaweed in the late hours wasn't doing him any favours. He fell behind, regardless of how hard he breathed. His mind was surprisingly blank of fear or thought, just a robot pilot pushing one leg in front of the other. The adrenaline, he reminded himself.

The HPA control room door was wide open, but he couldn't see anyone inside.

Wafturn charged in, scatter gun up, through the open door.

Someone yelled. A thump echoed out the door as the room flashed bright.

"Fierfek," Lucky said, reaching the door a step after Anders. Wafturn appeared, scattergun smoking. Lucky didn't need to see the body to know Wafturn had just aced someone. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"They're turning on us, Lucky, what did you want me to do?"

Anders snorted. "Weak stomach."

Lucky gave them an exasperated look. "You don't know that for sure. I thought we came down here to trap them and find out what they were doing, not kill them."

Anders rolled his eyes and stepped into the control room. Large glass windows covered the far wall, looking down on the cargo bay which housed the HPA. "Frak's sake, they're all over it."

Lucky pushed past Wafturn and followed Anders gaze. The HPA was a large mess of steel, ducting, lenses and other stuff Lucky didn't understand, but it didn't look wrong. . .

No, there was a small light moving around the top section. It took him a moment to figure it out.

A headlamp.

He spotted another, and another. Anders was right. People in EVA suits were crawling all over the HPA, doing who knew what to it.

"We've got to stop them," Lucky said, firming the grip on his weapon.

He moved for the door.

"I'm coming," Anders said. "Lock the door after us, Wafturn. If anyone comes to talk to your dead friend. . . you know what to do."

Wafturn nodded. His face was white, but his eyes were narrowed, as if it was his first kill and he had enjoyed it, and couldn't wait for the next..

Lucky didn't think he understood anyone any more.

Anders zipped up Lucky's pressure suit. "Don't fuck this up Lucky."

Lucky bristled, but didn't react. "You just worry about yourself, Sparky." Anders never liked his electrician nick name.

Anders jerked Lucky up as he closed the zip.

They passed through the airlock and into a narrow passageway that fed into the cargo bay. The HPA loomed before them, stretching up beyond sight, filling the gargantuan chamber like a twisted amalgamation of engineering. As Lucky's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he spotted a roving light just as Anders' arms flicked up and his scattergun boomed.

Or fizzed. A little flame burped from the end of the barrel, but nothing else happened.

Anders tossed the gun aside. "We're in a vacuum," he said, voice laced with anger, likely at himself.

Lucky didn't say anything. He had forgotten scatterguns required oxygen too. He held onto his gun though – it could also work as a club. He activated his radio. "Plan?" Anders was the last person Lucky wanted to ask that question, but they could be spotted at any moment and were currently outgunned. He'd rather ask Anders for advice than be killed.

Anders's head twisted side to side. "How many exits to this chamber?"

Lucky rubbed his chin. It had been awhile since he last looked at the ship plans. "Half a dozen doors, but probably twice as many access passages."

"Let's lock 'em in."

Lucky immediately thought of four problems with that idea, the biggest being the rest of Frantic's crew coming to the rescue. If it did come down to a fight, they needed the odds to be as even as possible.

A figure walked around the corner into the passageway. He froze.

Lucky stared at him, equally frozen. The man's eyes were wide, but his mouth was moving. Warning his friends. Lucky swung the gun up before he even realized it.

The man pulled a pistol from a suit pouch.

Lucky slammed the gun butt into the man's head. He dropped without a sound; the cargo bay had gravity but no air..

Anders dived for the man's pistol. "Good work Lucky. Now we can—"

A laser bolt smashed into the wall above his head and they both ducked down. "Fierfek they've found us," Lucky cried.

Anders dragged Lucky to the far wall, out of the sight of the HPA. He leaned around the corner and fired back. He pulled back to the wall as laser bolts flashed past. "We're screwed. Get back to Wafturn, tell him to lock the cargo bay down, it'll buy us some time."

"What about you?"

"I'll keep them occupied. Just don't lock the door on me."

Lucky nodded. If Anders wanted to play the hero, he was welcome to it. He raced into the airlock.

"Come on, come on," he urged the system as air brought the room back to normal pressure. He wiggled out of his suit. The door released and Lucky sprinted out. He'd never taken the ladders so fast in his life. The walls raced past in a disorientated blur, spots flashing before his eyes. He reached the control room and banged on the door until it opened. He collapsed into Wafturn's arms.

"Cripes, Lucky, what's the matter?"

