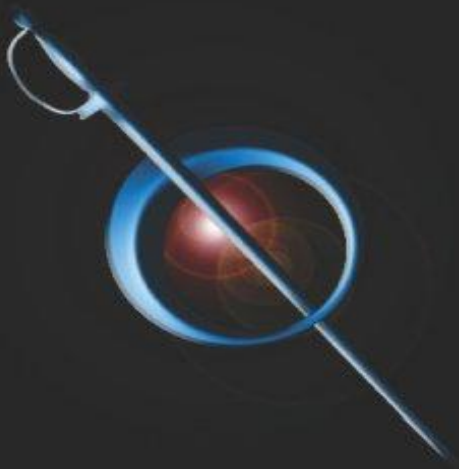


The First Light Chronicles

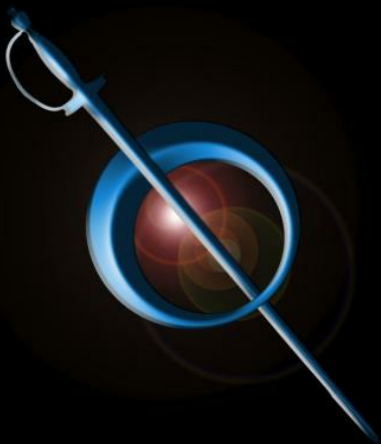
FREEGROUND



Randolph Lalonde

The First Light Chronicles

FREEGROUND



Randolph Lalonde

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com First Light
Chronicles Freeground Randolph
L a l o n d e www.spinwardfringe.com
Books by Randolph Lalonde

Fate Cycle Dead of Winter

Fate Cycle Sins of the Past

First Light Chronicles Freeground

First Light Chronicles Limbo

First Light Chronicles Starfree Port

*First Light Omnibus (Collected
Edition of the First Light Novellas)*

Spinward Fringe Resurrection

Spinward Fringe Awakening

Spinward Fringe Triton

Spinward Fringe Frontline

And Other Books In The Spinward

Fringe Series

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **The First
Light Chronicles**

FREEGROUND

Randolph Lalonde

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com First Light
Chronicles

Freeground

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely

coincidental.

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2008 by Randolph
Lalonde

ISBN 978-1-4348-4791-1

Thank you for purchasing this book. This is the first book in the First Light Chronicles, it's followed by The First Light Chronicles: Limbo and then Starfree Port. A the series Spinward Fringe continues the adventures of some characters found in these novellas. Enjoy the experience. If you would like to read more of this series or contact the author please visit our website.

www.spinwardfringe.net

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com *To all my
online friends.*

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com

Prologue

The odds weren't in our favour. They rarely were, but this time it was different. The stakes were higher. As I drifted through the silence of space in my Raze Starfighter I got a shiver. All systems were deactivated, including life support. We were hiding behind the thousands of meteors we had stirred up. There were one hundred of us this time, all set up in fighters, bombers and shuttles, each assigned to a task group. In times like these how every single one of us performed was critical. We could make only the smallest sounds, radiate only the heat that existed in our shielded vacuum suits, our only life support, and

we had to drift in the shadows of the meteor shower until the last possible instant. People were watching, machines were scanning carefully for anything in this field that could be something other than rock. It was hard to stir up so much mass and send it close to the munitions station, but not so close as to pose a threat. If one of us were scanned because we were just a little out of place, all that work would be for nothing.

I looked towards our target through the cockpit and could just barely catch a glimpse. It was massive; two wheels surrounding a tall centrepiece hanging in orbit around a gargantuan blue and purple gas giant. The station looked small even though it was over a hundred

kilometres across with fighter bays, drone launch tubes, dozens of point defence turrets and missile launchers. No one had ever gotten anywhere near it. Beyond it were small silhouettes against the sun. One of the All-Con Fleet Battle Groups had stopped in to rearm, and would be there for several days. They suspected someone would attack the station.

The command and control display on my wrist, counting down the distance between us and the station showed 43,477 kilometres and I knew that in less than four thousand we would know whether or not the station saw us as a threat. It would come quick, just a flash of light and it would all be over. Modern

super nukes were like that, no harmful residual radiation, just a massive flash and over four hundred kilometres worth of matter would be gone.

I caught myself holding my breath and shook my head. *Breathe normally*, I thought to myself, *If we get a chance to see the nuke coming, we might be able to turn and run.*

I checked my counter again. We had passed the safe range for a nuclear explosion, any closer and the base would risk shorting out it's perimeter sensors with the electromagnetic pulse and taking damage from the shock wave. That brought us to our next challenge.

First Light Chronicles
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com The perimeter sensors were finely tuned, and would scan everything that went by. Thankfully they wouldn't be able to penetrate our hulls and discover our body heat, but it would trace the outside of all the objects, creating profiles it would look up in the base's database.

We had attached all kinds of random objects to our hulls, making our ships look like floating trash or strangely shaped meteors made of compressed garbage jettisoned by some unknown interstellar vessel. If it worked, we'd be past the perimeter sensors, but if someone didn't disguise their ship well enough or turned any kind of system on we'd be finished. Once one of us was

found out, the station would send a squadron of fighters to check it out or they'd just start shooting at the meteors and we'd get ground up in a blender of erratically colliding rock and debris. I looked back to the counter on my arm display and watched the kilometres tick away. We were closing on 20,000km and fast. The gravity of the massive gas giant below was tightening its grip. An All-Con Fleet destroyer was moving towards the station, and I found myself wondering if we'd have to use it for cover later. Two years ago, when I joined up with this crew, I would have thought the strategy of using a kilometre long fully armed destroyer for cover was absolutely crazy. As I double checked

my fighter's thermal silhouette I found myself acknowledging that it was just another checkpoint on the list we call; 'they'll never see it coming'.

My command and control display beeped once quietly and I saw that we were a couple seconds away from our destination, the closest point we could reach under inertial drift. I watched and waited as it counted down to 937 kilometres. Just as it reached that magic number and started counting up again I covered my eyes and flipped a switch.

Hundreds of thermal charges planted in the meteors all around us went off with a blinding flash. They weren't hot or explosive enough to change the meteor shower's course, but it would

create an intense visible wave of light for hundreds of kilometres that would make it impossible for the station to pick out our fighters until we were close, real close. They'd need to use visual scans, which wouldn't work well for their computers since our shapes were irregular and that would leave manual targeting until they figured out what we'd done to our ship profiles. "Let's go!

Everyone knows what to do!" I yelled into my communicator.

"Yeeeehaw! Seven hundred kilometres and closing! Let's do some damage!"

I heard Oz reply.

"Cover the boarding shuttles, if we don't get our people inside this'll be for

nothing.”

“Bombers on first run! Don't launch your shells until you can read their serial numbers!” Ronin shouted into his communicator. I could see he and his thirteen bombers heading off towards the fighter launch bays and drone tubes. There was some activity out there, but not as much as I would have expected. The station computers and personnel weren't sure what was happening yet. My targeting scanner picked up the first group of fighters coming in from 1

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com the far side of the station. I turned my ship towards them while still floating past the outer

ring of the station and started firing. The loaders for the three rail guns vibrated the entire craft as they propelled hundreds of rounds towards the group of fighters.

“Marking alpha group.” I said as I selected them on my targeting computer. “They’re after the bombers.”

“It’s their funeral!” Ronin called out.

I watched the tactical screen as most of my shots went flying harmlessly through the enemy fighter formation. Then the enemy fighter group started to show some real damage, explosively decompressing and flying to pieces. I looked to where I knew Ronin’s fighter group was moving towards the station to see that they were drifting backwards at

speed while firing at the incoming fighter group. "Show off."

"All right, lets drop our shells and close the doors," Ronin ordered.

"Boarding shuttles under fire!" I heard Sunspot, the commander of shuttle two, call out.

"Could use your help here, whenever it's convenient, you know, drop by sometime," Oz said over the sound of his turret firing. He was in command of the first shuttle and shouldn't have been in the gunner position, but telling him that was a waste of time.

"On our way," I said. "All interceptors, keep those shuttles clear. Let's make a hole." I spun my ship towards their flightpath and hit the

thrusters.

“More resistance than we expected, about thirty drones and a dozen fighters,” I heard Zanger reply. His fighter group was the primary cover for the shuttles, and I could see that he had lost four out of fourteen. I caught a glimpse of the fighter bay and saw that the shells Ronin's group dropped had exploded, causing massive damage. That left one launch bay and only a few drone tubes open for business, the station was already hamstrung. I brought his fighter group up on my display to see that they had only lost two and were skimming the hull of the station's inner ring to avoid weapons fire. I had to admit, he was always the better pilot. “Be careful out

there Ronin, there's close then there's too close.”

“If what you see frightens you, then stop looking,” he replied.

“Old Chinese proverb?”

“No, crazy pilot's advice.”

My fighter finished coming around the middle ring of the station and the drones en route to intercept our shuttles came within firing range. I opened up with all three rail guns and scored disabling hits right away. My wing tore through them in no time and had several seconds to get ready before engaging the incoming enemy fighters.

The manned station defence fighters were a different story, they took three of my fighters out right away and I was

immediately under heavy fire. One shot struck the loading mechanism for my port rail gun and I had to shut it down. We scattered, marked our targets and re-engaged. I sent my fighter hurtling towards the inner ring of the station and spun using manoeuvring thrusters so I faced 2

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com three of the enemy defenders, all of which were after me. “You see this Oz?” I asked.

“I see it, firing right over your head.”

My path took me right below his shuttle and he laid down a barrage of cover fire with the rail turret mounted on the back of his ship. I opened fire as

well and took out one while Oz took care of the other two. The station was starting to see through the fading distortion of the thermal bombs I had detonated earlier and their defensive batteries started firing. "Get close! We have to stay between the station batteries or this ends now." I shouted as I watched one of my fighters take several pulse beam hits and fly apart in super heated pieces.

The boarding shuttles had reached the hull of the station and docked hard.

"Shuttle two docked and popping the cork. I beat ya here, you owe me fifty Oz!" I heard Sunspot say over the comm.

"Shuttle one docked, popping the cork. Oh and Sunspot?"

“Yeah?”

“Be quiet or I'll tell everyone,” Oz replied.

“You
wouldn't
dare.”

“Oh, I would sugar, trust me.”

I didn't understand what they were talking about, but judging from the tone it was some kind of inside joke. I shrugged and decided to ask later. My attention was called back to the moment as a beam pulse nearly caught my port side. I was almost close enough to the inner ring to be out of firing range for the larger point defence weapons, but no where near safe yet. The hull of the inner ring loomed larger and larger until I was

finally clear of the beam weapons firing arc. My wing was down nine fighters, there were only five of us left, we had lost half of beta wing, and theta wing was down to only two. “How are you doing Ronin?

Gamma wing holding together?”

