



# **FIRE FOR EFFECT**

A Tale of the Inevitable Future

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Space was always stupidly cold in a fighter or at least it seemed this way to Hunter Morrison. Even when you know where you were going, you could feel lost in the icy vastness of space. After all, your average fighter wasn't much more than a weapon's system strapped to an engine. Hunter was the unusual part. Most of the ships in his group were pilotless drones, so adding life support to Hunter's fighter wasn't something the engineers wanted to worry about ... and it added weight. Hunter's comfort was actually the last on their list of concerns. The fleet's defense was what mattered. Loss of comfort was something the pilots were supposed to learn to live with ... yea, nobody cared about the lost feeling in Hunter's legs after a tour in one of these things. The numbness which never seemed to go away.

Bentley Cunningham had been the sarcastic wit of the wing. Nothing was real to him ... or at least that's how he played it.

"You expect people to get in these things on their own?" He'd comment climbing into his Mark XIV fighter. "Don't you need pallbearers to lift you into a coffin?"

Strapping himself in, he'd turn to Hunter, "I gotta get myself one of those silk-lined jobs. Nice set of brass handles on the outside."

Hunter and Bentley had been flying cover over this part of the fleet for weeks. Endless monotonous weeks ... or had it been months? Out here you lost all sense of time. Bentley spent hours broadcasting classic Hoyt Curtin Jazz over the COMM system ... as if the drones cared. The tense melodies, the thematic twists somehow seemed appropriate to Hunter. Occasionally, he found it unsettling. Still, it was something to listen to, so you didn't go completely nuts out in the vacuum. He couldn't see Bentley, they were too spread out. But the music told him he was still there. Life in the Space Force has always been this way. Thousands of hours of tedious boredom followed by several minutes of sheer terror. Technology had never learned to make a dent in this simple fact. Despite the cold, Hunter started to smell his own sweat in the cockpit. Maybe it was the cramped space, but it always smelled like the inside of a jungle arboretum to him.

Then it started.

No space battle ever looks like you see in the movies. When it starts, you never see the enemy. Space looks like it always looks, a giant void filled with numberless stars. The next thing you know this perpetual night sky is littered with blaster shots. All the drones opened up at once on some distant, unseen object. Bolts of bright white light flying through the night. When it starts, you never really know if you've found a computer glitch or the enemy. Until they start firing back. Now the sky is lit up with twice as much light.

To Hunter, the worst part is the realization you're just a passenger at this stage. You can't see anything, so there is little for you to do. Bentley and Hunter did their jobs, they notified the fleet. Command never trusted the computers to do this on their own. If they did, you'd be dispatching wing after wing to intercept hundreds of electronic glitches. No, you needed real humans to be targets. Living, breathing targets.

Drones started exploding, adding a brief red, yellow and orange glow to the lights in the blackness. Alarms blazed. Hunter always hated this part. It was an instant of pure hell. As a pilot you felt totally

alone. You were just waiting for the fleet to send reinforcements and praying one of those blazing flashes in the dark wouldn't be you. At least Hunter wasn't out here by himself. Hunter didn't know if he could take the total solitude of lone combat. Terror needed to be a shared experience to have meaning. Fortunately, he could tell by the Jazz music still blasting in his headphones, Bentley was still with him.

The next part was where the terror comes in. This is when you can see the alien fighters. But you don't get a long, lingering look at them. They flash by like a speeding trucker on the interstate. Only it always seems like you're standing still in the shoulder. Your eyes barely have time to focus. Then your ship is turning to follow. There's a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. They've gotten through. The enemy is heading straight for your bunk, all your supplies, your friends, everyone you know. Hunter always found himself trying to push the ship's engines, even though the computer already had them at 110%.

Hunter heard Bentley's voice over the dulcet tones of a trombone solo. "Come on you bastards," he yelled, "How long does it take you to get out here?"

It was a rhetorical question. They were on their way, but as usual with the size of space, you couldn't see them. Instinctively, Hunter knew there were not far off. The fleet never had enough patrol drones to cover all the approaches at a great distance, so we were always close aboard. But everything happened so fast. Time seemed to dilate, to slow down. And the guilt he felt at not stopping them always made Hunter feel both inadequate and impatient.

"Hey, you morons," Bentley's voice melded with the trumpets, "over here."

The only good part of this stage of the battle was the drones stopped blowing up. Still, you felt useless ... and blind. Hunter longed for a true dogfight. The ones he'd read about as a kid. Hunter and his fighter against the skill and power of a totally alien machine. This was what had been lost from the old days when these kinds of battles were fought in the atmosphere. Went the pilot had a chance to escape because outside the cockpit was a blanket of air he could breathe. As the first fighter pilots, there was no parachute. Some days it made Hunter feel like technology was going backward. But all these things were gone. Only the nagging sense of terror remained. And the feeling of uselessness ... it remained in all its glory. The nagging guilt, the self-disappointment you'd let your buddies in the fleet down. Those feelings remained in spades.

Hunter's guns were beginning to overheat. The red lights flamed on his control panel like angry evil eyes. But he kept firing, even as the red lights grew in number, silently flickering into existence. Bentley changed the tune to a repeating melody which had a hunting quality to it. Primitive drums and thunderous trumpet sounds. Only now did some bright flashes start to reappear in the darkness. They had a satisfying blue aura about their edges which could only be seen right before the flame dissipated. It relieved some of the guilt. But Hunter still never felt quite right. Not as long as alien blaster bolts lit the night. He kept holding down the firing stud, even as acrid smoke started to fill the cockpit.

Without warning, the blots of the fleet's reinforcements started silently whizzing by their heads. Hunter struggled with the controls. He wanted to continue the chase, finish the hunt. But the computer cut in, taking over control. It knew, even if Hunter didn't realize it yet, staying in the path of the fleet's firepower was a suicidal option.

“It about time, you bastards got here,” Bentley cheered.

A lone blue light blazed on Hunter’s control panel. Bentley’s computer was off. His fighter wasn’t taking evasive action, he wasn’t peeling off.

“Scorecard,” Bentley screamed, “Get me a scorecard. I’m rackin’em up. You can move other those other aces on the flight deck walls. Make room for Mrs. Cunningham’s baby boy.” Over Hunter’s shoulder, bright blue flashes multiplied like a budding flower.

“Where’s the Guinness Book of World Records observer when you need them, huh?” The Jazz music rose to a crescendo. “Stupid aliens. Learn how to fly that thing, will ya? Lean it over to the left, that’s it. Drift, drift, keep going. Just a little more, yea! Come on, come on, one more and I get a free steak at Poncho’s Happy Bottom Riding Club.” The fire increased as the aliens arrived in range of the main capital ships. Not a turret as silent. The blaster fire was now a pounding thunderstorm of white energy bolts cutting through the inky blackness of open space. The sky was filled with death. “Hey, Hunter, watch ...”

Silence cut him off in mid-joke. The music was gone. The beat was now conspicuously absent. All Hunter could hear was the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

Not long after this, the night sky returned to its standard black. The stars returned in their millions. Somehow Hunter had never noticed they were gone. Somethings you notice. Somethings you don’t. Hunter Morrison now had a better grip on what those were. His fighter drifted into the landing bay on autopilot, giving him plenty of time to muse over the difference.

To be a pilot, they train you in all sorts of things. Combat tactics, emergency repairs, and procedures, engine control, weapons operations, the list goes on and on. But the one thing they never teach you is how to handle loss. Three thousand years of combat and no one has ever gotten a targeting solution on this tiny part of the experience. No one’s ever come up with a way to handle loss. The silence. The stupid silence.