Lucky gasped for air as he pointed down at the HPA. "Down," he sucked in another gulp of oxygen. "Lock down."

"All of it?"

"The whole room," another gulp. "Seal it."

"Where's Anders?"

"Seal it!"

Wafturn cringed but turned to the controls and locked the room down. A series of green lights turned red until the whole board had changed colour.

Lucky turned to the glass. The headlamps were fleeing the HPA, probably trying for the doors, but otherwise everything looked the same. "I hope Anders isn't still in there."

"He's not," called Anders from behind him. Lucky actually smiled. Anders was still wearing his suit, but with the helmet off.

Wafturn's eyes never left the control screen. "Now what? The electronic locks won't keep them in there forever, and Frantic is going to realize his men are missing at some point."

Anders threw his hands up and paced along the control room. "I know, I know. Let me think." His face wrinkled up as if the sheer power of his thoughts was shrinking his head. Anders was out of his depth, but Lucky didn't have a clue either. He was a career criminal with a background in astrogation, not warfare.

"Look we can't guard every entrance to the cargo bay. We have to assume we are going to lose it at some stage. But this control room only has one entrance."

Wafturn looked around, as if he had never actually sized the room up before. "We can hold it. The HPA won't run without these controls. Disconnect the computer from the bridge and the HPA is effectively useless."

Anders rubbed his chin. He stared at Wafturn's scattergun. "We should have brought more weapons."

"There's a lot of things we should have done, Anders. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we've got," Lucky said. He pushed the door closed. "Let's find something to brace this." The room was small, originally designed for a single man to oversee cargo loading. The room had been messed up after the last battle and bent structural girders had been cut out during repairs. They leaned up against the far corner, waiting to be removed. Wafturn and Lucky shimmied the girders behind the door and wedged them in under the control panel.

Lucky stood back and studied their handiwork with disdain. Their plan was getting worse and worse as continued to react. "We're kidding ourselves if we think that's going to keep anyone out of here."

Wafturn shrugged his shoulders as if to say that either scenario was equally boring to him and he had other things of more importance to attend to. Lucky was seeing a whole new side to the engineer.

"Now what?" said Wafturn

Anders sat in the control chair. "Now we wait."

One Last Card Trick To Play Part 2

[Lucky]

It didn't take long.

A face materialized on the communication console. His skin was dark and weathered and anti-flash sunglasses covered his eyes.

"Frantic," said Anders, crossing his arms in his annoyed-school-principle way. "I was wondering when you'd call."

Frantic's face was unreadable behind his sunglasses. The corner of his mouth twitched but little else moved to indicate the image was of a human being. "What's going on, Anders?"

"You tell me. Your boys are all over the HPA. I thought we had an agreement regarding the *Sunset*. You'd repair the ship, we'd look after the HPA. But if you're going to renege on that deal. . ."

Frantic removed his glasses, revealing icy blue eyes. He looked down for a moment, his cheeks reddening, and looked back up at the screen.

An act, thought Lucky, but he couldn't be sure.

"This is quite embarrassing to admit, but those men weren't working under my authority. They're rogue," Frantic said.

"Likely story," Lucky said, pushing close to Anders so Frantic could see him. "Your boys tried to kill us."

Anders glanced at Lucky, his teeth grinding, but he kept quiet. Frantic spread his arms, palms up. "I can't tell you what they were thinking, but perhaps they thought you were there to attack them."

"Interesting how you have such an insight into men that you have no control over," Anders said. His voice was as low and controlled as Frantic. Perhaps Anders had been a negotiator in a previous life.

Frantic's mouth twitched again. He must have known he was had. "It was a good move, hunkering down in the control room. You have full control of the HPA."

Anders nodded, but Lucky bit his lip. Frantic's tone smelt of false camaraderie. Lucky almost braced for the hidden attack to come..

"But my men control the *Sunset*, which means we control the atmospheric systems."

Lucky's blood went cold. Frantic's threat read loud and clear. He was going to kill the carbon dioxide scrubbers or something equally rotten and suffocate them out.

Nice.

Anders grinded his jaw briefly before reaching for the communication controls. "We're done here," and he killed the link.

The silence of the control room roared in Lucky's ears. Things had snowballed and now they were out of control and heading straight into oblivion.

"Jesus Lucky, they're going to kill us," Wafturn said, hands wringing together.

Lucky's eyes settled on Anders. He was still wearing his suit. "There must be spare oxygen in that," he said.