“Just waiting for our shells to go off.”

I manoeuvred my fighter so I moved along the hull of the station, trying to stay as close as possible while firing at targets of opportunity. “Well? Is that second fighter bay out of commission?”

“They destroyed the shells before they hit. Heading into the bay, take the rest of the wing to the docking site, Mira, cover them.”

“What the hell are you doing Ronin?”

“I'm setting my reactor to overload and ejecting while it explodes inside the fighter bay, what do you think I'm doing?”

“Bad idea, just get out of there and we'll try to deal with whatever they launch.”

“Good idea, bad idea, what does it matter when everyone already thinks you're crazy? Say hi to my sisters for me.” I could hear the sound of his ejection and tried to track him. I was on the other side of the station and there was too much interference between us for me to get a lock.

“Can anyone see him?”

“I did for a second, but then his fighter exploded, I don't think he made it,”

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com Mira said.
“That bay is a mess though, I don't think
they'll be launching *anything* today.”

As I came around another section of
hull two wings of enemy fighters came
into view. “Good, hurry up and get over
here, we need help. How is it going
boarding crew?”

“Never saw us coming,” Oz reported.
I could hear weapons fire over the
communicator.

“Oz is down, but his team got the
explosives in place. Planting ours now.”

“It's just a flesh wound. Just get your
little behind back to the shuttle.”

I called his status up on my secondary display and saw that he and one other member of his team were the only ones left and they were both badly injured.

“Heading back to the shuttle now, we'll be out in a few seconds,” Sunspot said in a rush. I could hear her running.

One of the enemy fighters clipped my larboard side and I was sent spinning. I barely had time to figure out where I was before I skipped off the hull of the station and into open space. I struggled with the controls and tried to stabilize the ship. Just when I was starting to bring it under control I saw the fighter that was firing on me and tried to get a manual missile lock as he whipped past my view. He scored another hit on my

hull and flashed past my view screen again. As he came past a third time I hit my secondary trigger and got a lock on him. I fired three missiles as fast as I could and worked to continue stabilizing my ship. "Come on, pick a direction god dammit!" I growled through clenched teeth to the controls. I finally got my ship under control just in time to see the enemy fighter explode less than one hundred meters in front of me. "Collision warning!" my computer said.

"Smartass!" I replied as small pieces of my opponent's ship started impacting on my hull. My cockpit started to decompress through a leak in the canopy and I was thankful that I wasn't relying on the fighter's environment. My vacuum

suit could keep me breathing for days.

Cannon fire from the station streaked across my cockpit canopy. I turned my fighter away from the weapon bank and hit the thrusters. I kept my ship moving back and forth laterally and vertically while I made my way out of the range of the station's weapons, making myself harder to hit. "My fighter's full of holes, I'm on my way out."

"Detonating our charges, the implosions should start in a few seconds. Do you think you can make it to the rendezvous?" Sunspot asked. I checked the status of my engines. "I only have one ion array left, but I can make it," the energy readings behind me spiked wildly, indicating that the

explosives had gone off and the station's core had begun a cascading decompression that would cause it to implode and I smiled. "I love your handiwork Sunspot."

"Why thank you, you're not so bad yourself."

"Make your best speed to the rendezvous point so we can open a worm hole home. I think we've worn out our welcome." I heard Marauder say over the comm. 4

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com He was the pilot and navigator for boarding shuttle two.

The station was no longer firing and I

could see lights going out all around the rings. I made it to the jump point and counted what remained of our raid fleet. Four fighters, two bombers and the boarding shuttles. Seventy eight casualties out of a crew of one hundred. A flash of light appeared in front of the boarding shuttle and my computer marked the coordinates as the opening point of the wormhole home. We all made the jump, shuttle one, which held the point open, went last. The simulation ended. "Scenario complete, all win conditions met. Congratulations! Your Academy rank is increased to Brigadier General," the computer said cheerily. "Entering social mode."

Another screen came up on my

display, replacing the fighter cockpit and field of stars. It listed all the participants of the scene we had just completed. "Too bad I'm not in the Academy." I said quietly.

"None of us are, think they'll ever find out who's setting new records in their hardest simulations?" Oz asked.

"I'm sure a few of us would be re-enlisted if they ever did. I wouldn't mind the chance to get in a real cockpit again," Ronin added.

"Some of us are already enlisted, so we already have clearance for these scenarios. I'm sure my C.O. would still have some choice words for me for participating along with uncleared civilians though. With Marauder's hacks

in place it'll be a while before we have to worry about it, I think. Wish I could stay but I have a duty shift in ten minutes. See you all later. Bye Horus, I'll see you soon." Sunspot said as she dropped her connection.

"I think she likes you Horus." I heard Oz say to me in a whisper.

"Yeah, seriously, you two have been flirting for months whenever she's in a scene with you. When are you two just going to meet and get it started for real?"

Ronin asked.

"She told me she's with a ship that's on assignment somewhere in the Corporate worlds, I don't see that happening."

"Oh, come on, you've gotta get

together with her sometime, living vicariously through you has been seriously dull lately.”

“Well then, go find your own companion.” I replied to Ronin.

“Bah! With a restaurant to run while living with three sisters? I'll be single forever.”

“Seriously Horus, she's got to make it back to Freeground sometime, no harm in meeting face to face.”

“Sure there is, it changes everything. I have a really bad record with meeting people through scenarios, remember the last one Ronin?”

“Oh, the issyrian?”

“Yup, looked human on the outside, was anything but on the inside.”

“Issyrians can't be that bad, can they? They can change their appearance to pretty much anything I thought.”

5

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“They can breathe out of the back of their heads if they want to. I won't go into the unchangeable differences.”

“Well, I met Sunspot while I was at the Academy and we've been in touch since. She's as much fun in person as she is in scenes, trust me.” Oz interjected. “Oh, and she's a real human; pretty even.”

“All the more reason not to ruin a good thing I say. Well, I'd love to stick

around and get more love advice from a lonely restaurant owner and a career infantryman, but I've got a shift starting up in a few minutes. Thanks for running that scenario, I can't believe we pulled it off," I said while taking off the virtual helm while the team members said their goodbyes.

6

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com **Just Another
Day in the Dark**

There are sectors where there is absolutely nothing. Areas of space where crews simply go to sleep and let the auto pilot take over for days or weeks on end. Over the last few hundred

years these massive black expanses have become slightly more well occupied. With the formation of trade routes, the advent of cheaper faster than light travel that requires large spaces where travelling in a long straight line for light years at a time is a benefit and a few ships out here that use this unbroken vast nothing to lose themselves, distance themselves from perusers who aren't interested in searching the most boring expanses in the universe, this area of space has a bit more life, but not much.

Some visionary decided to build a state of the art repair and resupply station right in the middle of nowhere, where there's literally nothing. For three hundred years Freeground has been the

only beacon of light for travellers, refugees and those seeking out the darkest spot in our galaxy, right on the fringe downward from the old Sol system. Once it was a massive clover leaf complex with habitat, control, mechanics and hydroponic sections. By the time I was born here thirty three years ago it had grown exponentially with kilometre after kilometre of structures including factories, research facilities, ship yards, forests, malls, low, medium and high cost housing, entertainment centers and even its own military and government based on the ideals of democracy and freedom.

The walking surface area of Freeground is just over half that of

Earth, that nearly forgotten blue ball in the distant Sol system. My home looks like thousands of plates connected by circular frames all spinning, surrounded by skeletal frameworks that stretch out into the dark like long arms and fingers grasping for light that is so far away that it's just a faint glimmer.

I served during the last great war, when the All-Con Corporation spent twenty years trying to take control of the station. They sent fleets, spies, blocked trade, used misinformation to turn our allies away from us but we resisted. In the end the Freeground Fleet pushed them back all the way to their home world and destroyed their factories, once again proving that Freeground

could not be owned by any corporation or governed by any external body.

I remember those days, setting foot on solid ground for the first time in my life, looking over manufacturing facilities as they went up in smoke. All-Con Prime was already a grey, scorched ruin of a planet before we arrived, they had mined it to the core and covered the surface with thousands of manufacturing complexes. I was a technician, and wouldn't have had the chance to stand on the surface of the planet 7

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com unless one of
o u r t r o o p c a r r i e r s h a d n ' t l o s t i t s
c o m m u n i c a t i o n s a r r a y d u e t o t h e

corrosive atmosphere.

Even through the grey blue sky the free blowing wind and distant horizon was impressive. I still didn't feel that I had been missing much growing up on Freeground station. Watching the fighter and bomber squadrons fly overhead I remember wishing I had served in the squadrons instead, seen more fighting. What I didn't know then was that while I was away doing my duty at the front with the last wave Freeground had suffered a massive coordinated terrorist attack. Three habitat sections had been destroyed in the blink of an eye, my entire family was gone. Everyone lost someone in the war, no one was untouched. The people who were

responsible for the bombings had been living with us for years. As a direct result, Freeground does not favour a stranger.

W i t h s u c h a w a r y populace, Freeground has become a place where our friends can feel safe and be well cared for at a small price. Our enemies give us a wide berth and know that if they enter our territory chances are they'll never make it out again. Any ship that harbours a past or present employee of All-Con Corporation, anyone who has committed a crime on the station or for any other reason can be considered hostile is recorded in all our ship computers and the station proper. The Freeground Fleet is filled with people

who crave excitement and pursue our enemies on a fraction of a seconds notice. I wasn't one of those daring few, however. When I arrived back home twelve years ago and discovered what had happened to my family, I reported for duty with the engineering and construction crews. We rebuilt the habitats that were destroyed and when that was finished five years later I became a communications and priority assessment officer in the operations and port control center.

For seven days out of a ten day galactic standard week I discussed the needs and requests for supplies, repairs, and anything else a ship that arrived and docked may have required or desired.

They circled the station slowly, sometimes dozens of them, sometimes hundreds, military, corporate and civilian alike. All calmly waited to be directed by one voice, then connected to me so they could request anything from a routine engine inspection to a bottle of over priced Freeground wine from our vineyards. The traders offered more than they requested, and some of them were willing to do anything to sell their cargo, especially when they knew it wouldn't survive the trip to any other station and none of the other traders were interested. There were days when I wished I was back between decks, repairing some tertiary system in a neglected section of the station no one visited alone, rather

than speak to one more trader who had already tried peddling their perishable wares to everyone else.

I couldn't spend more time than I had to in my quarters either. I may have helped build the replacement habitation sections but that didn't get me my pick from the hundreds of new homes. What I had was smaller than the bathrooms in the deluxe sections, while maintaining that easy to disinfect and reassign look of prefabrication. 8

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalande

www.spinwardfringe.com Two rooms were more than what some people get, however, like in the hive levels where units are four feet tall, four feet wide and

eight feet deep, so I didn't complain. Much.

That day, like almost every other day, I made my way out of my small home and through the catacombs of hallways until I reached the lift and causeway. The habitation we built years ago was so large that its center housed a forest while commerce and entertainment huddled around its borders in a perfect circle of streets. Complete with weather patterns and holographic skies, travellers often forgot they were on a space station. There were even night and day cycles. There wasn't much of a difference between the two that day, however, as the cool drizzle covered my face as soon as I stepped out of the lift

onto the ground level. By reflex I closed my black and grey engineer's coat. There was really no need since the Freeground uniform of white and blue I wore underneath was completely sealed all the way up to my jawline. It sustained its own environment, protected from most stellar elements and even sharp objects all in a skin tight shell that was as thin and flexible as common cloth. It was a little too skin tight for my tastes to be honest, so I wore my old engineer's coat, which protected from almost everything the uniform didn't and had every old tool that survived my career as a field repair technician. Most people looked and wondered where I found one, since it looked like an old trench coat used by

ground militia on earth several hundred years ago when impact reactive armour was invented and bullets slid right off that generation of infantry's new black trench coats.

Nodding at a passerby I pulled up the collar and made my way down the sidewalk to Minh-Chu's, a small restaurant that was little more than a booth with a few stools and tables on a widened area of the walkway. Minh, Ronin was what he called himself in the simulations, waved as I approached and started heating some lo mein. He shook some black sauce on it and added veshri, a water vegetable that I had heard tastes just like shrimp, a fish from Earth I had never tasted.

“Your mood matches the weather Jonas.”

I poured myself a cup of coffee and nodded. “You'd think they would have planted vegetation that didn't need so much rain. If I had the rank to know what this habitat would be like half the time I would've found other housing.”

“Ha! Watch what you wish for! Someone from Fleet Operations was in here just the other day and she just couldn't help talking about Core Port Operational personnel being promoted. The team on your shift is doing such a good job they're looking at raising everyone's pay grade. I'd bet you a year of dinner you're on your way up.” Minh said as he handed me my bowl of

noodles and chopsticks.

“Oh, just what I wanted.”

“Don't put down rank, friend, this was my reward for retiring early from Infantry Command, a Kingdom built on noodles and rice. Well, it took a few credits from selling that fighter I stole from All-Con Prime, too, but it's still my Kingdom.”

“I'm your loyal subject as always. Best lo mein I've ever had.” I said around a mouthful.

9

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“Probably the only lo mein you've ever had, you should get back into fleet,

see some solid ground somewhere. Maybe spend some time at another restaurant. I won't mind as long as you come back with friends.”

“One year on All-Con Prime was plenty.”

“Not much of a world, especially after we set most of it on fire at the end of the war. You really should get out there, find a nice home world to make landfall on. Just make sure there's a beach and plenty of women around so I'll have something to do when I get there!”

“And leave your Kingdom?”

“Nothing is a constant but change, I've heard someone say.”

“Ah, we'll both be here until they

rebuild, and even during reconstruction you'll probably be on crowd control duty while I put the roof up. Then we'll just settle again. This is our home world, as intentionally wet and miserable it can be half the time.”

“Who let an old man sit on my friend's favourite stool? Move on old timer!

My friend will be along any minute.”

“Ha, very funny.”

“You shouldn't be settled so young, people are living to four hundred these days, and they still look fifty!”

“Look who's talking mister restaurateur.”

“Oh, I'm not settled, this place breaks even in just under three months, then I start making credits I can keep, maybe

hire someone who can do my job and then I'm free. I could even qualify for Freeground Fleet and join a Reserve Fighter Squad.”

“First Infantry, now Fleet.”

“Reserve Fleet my friend, missions on a mostly volunteer basis with mandatory patrols twice a week close to home in a Black Hand Interceptor. The only way I'll see combat is if someone attacks the station.”

“Unless they promote me to command and I send your ass out to Kamshi, I hear the Tertiary Battle Group is having a blast maintaining the territorial lines out there.”

“You wouldn't take me away from my noodles.”

“Oh, if they make the mistake of promoting me there's no telling what they'll let me do.”

“Well, then I suppose I'll have to make the best of things out in Kamshi, after they saw our squad simulation replays they don't have much of a choice.”

I couldn't believe he set me up for a promotion, I knew that Minh's days got a little long, and his kitchen staff of four wasn't exactly the most thrilling bunch, especially since three of them were his sisters, but this was beyond beating the boredom. “Which replay? Who did you send it to?”

“The Lost Wing sim. You remember, when you took command of three wings,

took us through the asteroid belt and jumped the Anterans from behind?”

“That was on the secure Academy network, no one is allowed to take on level eight training simulations without clearance especially since the opponents are 10

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com trainees and officers.”

“You're a Lieutenant Commander, you have clearance, that's how we were able to play.”

“An *inactive* Lieutenant Commander, *deactivated!* C *ivilian o frank*, and you're not even in the service anymore!”

“Ah, but someone knows Admiral

Ferrah's favourite recipe for Dim Sum. It's amazing how many people in Fleet just love my cooking. You should have heard her go on about our near zero thermal manoeuvres, if that were a real operation it would take the best scanners in the galaxy to pick us up. I'm telling you she was-”

“She's a former pilot, but of course you knew that.”

“Of course, and you're in her command chain. She was equally unhappy when she heard that you were still filling requisition orders and providing commerce traffic control.”

“Well, there goes the simple life, at this rate she'll hand me a command. All because I can give orders from a

simulated cockpit.”

“You can also make fifth on the kill leader board while doing it. Not the best, but then, we can't all have the reflexes of an android that can look three seconds in the future,” Minh said as he pretended he was back at the controls of a starfighter, firing at some unseen ship.

A thought occurred to me and I couldn't help but grin. I put down my bowl and slapped the chopsticks on the counter. “Oh, well, sounds like you're a necessary asset!”

“But my restaurant!”

“I'm sure you'll be able to hire someone to take your place with the Fleet pay you'll be drawing. If I'm getting promoted back into a career

position I may as well have someone I trust working to keep the fighter jockeys in line.” I said as I stood up and started walking towards the tube shuttle that would carry me to the Operations Deck where I'd start another uneventful shift.

“You're a mean spirited man Jonas! My customers will miss me! I'll put a picture of you up right here on the counter and it will say; *Jonas Valent: Noodle Master Kidnapper!*”

“May your life be interesting!” I called over my shoulder as I walked through the tube entryway.

11

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com **Walking To**

The Crossroads

While the war was on I was part of the engineering staff of a Destroyer named the *Loki*. It wasn't as interesting as it sounds, there were one hundred and twelve of us engineers there just to keep the systems running while we were on our way to the front. Only half remained on board when we reached All-Con Prime. That's when the excitement started.

The low grade engineering crew were set up with infantry units and sent out to blow up and burn every factory they had. Originally I was sent down to repair the shuttle that Minh-Chu's unit had dropped in on and then I was assigned to them as their engineer. Our objective on the

ground was to put a stop to the All-Con Corporation's primary production lines. Minh-Chu saved my hide more times than I could count during that year and taught me how to stay alive in a firefight, even tried to teach me how to shoot. I qualified easily in basic training but I was never a great shot, definitely not what one would consider a marksman. Minh took me on as his pet project and what do you know, after a year I was actually a very good shot, in the upper ranks as far as shooting scores were concerned after we got back home some time later.

The fighter pilot stint came later, when our units had to use stolen Raze starfighters to get off world and break

through what remained of the All-Con fleet to get home. We never saw combat but there was something about being at the controls of a one point five million credit Raze Interceptor. That made it hard to give up the cockpit when we got home.

Don't get me wrong, there's no glamour in spending three days in a cockpit, speeding away from the stars into the darkness, but we were infantry, engineering and other support crew set on our own with simple orders; get your butt back home using stolen fighters and supplies. It was an exciting challenge if you weren't so terrified that you couldn't enjoy it.

Most of us only had the most basic

training as pilots, Min-Chu and I were two out of a handful who had taken the time to be fully certified. All together five of us had piloted craft outside of a simulator and we had to lead everyone else, over a hundred ninety untried factory fresh ships flown by green pilots all the way back home. When one hundred eighty seven of us arrived in mostly good condition there was a welcome party the likes of which we had never seen.

After getting back I transferred to the reserves and signed up for the volunteer patrols. Since I was already enlisted they were nice enough to let me keep the fighter but it didn't take me long to realize that the reserves were filled with

rich 12

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com kids who
bought their own fighter or cadets
looking to go career military but weren't
finished their turn at the Academy or
weren't old enough to be in the field.
There weren't many so called veterans
like myself out there, Minh had sold his
fighter to start up his restaurant and
didn't have time to volunteer. I
eventually took a non-advancement
position in the Freeground Fleet, my
rank of Lieutenant Commander
guaranteed me a reasonable pay grade
even though I was deactivated, and I
chose communications. There weren't

many positions available, so I thought it would be a good post. I was wrong. Since fully autonomous artificial intelligence has been banned from running networked systems it's left to us to take requests from ships docking and that quickly branches into complaints, life stories, appeals for leniency on any law you can name, and anything else you can imagine, some of which would appal the entire population of the station. It's boring, irritating, true, but at least they weren't going to assign me to a ship's engineering crew headed for God knows where. Being an engineer was my father's dream, he was a deep thinker, always had a simple solution that had everyone in the room saying; "why didn't

I think of that?"

When I was very young I headed straight to the academy with the intention of getting as far away from Freeground as possible. I got just enough training to qualify for the engineering staff of a ship and found out that I was dead wrong about that choice too. I excelled at the academic challenges but I didn't enjoy the work once I was in the service.

Come to think of it, serving on a ship *was* more interesting but no more enjoyable than what I did in Port Control. My spare time is where I enjoyed myself while I was a communications officer. Being part of or commanding fleets of small ships, the bridge of a larger one, or wings of

fighters. I was still not the greatest shot from the cockpit, but the strategy and effort of coordinating a task force in simulations, even during simulated emergency repair and the like is something I could have just done forever.

That's why, as days passed and I quietly went about my business directing incoming trade traffic and arranging supplies and repairs I started to feel disappointed that Minh-Chu's efforts to have me tossed back into a career military position seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

My heart jumped into my throat when the staff Sargent, a tall fellow with a narrow face and greying hair, tapped me

on the shoulder. "You're relieved Lieutenant Commander. Admiral Rice wants you in her office in twenty two minutes."

I nodded, collected my coffee mug and stood up. My Sargent cracked a smile and shook my hand. "Don't take this the wrong way sir, but I hope the next time I see you back in this room you're the one giving me orders."

"Don't call me sir yet Carl, my rank is still deactivated as far as I know."

"Not as of five minutes ago sir, you're active now, and that's all I know. The 13

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com Admiral will
tell you more I'm sure."