"Shared three ways? It won't help much," Anders said. He got up and searched the room high and low. Lucky moved out of his way. He didn't know what Anders was looking for –spare air tanks, an instant solution to their problem- but he hoped he found it.

"Maybe we should just surrender," Wafturn said. His face was still white, but the cavalier look to his eyes had been replaced by a quiver. Fear. "Norman can sort this out when he gets back."

"That Frantic is a psycho," Lucky said. "He just threatened to kill us. Did you see his eyes? There was nothing there. He's a killer. We surrender and we're dead."

Anders stopped looking under the console and stood up straight. "Lucky is right. We're stuck in here now. We've got no choice. We have to wait it out until Norman comes back."

"Freks sake," said Wafturn, collapsing into the chair.

The background whir slowed and died. Lucky craned his neck back. The roof air duct was still and quiet. His mouth dried as he imagined the stream of air drying up. His heart raced at the thought of each breath bringing him closer to death, one lungful at a time. He was both torturer and torture at the same time. He backed into a wall and slid to the ground. "Jesus. Jesus." His heart beat faster and faster, speeding up his breathing, quickening the build-up of carbon dioxide.

And that thought made his heart beat faster until he was panting, head between his legs and he was six again, back home, trapped, unable to breath, knowing he was about to die—

Anders lifted him off the ground and slapped him in the face. "Control yourself. You'll kill us all."

Lucky stared at Anders, not entirely sure what had just happened, but his heart had slowed and he nodded numbly. Anders let go and Lucky slid back to the floor.

Wafturn hissed at Anders. "Leave him alone Jon, freks sake, you know he's no good at this."

Anders just shook his head and turned away. "Norman had better hurry then. We don't have much time."

The Janus Man

[Sam Kemper]

Sam stood before the control array on the mezzanine of the *Repulse's* bridge, staring through the far viewpanes to the swirls of hyperspace outside. The deck below was empty and dark; he could barely make out the astrogation and navigation consoles.

The bodies of Stenson and the INRA men were still behind him, soaking in a pool of their own blood. They wouldn't move of their own volition and Sam sure as heck wasn't touching them.

The control console beeped softly. The *Repulse* was tracking to the right slightly, like a hovercar with uneven power to its anti-grav panels. He entered commands into Norman's remote control system.

The hum of the engines shifted slightly. A minor hyperspace adjustment. The remote control wasn't really designed for that detailed a level of control however.

Control screens filled the mezzanine, but the majority were dark. When operational though, the sheer amount of sensor data would make future battles much easier. Yes, it would be fun getting the *Repulse* running at one hundred percent. Once equipped with the HPA, it would be superior to the *Sunset* in every way.

Sam rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes for a moment. Sleep had called and left a message, and now his head ached. He couldn't leave the controls while the ship continued to drift in hyperspace though. He'd had enough of those bed time stories when he was a kid.

He logged onto the medical bay mainframe. It registered one patient in critical condition, in a drug induced coma.

Sam nodded to himself. Norman had got as close to death as one could get before Sam had hauled him into the medical bay.

He would live long enough to reach Frantic's base. If his infamous luck stayed with him. Frantic had spare clones. He'd borrowed Norman's high fidelity clone patterns and promised Norman spares.

Sam made another slight adjustment. Military spec engines huh? They were so far out of alignment they might as well have been on different ships.

He chuckled. De Havilland had talked up Alliance engineering every chance he had. He'd hate to see Alliance tech done on the cheap.

Or was the problem something else?

His head pounded like a tribble in a cargo container. He could probably step away for a moment to get some water. He logged off the medical mainframe. Even if they got Norman another clone, they were only delaying the inevitable. Time would catch up with Norman. Unless his enemies got to him first.

He was just delaying the inevitable.

Sam knew this more than anyone. He was on borrowed time himself, ever since his capture by AIS.

The pounding grew louder and harder, doubling Sam over. His memories were going too; he couldn't even remember how he'd escaped from Alliance Intelligence to meet up with Norman at the start of this whole adventure.

It was too hard to think. He pushed the thought aside. The *Repulse* was drifting again. He tweaked the trajectory, hoping that each change wasn't the last manoeuvre he could make with the remote control.

The headache began to fade.

There, he just needed some clarity of thought. The past was the past. He had a job to do now, in the present.

His mouth moved to an unfamiliar tune and he whistled easily, as if the song was not coming from him but a record player; a song he had known all his life yet had no memory of.

Then he recognized it.

The Alliance Military March.