I smiled back at him, though I don't know how convincing I was. "Just enough time to refill my mug before meeting her."

I put my coat on and made for the cafeteria, where I tossed my mug into the recycler instead of getting more coffee. The last thing I needed was more caffeine. I stepped into the transport tube and tapped the activation point on my wrist to turn on the screen built into the arm of my uniform. Alice, my personal digital assistant came on. "Hello Jonas, I hear you have an appointment with Admiral Rice." She cheerily chirped. I could practically see the curiosity of the other five or so passengers in the tube car pique. The doors closed and the

express car began to speed around the station to drop off everyone who had already stated their destination.

“Why am I the last to know?”

“Only the Admiral, her assistant and your former Sargent know about it, actually.”

“So I'm fired, great.”

“In a manner of speaking, but I'm sure that if you present yourself as an incompetent baboon the Admiral will be happy to put you back where she found you. I'd advise against it.”

“I'm going to have to look into where I went wrong with your sense of humour sometime Alice.”

“You would regret the results, simplifying my programming would

make me a very dull girl.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Where am I supposed to meet her?”

“In the Officer's Forward Observation Room.”

“Forward that to the tube system.”

“Done, we'll be on our way after we drop everyone else off, you're the only one in this car with clearance to visit that section.”

“I'm sure everyone appreciates you mentioning that Alice,” I whispered in response.

“When the Admiral makes your promotion official will I have to start calling you sir?”

I should have expected that kind of behaviour from Alice, I had kept the

same personal assistant program since I was a teenager and she had grown to love embarrassing me just a little whenever she got the chance. I suppose it's the price I paid for having the most sophisticated AI allowed as a personal assistant program. I saved up for two years so I could afford her software package. "No, but would you mind looking up what my current rank is and whispering it to me?" I asked quietly. A moment later I heard Alice's response in my left ear. "That information is currently restricted, I can't find my way to it presently. It only tells me that your former rank was reactivated and has been changed since. I can keep digging."

"Okay, you can stop trying."

“Are you sure? There are a couple things I could try for you, they might not be entirely legal but-”

14

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“I'm sure, let's not get into trouble.”

“All right, good luck, *sir*.”

Sometimes I think witnessing all my experiences and learning from every decision I had made since I bought her when I turned seventeen had made Alice a little smarter than the programmers intended, and other times I think it just made her a lot more eccentric, I was never quite sure.

By the time the tube car arrived at my

destination, I was only two minutes early. Admiral Rice's assistant, a short, dark haired man who sat manipulating a holographic representation of crew schedules beside the door leading into the Officer's Observation Lounge looked up at me for half a second before going back to his work. "For future reference the Admiral prefers all her officers to be fifteen minutes early. She's just inside, don't keep her waiting."

"Thank you," I replied stiffly before walking towards the doors. There was a two second delay while the computer scanned me and I heard the locking mechanisms decouple. The security systems were old, but near indestructible and reliable.

I didn't know what to expect as I stepped inside and I definitely wasn't prepared for what I saw. The room was arranged like a clover leaf, with a main platform featuring seating and tables near the entrance. Three sets of stairs lead down into the separate multi-level sections. There were command and control consoles in each area, holographic representations of ship deployments and advanced record keeping interfaces surrounding some Officers, while others wore visors that provided advanced visual interfaces privately. Catwalks above and around the command centers provided space for many more operational and intelligence officers. White noise generators kept the

specific images and sounds on the command sections hidden but it was obvious to me what I was seeing was a large part of Fleet Command. My best guess was that there were at least twenty high ranking officers in each of the three sections and room for a lot more.

The section I stood in, nearest to the entrance, was a complete contrast to the command sections. The lights were dim, more like a classy dining club, and a few Captains, Majors, Generals and Admirals sat quietly and sparsely at the thirty or more tables. A woman in her middle years with short blond hair and sharp features smiled at me and stood. "Mister Valent I presume?" She asked with a British accent.

“Yes Ma'am.” I said with a salute, noticing the nine platinum slashes on the neck of her uniform, marking her as an Admiral.

“I'm Admiral Rice,” she said while shaking my hand firmly. “Impressive, isn't it?”

“Just a bit, when I was told to meet you in the Officer's Observation Deck I expected something else.”

“That's the point as I'm sure you realize. We value our privacy and misdirection is an important tool for protecting the senior staff.”

“This is almost as large as the official Fleet Command Deck, I didn't know 15

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com we were that active out there in the galaxy,” I said quietly.

“Well, let's get started. Follow me please,” she led me across the section closest to the entrance down the right hand steps then into a side office. The door closed and the din of sound, blurry and clear alike, was gone. One wall of the office was transparent and looked over the military ship refitting and repair dry dock. Few civilians had ever seen the inside of it, a massive open space that was set stationary and without a gravitational generator so there was no measurable force exerted on the ships inside. It was over twenty kilometres at the far, narrow end, and to hazard a

guess it had to be at least fifty kilometres wide below where I stood, which was roughly in the center. I could see dozens of ships in for repair. A great number of which were showing extreme damage and one, a massive three kilometre long Abolisher Class Carrier, was missing most of its middle. Ragged beams and a scrap of hull was all that held it together. The edges of the damage looked melted. The Admiral had obviously followed my gaze to it. “The *Lockheed*, sister ship to my old command when I last Captained a ship. She was hit by a high rad dirty nuke in the field. From what the logs say the enemy left her adrift, and the few members of the crew managed to get her drives online before dying of radiation

poisoning. By the time it got here it was a ghost ship. I knew her captain, he was a friend of mine for over twenty years.”

“I'm sorry Admiral, I know what it's like to lose someone.”

“Your family, I know. We're looking to prevent that kind of loss from ever happening again, even though the likelihood of it increases by the day. We need to change our manner of thinking and fast. The *Lockheed* is a morality tale. Her Captain directed his battle group around to the dark side of the fourth moon orbiting the planet Rindega in a Colthis Corporation system and was ambushed by an AI fleet. They had dug into the moon and were protecting something, we're not sure what exactly.

When the *Lockheed's* battle group came into range they sent out several dozen drone fighters, each armed with one dirty nuke.

Captain McKay's battle group nearly destroyed all of them before they were within range but a few got through. The fact that Corporations like Colthis Intergalactic are using illegal AI fleets, breaking nuclear conventions that have stood for nearly four hundred years and throwing away trillions of credits on defences like this tells us two things. Firstly, they are doing something, or have something that is worth protecting at any cost and secondly, we have to look beyond conventional thinking. All of Captain McKay's precautions and

countermeasures were by the book, but even with an experienced crew it didn't mean a thing. He was overpowered by a more reckless, forward thinking enemy with no moral restraint. We're big enough to draw a lot of attention but not powerful enough to make claims on areas with the resources we need to grow so we have to think outside the normal realm of conventional methods."

Admiral Rice looked from the *Lockheed* to me. I felt like I was being inspected from the inside out as her eyes locked with mine. "Being in command has taught me a few things, one of them is that solutions come in surprising ways, in 16

First Light Chronicles Freeground

Randolph

Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com

strange

packages,” she said quietly. “Your friend, mister Minh-Chu, did us all a favour when he showed my colleague your replays. We've been trying to find out who has been raking trainees over the coals the last few months. You and your friends, some of whom are actually ranking members of the Fleet, don't just out shoot our trainees, you have been practically embarrassing them. At first we thought one of the basic opposing team AI's had gone rogue, learning too much and performing past its normal abilities but then we managed to get into the simulated communications chatter and heard the disguised voices of you

and your team. Not simulated chatter at all, and heavily encrypted. Ever since then we've been watching and trying to find out exactly who you and your friends are but the trail never led back to the right place. Your programmer friend, Jason Everin, has done such a good job at hiding your transmission trails that at one point we were led to a door control module in a waste reclamation plant as the source.”

My heart was sinking, but I kept a stiff upper lip and tried not to show it.

“I've never met him ma'am.”

“I'm not surprised, but you will.”

“I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused and take full responsibility

for the actions of all my team mates. They followed me in and we initially used my access codes to gain entry into the training simulations.”

“We realize that now, and it's too late. We've already singled out who we can and are acting accordingly. You, along with three others are being dealt with presently. Just so you know, we were on the verge of finding out exactly who you all were. The last simulation you ran was one of the most difficult we have to offer, as you well know it is among a chosen few that are reserved for optional study among trainees. When we realized that you and your team had started it, our cadets were removed and replaced with a group of seasoned

commanders and pilots we had in place to test you. They were beaten. That simulation was created as a no-win scenario, only two groups of seasoned officers have ever completed it with a measure of success, one of them was the team that programmed it.

Ever since then we've had all the resources we could spare trying to track you and your friends down. You managed to embarrass a number of the senior staff and they think you've been brought in so I can administer your punishment personally.”

I wanted to say something, but didn't know what, so I kept my mouth shut and clenched my teeth, suppressing the hope that I wouldn't spend the rest of my

natural life on an asteroid, mining with prison crews.

She shook her head and continued; “Computer, display full career path of Jonas S Valent.” A holographic tree of everything I had done appeared over her desk, starting at age seventeen. She pointed at the first one. “You purchased a top of the line personal organizer program, called it Alice and started modifying it. By the time you joined the service at the age of twenty Alice had grown into the most sophisticated level of AI we allowed by law, her limiters have been in place ever 17

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com since. There

have been three attempts at copying her, which failed since her AI is complex enough to warrant severe usage limitations, and she was moved twice. You joined the Fleet, spent two years training as an engineer, four as a cadet, received basic engineering, infantry and pilot certifications. You then went on to complete a year of officers training and entered the service proper as an Ensign. During the voyage to All-Con Prime you were promoted by your senior officers more than once because they saw great underutilized potential and that you were already completely fulfilling the duties of your rank.

Your commanding officer noted that you had no difficulty meeting and

sometimes exceeding expectations as an Ensign, but as a Second Lieutenant Commander you only did as much as was required and no more as an engineer, but where it came to the staff under you there was no limit to the time and effort you would expend on them. People under your command flourished, the few that didn't meet your standards were routinely written up. The discipline and professionalism with which you conducted yourself while in that position earned you the respect of the senior staff. Final reports entered by those those under you generally noted that you were fair, personable and a few even claimed it was a pleasure to have you in charge. Nearly two years later

you arrived back here with a stolen fighter group that you helped command safely back home and were promoted to Lieutenant Commander. You requested a non-career position shortly thereafter, joined the reserves, served for a while as pilot on patrol and then had your rank fully deactivated when you left.”

Admiral Rice sighed and walked to the window, where she looked outside with her hands folded behind her back. “Years later you're back on our sensors but as a Command maverick on our simulator network. From what I understand you joined with a group of hobby pilots and infantry who you then led to the top of the leader board using the call sign *Horus*, the ancient Egyptian

God of the Pharaohs. Then you got bored and used your limited clearance to gain access to actual training scenarios where you've gotten everyone into a great deal of trouble by disrupting our curriculum, exposing civilians to high level military training materials, and making a mockery of our standards and war game grading. Do you know what the Officers just outside that door are calling you?"

"No, I do not, Admiral," I replied stiffly, bracing myself for the inevitable conclusion to her lecture.

"They're calling you an Asset. Anyone who hasn't seen your full record thinks that you've lacked the opportunities to make your skills known and find your place," she turned her head and looked

at me out of the corner of her eye. “You and I know better, don't we?”

Officer training and common sense made it clear that any response I offered would only make things worse. I kept my mouth shut and eyes staring forward. The ruined husk of the Lockheed was being towed directly into my line of sight. Her voice was quiet and her words were annunciated sharply as she went on'

“You're bored but lack the direction and ambition to step forward and try to make a 18

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com place for
yourself. You've grown complacent and
lazy. Sure you're exceptional at directing

traders, resupplying incoming ships and arranging for repairs but Alice, that AI you keep strapped to your arm, could do the job just as well while working on eight other tasks. You're wasted, Mister Jonas, how does that make you feel?"

My face was red, my palms were wet, and my nervousness had gone. That little voice in the back of my head, always telling me to stay out of the fight, that it was a good idea to step away from the military and that I had found a peaceful, leisurely life that was worth keeping was gone. I knew everything she was saying was right, that I had convinced myself otherwise over time, making little compromises, small, short sighted retreats away from what I wanted and

the work involved with getting it and when the opportunity to do it in a game, to feel the warmth of camaraderie and rush of command I dove right in. She was right, and I realized that the anger that filled me had nothing to do with her. My admission came out quietly; “I am wasted.”

She walked quietly, calmly to her desk, I couldn't believe how calm and clear she was as the anger within me clouded my judgement and rendered me speechless. The Admiral picked up a small data chip and turned it on. I recognized the holographic icons that sprang up above it immediately. “Well, there is something we sometimes do for people like you. We challenge them,

only you've gone too far for us to make it a simple matter of reactivating your rank and putting you back into the service. You're a passable engineer, but from what we've seen that's not your true calling. Few people on this station know it, but we're fighting to maintain what little territory we have and the opposition has become more fierce than ever. We can not afford to have trained, qualified personnel sitting around directing traffic. Having said that, I'm not going to hand equipment and responsibility over to a man who hasn't been properly tested let alone a crew who, for the most part, share the same problem.

I'm giving you and everyone who is

involved in this fiasco a choice,” she turned the data chip off and tossed it at me. I caught it by reflex, but barely. “You can pay fines and be permanently barred from any ranking Fleet position or participate in one more high stake simulation. For the purpose of this simulation I’m promoting you to the rank of Trainee Captain and everyone else is being assigned a trainee rank befitting their position in your crew. Anyone who accepts this challenge will have six days to prepare for the simulation which will be conducted on an actual ship. The scenario will be at my discretion and be chosen five minutes before it begins from a list of historic scenarios in which the casualty rate was seventy percent or

higher. To ensure that everyone has the proper perspective, death in the simulation will have real consequences. Anyone whose avatar dies will be charged with violating military digital security which carries a prison sentence of five months to five years as determined by the sensitivity of the accessed materials. If our officials determine that damage was done to our systems, morale or procedures, more fines and prison time could be brought down on people who lose their simulated lives.”

I don't remember what went on in my head exactly, but I wasn't willing to 19

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com back down; “I can only speak for myself, Admiral, but I accept your challenge.”

Admiral Rice smiled at me and nodded; “Good, a number of your team mates made it clear that they would not participate unless you were put in command. We've had a chance to meet with everyone, and though most are choosing to become permanent civilians twenty one of you are going to be participating in this exercise. All but you and three others have already reported aboard ship and I've had your things sent to your quarters there,” the Admiral walked to the window and pointed.

“You'll be using a Combat Carrier that's been converted into a Striker class

Destroyer that's undergoing a refit. Her name is the *Sunspire*, but since we're replacing the main power plants and most of the other systems she'll be renamed when she's fit."

I stepped up beside the Admiral and looked down. The entire lower half of the hull was opened to accommodate the replacement of the ship's old power systems and the upgrading of other systems. The ship once had a reflective surface to minimize beam weapon damage but it had been tarnished by weapons fire and it looked mismatched where hull plating had been replaced with slightly different materials. I could see why they would refit the ship instead of decommissioning it, however.

Even from where I was standing I could see the hull was made of ergranian steel, a rare regenerative, incredibly dense metal that was difficult to mine and next to impossible to find. Looking at the exposed portions I could also see that the hull was well over a meter thick, more in some places. Tethered just behind the ship were two dozen starfighter training pods ready to be loaded into some part of the ship, judging from the work ongoing, I couldn't begin to guess where they'd be putting them.

“The old reactors they're pulling out of her are huge, they've got to be almost a hundred fifty years old. What are they going to do with all the space left over

after the new ones are installed? They'll be an eighth the size and generate the same amount of energy," I found myself asking.

"There won't be any space left over, they're actually using all the space for power generation with modern power plants and installing fuel manufacturing systems that can use anything from rock to highly compressed metals. We're putting those huge ram scoops to good use with the new design. They'll also be installing new automation systems so she'll require one tenth the crew or less to maintain."

"That'll give her the power generation capabilities of a juggernaut and the ability to turn anything into energy."

“Exactly.”

“So, I suppose I'll be commanding the ship in its original configuration during the simulation?”

“No, part of the test is to find out how you and your team mates deal with new technology. The *Sunspire* may look like a ship ready for retirement on the outside, but we're updating her with all our best technology on the inside and reshaping whole sections of the hull. The regenerative qualities of the metal allow us to do a great deal with this ship that we couldn't with any modern vessel. One of the 20

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com unique things

about the challenge I'm setting you and your friends on is that no one really knows all the details of this ship from stem to stern except for the lead engineers who redesigned her.

The specifications, real life profiles and everything other than the scenario are on the data chip I gave you. As of this moment you're in full command, crew assignments, drills, and even who you might want to excuse are completely up to you. I'll also allow you to request a number of qualified, low ranking officers to fill in for missing crew members. You'll be restricted to three decks, one of which is being temporarily fitted as a training area with simulation pods but that should be more than enough

room. Everyone has been instructed to stay clear of anything that involves the ship's refit. Do you have any other questions before you ship out, Trainee Captain?"

"What happens to anyone I excuse?"

"Civilians will be banned from serving in the Freeground Fleet and career military will be demoted or imprisoned depending on what the courts decide on the charge of conspiring to violate security protocols. If they're not good enough for your crew, then they're certainly not good enough for Fleet. Any other questions?"

"No, thank you Admiral."

"Good, then Godspeed, I'll see you after the simulation. Security will see

you out and to the *Sunspire*.”

I started walking out of the room when the Admiral stopped me. “One more thing Jonas, one of your team mates, Sunspot was her handle, is actually the Commanding Engineer aboard the *Sunspire*. She was overseeing the refit until today and her rank is still effective. The charges of conspiracy were waived in her case since we couldn't prove that she knew some of her team mates were illegally participating in simulations. Despite this, she's convinced me that she should be treated like anyone else in the team and will face charges if she is killed in the scenario. I like this officer, she's a bright, dedicated engineer and a better commander than most with a long

history in the military despite her age. If she goes down with your team, I'll hold you personally responsible. Dismissed.”

21

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **Conspirators**

The meeting with Admiral Rice had changed my world. That morning I was in a different universe and as I was escorted to the long boarding tunnel to the *Sunspire* the enormity of the situation was still sinking in. Twenty one lives were in my hands, each one of them taking their chances with me and their fellows instead of taking the easy way out; civilian life, which was a slap on the wrist in comparison to the

consequences of failure.

The busy boarding tunnel was filled with personnel engaged in the refit moving to and from the ship. When I arrived at the end I was met by the security detail in charge of the *Sunspire* proper. "Welcome Captain Valent, your quarters are ready. Follow me please," the Officer stated pleasantly.

"Decks four to seven are at the disposal of you and your crew. You'll be using a temporary bridge on deck five for the simulation and most of your crew are settling in to their quarters or will be arriving soon." The security officer was a thickly muscled fellow who stood at least six foot four. He seemed very happy to see me which was a bit

surprising and unnerving at the same time. The halls were two meters across and unpainted, showing the dark blue sheen of ergranian steel. It struck me then that it was the perfect bare material for the interior since it would absorb massive amounts of energy instead of conducting it freely. The cables, wiring and pipes that ran along the sides of the corridors were perfectly arranged, neatly clipped against the bulk heads so they were out of the way. There were pressure doors every fifteen meters that decoupled, moved outward and separated at our approach. “Are these doors always closed when the ship is in operation?” I asked.

“Only during yellow or red alert

status. Normally they're only closed at major junctions. During the refit we're keeping everything as bottled up as we can just in case we blow a seal somewhere while the crews are replacing or altering sections. From what I've seen that's unlikely, but not everyone is used to organic metal so you never know.”

We had to traverse the ship vertically by using an empty lift shaft since the elevator cars were being replaced. Aside from a safety tether, we were floating free in a shaft that ran the full height of the hull, eight decks above me and thirteen below. The size of the vessel couldn't have been more apparent as we drifted up several decks to the

third. "This is huge, how big is her normal compliment?"

"As far as I know it depends on how she's tasked. During a drop mission she can carry eighteen hundred infantry, sixty drop ships, twenty fighters and requires a 22

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com main crew of over a thousand. For deep space missions, the configuration we're being set for, I hear you can run the ship with automation and fifty crew. The normal compliment without automation is over two fifty, so I hear. What it was like when she was a Combat Carrier, I couldn't tell ya. She's been off that duty

for a century or so.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about this ship, have you served on her before?”

“No sir, I just like to read.”

Whereas the busy decks below were filled with people, equipment, had open compartments everywhere and noise all around, the third deck, obviously the officer quarters and mess hall, were deathly silent. Our footsteps echoed as we came out of the shaft slowly and let the artificial gravity – which was fairly light and not fully operational either – draw our feet down onto the floor.

The narrower halls were surfaced with padded panels and the lighting was subdued. It already looked better than my apartment, which may not be saying

much by normal standards, but it was enough to make me grin. Especially since I was fairly certain that if we did well enough in the simulation I'd most likely be serving aboard the *Sunspire*.

I didn't even realize that we had arrived at my quarters as we stood in front of the pressure doors that were clearly labelled *Captain* with space for a name to be posted below. I cheerily stood there, looking around with the doors closed. The guard smiled and announced; "Here we are sir."

I nodded as though I was perfectly aware of the fact that we were standing quietly in front of my quarters and stepped forward to trigger the doors. As they opened I looked inside to find a

main room that had a table with four chairs on one side with an archway leading to another room, a sofa, thickly cushioned armchair and another archway leading to yet another room on that side. “You could fit four of my apartment in just what I’ve seen so far and have room for a walk in closet.”

“The privilege of command, sir,” the guard said with a big toothed grin. It was then that I recognized his voice from the simulations. “Oz?” I asked with a smile.

“About time! I was starting to wonder if they got the right man!” he said, giving me a handshake that nearly pulled my arm out of it’s socket. “I’m actually Warrant Officer Terry Ozark McPatrick. Most of my friends call me Oz.”

“Just like in the scenarios, that's something I can get used to.” I stepped into my quarters and he followed, “so you're actually a security officer? Not infantry?”

“Well, I started in infantry and got poached into Fleet by my uncle before he retired. I told him I made a mistake joining infantry on a space station and he agreed. I've served for eight years in different security roles, just got my flight and gunner certifications last year and I'm almost finished with my bridge command training, can't get promoted until I finish that. Unless you have other plans for me I'll be on security detail while we're aboard.”

“You're welcome to it, have you met

anyone else yet?" I asked as I sat at the
23

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com table.

"Just Ayan, turns out she's changed a bit since the Academy. When I first met her she was in advanced engineer training when I was going through the first year, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Now she's used to commanding an engineering crew of about a hundred fifty and well, let's just say she grew out of her awkward stage."

"Well, that's not intimidating *at all*."

Oz laughed and put a big hand on my shoulder. "She's just as nice as I remember, got a smile that can light up

the main cargo hold. I don't know why, but she's glad to be here, all excited about this challenge trouble we're all getting ourselves into. Don't get me wrong, I'm looking forward to it too, but she already has a career that would make any cadet envious, she made Commander before thirty and could have Captain by thirty five. She doesn't need something like this making her life all complicated. Doesn't matter though, she's trying to flip her rank over into training status like us, but Fleet won't let her just yet.”

“I know, she's taking a huge risk by signing on for this challenge. I really don't know what's behind it either.”

“Her mother is less than pleased, I'm

sure you've heard.”

“I had no idea, her family lives on the station?”

Oz's jaw dropped and he sat down on the sofa. “You really don't know, do you?”

“Know what?”

He shook his head and ran a big hand down his face. “Okay, there's something you have to know about our Chief Engineer. Her full name is Ayan Rice. Her mother is-”

“Fleet Forward Admiral Rice,” I felt as though all the air just left the room. Suddenly I couldn't breathe, the room was spinning, I reached out to put my hand down on the table and missed. I was falling and then everything went

black. When I opened my eyes I was looking up at the faces of Oz and Minh-Chu.

“He just started hyperventilating and passed out. I think he's coming around though,” Oz said as he propped my head up in one of his hands.

“Some fearless leader,” Minh added with a smirk.

“I heard that,” I tried to blink the white spots out of my eyes. Oz helped me up and we all sat at the table. “How long was I out?”

“Just a few seconds, long enough to scare the hell out of me. Don't do that on the bridge,” Oz replied.

“I came in and this big guy was standing over you, I was just about to run

for the nearest exit.”

“Well, I'm glad you're not going to be involved with security,” I told Minh to Oz's amusement. “So, I have a Fleet Admiral's daughter on board. That's going to be a little awkward.”

“Only if you give her any special treatment. I think she might be 24

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com participating in this thing because she wants to prove that she gets the same treatment as everyone else.” Minh said in more of a serious tone than I'd heard from him in a while. “That, and rumour has it she was assigned to the *Sunspire's* refit as some kind of rehabilitation. No one knows

what exactly from."

"Well, she can demand as much respect as she wants as long as she keeps our simulated ship together. From what the Admiral told me we're in for a rough ride."

"You mean the Admiral briefed you herself?" Oz asked, agape.

"She did, thanks for that, by the way," I half bowed to Minh from my seat.

"Didn't turn out the way you expected it, did it?"

He looked almost panicked, and I realized that until that moment only he and I knew he was the one who informed command of my identity and got this ball rolling. "I knew you were good, but not good enough for this kind of effort. I

thought they'd promote you and put you to work somewhere you'd feel useful again.”

“You're the one who popped the lid off our little covert fun?” Oz asked, wide eyed. “Did you tell command about me too?”

“No! Just Jonas and myself, I swear! I had no idea they were already tracking us down or that we were doing so much better against the cadets in training than the AI or training staff. I thought we were just bumping in and messing around, embarrassing a few trainees, especially since no one cancelled the exercises once they started. How was I supposed to know that they were watching and throwing their advanced

trainees against us once they realized the AI we were replacing was deactivated.”

“Well, since we're getting our asses kicked out there, Fleet is interested in new solutions,” Oz said, pointing to the large view port. “That's why the *Sunspire* is here, it's not just a refit, she was so badly damaged that the primary generators weren't salvageable and they had to force the hull to regenerate by energizing it as soon as it got here. Ayan couldn't talk about what happened, but I could tell it was worse than bad and it wouldn't be long before everyone on Freeground would know about it.”

“The Admiral told me there was a lot more going on out there than Fleet was telling the public about. I think, in the

bigger scheme of things, who told who what is pretty insignificant. When it's all said and done I'd rather be in a position to do something about the problems facing Freeground than be directing trade traffic and resupplying ships. I was born here, the only people I've known are all here.”

“I was born here too and have three sisters who wouldn't leave if their lives depended on it. They might drive me crazy, but I know I always have a bunk waiting,” Oz said, nodding.

“Someone's got to protect my restaurant, it may as well be me,” Minh added with a shrug. “My sisters can take care of things while I'm gone, and it's hard for them to scream at me while I'm

light years away in a fighter cockpit, if that's where I end up.”

“Well, let's get to work then. I have a lot of catching up to do, I have to learn

25

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com about the ship
systems, find out who I have and who I
need to bring aboard, set out the crew
assignments, then we have to start drills,
and then there's everything I'm not
thinking of.” I turned to Minh then; “Can
you get everyone set up with quarters
tonight? Make sure they're settled in and
tell them there will be a meeting at ten
tomorrow morning in the Mess Hall?”

“Sure, but the main mess hall is open

to space right now. Won't be very comfortable.”

“Do we have another space available?”

“We have the common room at the rear of this deck, that should be big enough.”

“Good, that's where we'll meet tomorrow,” I turned to Oz and smiled. “Do you think you could talk to Ayan and review the roster with her? She'll need an engineering staff, a repair team, you'll need pilots, I'll need a bridge crew and you'll need security personnel.”

“All right, and what will you be doing?”

“Everything else. I'm hoping to have

all the essentials ironed out tomorrow afternoon so we can have our first drill before the day's out.”

“Well then, we should get going, I have crew members to track down.”

Minh said, standing up and heading for the door.

“I have an Engineer to find. From her reputation I'll probably find her half way inside one of the main systems.” Oz shrugged with an amused smile.

“One more thing, we shouldn't tell anyone that Minh here was the one who helped Fleet Command put two and two together. I know I'm past it, but we don't need the extra trouble.”

After they left I walked to the view port. It stretched the length of the main

room in my quarters and was a meter and a half tall. I looked out at the work crews, all so efficient, getting the *Sunspire* ready for God knew what. Was I going to be her next Captain? First Officer? Or would I be a footnote in the Fleets history as the man who could handle a virtual command but cracked when there were real consequences. I shook my head and called out to the ship's computer system.

“*Sunspire* control, this is Trainee Captain Jonas Scott Valent, am I clear to enter operational data?”

“You are clear Captain Valent. Please upload critical mission data,” a strong male voice replied.

I held the data chip I was given by the

Admiral in front of me. “Scan and record all operational data from this storage unit.”

“Scan complete, do you have further orders Captain?” The computer asked after a moment.

“Forward roster to Terry McPatrick, Minh-Chu Buu and Ayan Rice. Leave general instructions that I am not to be disturbed until five am tomorrow morning, set ship wide wake alarms for the same time.”

“Acknowledged and completed as ordered.”

26

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“Thank you computer, now could you give my personal assistant AI, Alice, access to your database, display controls and communications system?”

“Processing.” The computer replied, and as I expected, Alice giggled through my ear piece. “It tickles!” she said as the ship computer came on once again.

“Complete, command and control circuitry remains isolated from Alice AI.”

“I never have any fun,” Alice pouted.

“Thanks again computer, that will be all.” I said, dismissing the voice interface. A holographic representation of Alice's head and shoulders appeared suddenly on the holographic display in front of the sofa, and I jumped back so

fast that I nearly knocked the table over. The representation of her was a black haired, blue eyed woman about twenty and her head was two meters tall. "Don't do that! My day's had enough surprises without you popping out of the floor as a huge floating head."

"So I've noticed," she said with a grin. "I suppose we should get to work now."

"You know me too well. Let's take a look at those systems."

27

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com **Even the
Sunspire Casts a Shadow**

With Alice's help I pored through

most of the details I needed to assume command. I knew there was no chance I could retain all of it. I didn't think anyone could after having such little time to commit it all to memory but Alice learned how to prioritize the information. I was sure she'd be whispering in my ear in moments of hesitation while I tried to remember a name or other detail. I wasn't the first captain aboard the *Sunspire* to have a personal AI either. Captain Grace Cameron, the last person to command the *Sunspire*, carried an AI much like mine but that's where the similarities ended. She was a career Officer, worked her way up through the ranks the hard way through nearly thirty years of service and

commanded the Sunspire for six years before being killed with most of her crew. Before I knew it I was reading the report detailing how six hundred and five crew members and the captain were killed and I fell back in my chair. The *Sunspire* was in the Ukonis system, some three weeks hyperspace travel away from the station with the fifth battle group. They were on the run from Triad Consortium ships and after several days of trying to win free from gravity traps and scrambling posts that kept them from entering hyperspace or generating a wormhole entry point back to the station, they found themselves separated from the battle group and trapped. To Captain Cameron's credit, she tried everything

before making a last ditch effort to break through by openly attacking the smallest group blocking their path, two destroyers and a gravity generator. I was absolutely astounded as I watched the tactical replay.

Looking at the *Sunspire* I would have never guessed it could be so quick and agile in space. It managed to use one destroyer as cover and survive its barrage of beam weapon fire while hammering at a section of the ship that must have seemed non-essential at first to the enemy crew. After several minutes of close fighting, taking a lot of damage and sacrificing most of her fighters, the *Sunspire* broke through the closest destroyer's heavy shielding and

destroyed her main stabilizers, overloading the port side engines. Without full control, the destroyer couldn't stop itself from colliding with the gravity generator ship it protected. It was daring, required sacrifices I didn't know I could have made in her place, and the *Sunspire* was just about to make her escape when the remaining destroyer launched several dozen missiles. The *Sunspire's* fighter screen was down to two ships and most of her gun emplacements were either damaged or destroyed. There was nothing they could do to stop the attack and as the destroyer that launched 28

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com the missiles, *Enforcer 2117*, turned away and jumped out of the system I realized what was about to happen. The missiles they couldn't stop were never meant to hit the *Sunspire* but surround it and emit a massive electromagnetic pulse. Anyone not already within the field surrounding the *Sunspire's* main generator was killed instantly and most of the ship's systems were devastated. Ayan and four of her engineering staff survived because Captain Cameron had just enough time to command them to climb into the center of the ship's main generator while it was still running.

According to Ayan's report they were adrift for a week while they got basic

propulsion back online. They hid the ship in a stagnant asteroid field for five more weeks while they repaired the secondary jump drive. I thought about Ayan and her remaining staff for a long time after I finished reading her report. I couldn't imagine being defenceless, left for dead on a ship filled with the corpses of my crew mates for weeks, knowing that any moment we could be discovered and killed or captured. I went to bed late that night thinking about the good humoured, fun loving Ayan I had grown to know in simulations as Sunspot and what she must have gone through. Weeks relying on just her vacsuit for life support with no gravity, little light, and by the time I was asleep I

saw nothing but dark hallways and corpses drifting in and out of the dim light emitting some faint unseen luminescence. I woke up and looked at the time. I had drifted off for less than an hour then tossed and turned for the rest of the night, sitting up occasionally to dictate more details for Alice to add to my action plan. “So noted, now go to sleep or I’ll convince the ship computer to flood your quarters with sleeping gas,” she said after the fourth or fifth time. The humour helped lighten my mood a little and I tried to stop going through all the past events of the day, reports, and plans I was in the middle of making.

It must have worked, because when

Alice woke me up it was a few minutes before five in the morning. “There is someone at the door for you, I think it's urgent.”

I sat up groggily and tried to shake the cobwebs in my head. “I'll take more sleep at any price.”

“They brought coffee.”

“Thank you Alice.” I said with a dry mouth. I reached for my command and control unit and snapped it on my wrist. The status lights came on and I dragged myself out of bed to stand in the middle of the bedroom. “Cleaning cycle then apply uniform for Trainee Captain, vacuum suit version, two millimetre thickness, with extra material in sensitive areas.” I commanded. The

small projectors in the wristband vibrated the air over my body, shaking off dirt and dead skin, reducing all the matter to particles finer than visible dust. Then I passed it around my body so it could spray on the uniform with blue extremities, shoulders, legs and a green coloured core. I always hated the colour of the trainee uniforms. It only took a few seconds for the material to finish bonding to itself and I stretched to loosen it from 29

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com my skin.

“Please let them in Alice.” I said as I realized that I didn't even ask who was at the door.

The pressure doors decoupled and parted to reveal Ayan who patiently waited with a tall, sealed silver coffee mug in each hand. Her roster image didn't do her justice. She was diminutive in stature, and her face was heart shaped with wide cheekbones and bright blue eyes. She had changed into a trainee's uniform like my own, which made it plain that she had been relieved of overseeing the refit while she was on my roster. Her engineering kit was slung around her waist, filled with all the tools and advanced devices of her trade, some of which I didn't even recognize. She smiled and looked at me for a moment before flinching and avoiding my eyes, smiling even wider. Offering me a

coffee she said; “I think you need this more than I do. Can I come in?”

“Only if you tell me what's so funny.”

“I'm sorry, I must have caught you sleeping sir, your hair is a little out of place,” she replied, trying to keep from laughing. She was obviously trying to ignore my crow's nest but was having serious difficulty.

“If you'll excuse me,” I expressed with exaggerated politeness before stepping into the bathroom. “There are days I think it would be just as well to go bald,” I said to myself as I did a serviceable job of fixing the mess, then I chewed an oral cleaning tablet and stepped back out.

Ayan was sitting in the recliner,

thumbing her way through a report she was viewing on her personal holographic projector. “Feel better?” she asked. I nodded. “sorry about that.”

She smiled up at me and turned off the mini-projector. “No worries, you should see me in the morning. It takes a good twenty minutes for me to look even close to human.”

I sat down on the sofa and took a sip of coffee. An uncomfortable silence settled in almost immediately and she stared at me over the rim of her mug for several more protracted moments before saying; “You're different. From what I expected, I mean.” Even though she was being very quiet, even shy, there was still a lightness to her. As if even though

she was dealing with the unexpected it was right where she wanted to be.

I didn't know what to say and before I could say anything she put her mug down and went on. "I'm not what you expected either."

"It's not that, I just read the reports on the Ukonis System last night." From the fallen expression that crossed her face I immediately realized that I had said exactly the wrong thing.

"Not you too," she said quietly.

"We're lucky to have you back, very lucky."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Ensign Richards recognized what those missiles were and before we knew what was going on the Captain ordered the

engineering staff to take cover because she knew we were the only ones that could. A 30

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com moment later, there was a flash and everyone was dead, the entire ship shut down and just a few of us were left, huddled into the heart of the ship in the dark. What isn't in the report is how it's been almost four months since then, and even though most of us lost everyone we knew, all our friends, some of us are almost over it."

"Anyone who's gone through that has to have a lot to deal with. It can't be easy, everyone knows that."

"But do they have to treat me like I'm

made of glass?”

I didn't know how to ask her how I was supposed to breathe without making things worse, so I didn't say anything as she stood up and started pacing the length of the room.

“That's why, when I came back I jumped into the first simulation that I saw Oz, Mira, Ronin and you in. You were friends that didn't know what I'd just been through. To you I had only been away for awhile, on duty, nothing out of the ordinary. I could try to be myself for a while and if I was depressed or felt low I could just hide it behind my avatar or take off the simulation visor. My one candle in the dark, and now you're all here and you know who I am, what I've

been through.”

I started to say something, but she wasn't finished. She turned towards me with tears in her eyes, yelling.

“I went to the common room last night and looked for something I could recognize. Oz was there and he was talking to Ronin, who I never met before, but there was something about him. The way he was joking around, how everyone within five feet of him couldn't stop laughing. I recognized that crazy voice I knew so well in the scenes despite the disguiser, and when I went over to meet him, Oz whispered something in his ear and all the laughter was just gone. Instead of meeting Ronin, the crazy pilot, I met Minh-Chu, who had

been told all about poor little damaged me and was very concerned. Everyone was staring and trying not to stare at the same time. No one knew what to say and all I wanted was to be myself with the only friends I had left.”

I stood and started crossing the room towards her.

“No, don't you dare try to fix me, I couldn't take it from you!” She said, backing away.

I stepped forward and pulled her into my arms, crushing her to me. She fought for a moment but accepted the embrace before long. When she had quieted long moments later we stood there swaying slightly. “Now who's a big mess?” I asked her with a smile.

She couldn't help but laugh at herself and she wrapped her arms around me for a moment. "No one other than my therapist has done that since I got back, thank you." She squeezed before we both let go.

I sat back down on the sofa, her on the chair. When we both had our coffee in hand I smiled at her. "I'll make you a deal. I'll treat you like my Chief Engineer and friend if you help me get the crew through this scenario so we *might* have the chance to sign up with the military officially."

She smiled brightly and nodded. "deal."

Randolph

Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com Before long we were hard at work, going through the post-refit ship configuration, reviewing the five staff members she had selected and passing ideas back and forth about modifications we would be making to many of this ship systems before the simulation started. Some of the changes she'd be making would be minor tweaks, but there were some vast revisionist ideas that came from her side of the table, and a couple that came from mine.

Her imprint was already all over the redesign. She had added seals and housings that would make the ship completely impenetrable to any electro magnetic weapon while the inner hull

was intact. She knew the ship like no one else, and I recognized that I couldn't possibly have a better engineer aboard. She was very easy to work with as well, willing to explain the new, and allowed me to ask all my questions without worrying about looking like I had just spent years on basic communications detail. My experience kept me from looking foolish, but I had gotten a little behind on a few important systems.

At about 09:30 we knew we were out of time but with all the work out on the table, we were glad we were only preparing for a scenario. Some of our ideas would require much more time or manpower than we had to prepare if we were really applying them to the ship,

while in the scenario we could spend several hours and have them all done with competent help. Everyone would be busy, especially considering there were to be two drills a day using completely different scenes each time.

When it was time for her to go and finish getting ready for the assembly we embraced for a little longer than two people who were just friends would. "I'm glad I signed on." She said quietly.

"I couldn't do this without you."

She looked up to me and smiled before we moved apart. She was out the door in a few steps and that was the last time I saw that side of her for what seemed to be a very long time.

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **Training**

The common room was different from the rest of the ship. There were one by one meter port holes spread out along the front and sides, but that's where the extravagance ended. The tables and chairs were synthetic wood and at least forty years old, some even older by the looks of it. There was an old dartboard, suspensor table, and space in the center was cleared for holoprojections. The floors were covered with a scarred, short ended, spray on shag application that was peeling in some places and the walls were unpainted. To the left there was a n archway with its emergency

doors shut, and to the right another archway with one of its emergency doors detached completely and propped up beside the opening. I knew this room was considered non-essential, but I had never seen such disrepair anywhere in a starship.

Some effort had been made to tidy up, I could tell, but no one had time to actually repair anything just yet.

“Captain on deck!” Oz yelled as soon as the main doors opened. In a matter of seconds, commissioned and non-commissioned officers alike were in a line along the front of the back wall. All of them were in uniform, arranged by rank, at attention with their eyes front and hands at their sides. I knew that I

had met each one of them in the simulations we ran, spoken to many of them for an hour or more while we waited for the scenarios to load up with opponents. I had discussed strategy with a good number of them for hours, talked about details of our lives, our jobs. I didn't recognize the majority of them, however, since I had never seen their faces and we didn't use real names.

The social scene I was able to glimpse while the door was opening and no one was aware that I was watching, was not that of a room full of strangers, however. It seemed to me that the problem of connecting nick names and voices to faces and real names had already been solved for the most part for

my crew and a level of comfort was already starting to sink in, which was very reassuring. I stood up straight and ran my eyes from highest ranking at the left where Ayan stood, to the lowest on the right. I didn't recognize the dark haired woman I saw there. "As you all know, I am Trainee Captain Jonas S Valent, your commanding officer. My call sign in the simulations was Horus. We've been given an opportunity to demonstrate our skills in an exercise that will determine whether or not we can take a real rank in the Freeground Fleet. This is a unique opportunity for two reasons. One, we avoid criminal charges or fines, and two; we can all become a part of a crew together in defence of our

home. I've never heard of anyone getting
33

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com this kind of
opportunity. That being said, I don't
expect everyone to take advantage of it.
Many have already decided against the
risks and become permanent civilians
and I can't blame them. I will still call
them friends when this is over. Since we
were able to engage in simulated combat
with not only trainees but some of the
best Freeground's Fleet had to offer and
we kicked their asses, they want to see
what we can do when the stakes are
much higher. Each one of us will enter
into this simulation knowing that if we

are killed we will individually be tried in court for our roles in violating military security laws. The proceedings alone could carry on for months, and there is always the risk that you will have to serve out a term in prison. If any of you want to become a lifetime civilian with no chance of entering the Freeground service, step forward now so you can say goodbye to everyone here. This is your last chance and I won't hold it against you."

I mentally counted to thirty, slowly, looking up and down the line. "I'm glad to have you all aboard. Now, I've made sure that you understand all the conditions of what Fleet is offering, now here is what I have to say about it.

Everyone here is aware that in most scenes, someone's avatar dies. Whether it's by rare accident, a sacrifice is made to ensure win conditions are met, or because for just an instant someone else was better than you, someone's avatar almost always dies. I expect the projected casualties for whatever simulation we're dropped into to be very high, and that some of our avatars will be killed, that is simply a reality and the Admiral made me aware of it herself.

If your avatar dies I will stand beside you and the rest of our fallen and do absolutely everything I can to ensure that the consequences are lenient whether we win the scenario or not. If there is a way for me to get you out of having to stand

in court, I will find it for you. If we fail as a crew to meet the win conditions of whatever scenario we find ourselves in, however, I don't expect I'll have much influence with the administrative staff, so we have to work as a crew united. Just like we were in the scenarios, putting the group ahead of ourselves and working for success as a team. That is why, despite our eclectic make up, I believe we were able to lick trainees and experienced personnel at their own scenes. Individual skill is one thing, and we all have it, but it means so much more when you apply those skills as an organized crew. We'll be working drills every day leading up to the final scenario so we can tighten up our

teamwork.

That brings me to what I see in front of me now, once we were a team in a simulated environment, and though our challenge will be taking place in a scenario the Fleet has been kind enough to bring us all together on this fine ship. I'd like you to take a moment to quietly look at the faces in this room, think of the relationships you've made with them, how good it felt to meet them in person for the first time.”

Again, I counted to thirty slowly in my head, watching as my crew calmly looked at each other. At first there were some quiet nods, then a few smiles were exchanged and by the time I finished counting a few were just starting to

quietly whisper to each other. “There is no doubt in my mind that this crew is good together, it's too bad some couldn't follow us on this particular adventure, but we can't blame 34

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com them, can we? Could you imagine entering this simulation, doing your best and getting your avatar killed? After a few moments to say goodbye to everyone you'd be brought to a cell, then a few quiet days would pass as friends and family visited you before standing before the Military Judiciary Council. Some of us have a great deal to lose. We have family, property, responsibilities, but I'm going

to ask you to forget all that for a moment.

Instead, imagine yourself coming through this thing as one of the virtual survivors. Take a moment to visualize all those win conditions met, and when the simulation is over, a select few of us are in the winner's circle and awarded with a career rank in the Freeground Fleet.” I paused for a few moments then, and noticed that only the previously commissioned officers were staring straight ahead, the rest were looking right at me. “Now, like I said, it is a dead certainty that some avatars will be killed, there is no way to victory in this scenario without sacrifice. As you stand in that winner's circle with a few crew members you're watching as others say

their goodbyes, some of them are angry, others are disappointed. A few may be able to keep a stiff upper lip as they congratulate you and I'm sure still more are in tears because they know they'll be headed straight into the court system, they're probably about to be processed and deposited straight into the stockade. What would you want to do? I'm sure that every single one of you would want to step forward and do everything you can to share the victory they worked as hard as you did to accomplish. That is a very special thing, to have the opportunity to stand up and honour those that sacrificed so you could go on and lead your life. Every one of us is just one candle held up against the darkness

that surrounds us, it isn't much in it's singularity. Bring those points of light together, into a crew who works for the good of the whole, who can make good decisions for themselves and others, trust in the men and woman at their sides and suddenly that one candle grows with the light of many and we are an inferno that presses anything that would violate us back into the deep darkness.

I say we'll win this, because I know you, if not by your real face, the one you have shown me, and I trust you all to do what you have to and more to keep our fires burning through to the end. When some of us stand in that winners circle I say we all step forward and tell Admiral Rice and the administrative staff that

they take all of us or none and anyone who doesn't agree with that should leave now, because it's your last chance to drag yourself and your kit down that ramp with your dignity intact!"

Oz stepped forward started shouting; "All or none! All or none!" and all but one man who stepped forward joined in. He walked right up and fixed me with a sad smile then shook my hand. The chant was beginning to falter at the sight of one fellow quitting, so I said. "I understand, good luck." to him quickly. As he left through the door behind me I joined into the chant, which rose to a deafening roar.

When the chanting abated and people had started talking amongst themselves I

got Oz and Ayan's attention. When they came closer I told them that 35

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com we'd break so we could continue to get acquainted and then continue with the agenda after lunch. During that break I met everyone and managed to connect everyone's face with their voice in the scenes and what role they played. I was starting to feel pretty lucky about who had stayed on. So far it was a selection of the best with few exceptions and even then the lacklustre members of my new crew had practical experience that would come in very handy.

Before long, however, I realized we

only had three fighter pilots. Minh-Chu was the only one with any experience in the military, and he'd never really been outside the infantry. Oz came over to the table I was sitting at with a couple other crewmen. I was nursing another coffee and had become lost in my own thoughts, mentally reviewing the roster and what was missing. He tapped me on the shoulder and we moved to a table in the corner.

“You look like you're doing that deep thinking thing again.”

I looked at the nineteen crew members left in the room, including Oz and myself there were twenty one. “We're seriously short. Our finest are sticking around, but we need eleven more fighter pilots, at

least fifteen more engineering personnel, thirteen more security people, and at least twenty eight specialized crew including fighter mechanics, general maintenance, computer specialists and a few others. We're also missing communications officers, a second shift on the bridge staff, our Legal Officer, and I'm sure I'm missing something."

"Your second officer."

"Right, and there's no one with a rank that would put them up there." I watched as some of the non-military put trays out as directed by Ayan, all the nonmilitary joiners from our team wore the uniform and rank of private or ensign, putting them at the bottom. "These people are good in a simulation, but even in a

scenario with automation we're really low and that's going to hurt us. The Admiral is allowing me to choose some trained officers, I thought that would help but now that I've got a head count I'm not sure what kind of scenario we can win.”

“Well, we can assume that we won't need the second shift so that's a lot fewer right there, bringing us down to sixty six, then there are the officers which makes us fifty eight short.” Oz smiled nervously. “So what you're saying is this is going to be interesting.”

“Without knowing how long the simulation will be, what kind of situations we'll run into, or what the win conditions are it's hard to cut corners,

but we don't have much of a choice. How many security personnel can you manage with?"

"Minimally? Five would be the smallest team that could be effective, but if we're boarded in two places we can only secure one incursion. So, in that kind of situation we're done."

"Okay, then we arm everyone who isn't liable to shoot themselves, you're going to have to train them. I'll set you up with a primary team of five and they'll have to do. If we're boarded in two or more places, you go for the nearest incursion and everyone else will have to keep the boarders bottled up until they can get to them."

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“It makes sense, but we'll lose some specialists that way.”

Ayan set down her tray and motioned for an ensign to bring two more as she sat down. “I've gone through infantry boot camp and have tactical training. I also spent Four years in the Youth Infantry Corp.”

Oz laughed in surprise and looked her up and down. “Really? No offence, but I wouldn't have guessed.”

She shrugged and smiled. “ I w a s a bored military brat looking t o rebel against my stuck up Fleet mother, so as soon as I reached the qualifying age for

infantry cadet training at fourteen I signed up. I was a tall girl at five foot one then, but I stopped growing at five three. So I just got stronger than everyone else. My mother was out captaining a ship somewhere for eight months, and I was able to keep my enrolment a secret so I was able to finish a whole semester and get in on the advanced training while keeping up my core grades.

You should have seen her face when she got home and found her muscular daughter in her infantry gear. There's nothing like the daughter of a high ranking Fleet officer signing up for Infantry, you should have seen her face,” Ayan smiled and shook her head at the

memory before going on. “She realized that it was better than me running off and breeding with some high school boy so she let it happen. I finished three more years in cadets and slid right into the Fleet Engineering and Officer's program. I don't know if I could bench press my own body weight anymore, but these days I prefer zero gravity yoga anyway.” She said with a grin.

“Well, there goes that myth, it seems half of fleet still thinks that the Admiral had a hand in getting you into the Academy right after your eighteenth birthday in both of the hardest programs they have at the same time.” Oz said.

“So you've been checking my file and asking about me Oz?” She said, looking

at him with a raised eyebrow and a hand on her hip. “Do we have a personal issue to discuss here Warrant Officer?”

Watching her make a man easily twice her size so completely uncomfortable made my day. I don't think I've ever made Oz squirm as much as she did just then.

“I've been looking everyone up, you know, to make sure I know what they can do and a little more about them.” He said quickly before digging into his salad. I don't think he even looked at it before assaulting it with his fork. I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head. “Okay, so you can lead your staff in an incursion. Oz will train them with everyone else and engineering won't be

a soft target.”

“I have an idea that might help us with our security situation too. During the scene, let's all keep our vacsuits sealed up, hood and all. We'll clear all the unnecessary decks and if we get an incursion we'll blow the seals in that section. They might be boarding in vacsuits or armour, but I'm sure if we time it right it'll slow them down, maybe even blow them right out into space. Sealed suit or not, it will probably take them some time to boost back to an airlock.”

“That could work, it's a really old strategy, but it could work.” Oz said around a mouth full of lettuce.

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“It's an old ship. There's enough metal in five feet of deck plating to build a modern Raze fighter. The Fleet built her before the form fit adaptable vacsuit was invented, so decompression was an even bigger issue then and people couldn't run around in a suit they could seal in under three seconds with their hands free. They also had more ergranian steel than they knew what to do with from the Blue Belt. Too bad they lost it ages ago.”

“If we keep this up we might only need the officers the Admiral offered. The only problem is, we have no Wing Commander.”

“What about Minh-Chu?”

“He works alone better than anyone I've seen, but he takes a lot of risks and doesn't always track what everyone else is doing.” I replied, though it stung to admit it. “He's our best pilot, and he's had actual time in the cockpit, but I'm not sure of him.”

“I think he's going on the understanding that he's your Wing Commander. I've heard him talk about it a few times now, and he's not thinking like a soloist anymore, for the most part. I'd give him a shot.” Oz said quietly.

“Balance against uncertainty with sure things and reliable people.' Officer training 101. He might be good, probably has the mind for it and I know

he can command people on the ground, I saw it in the war, but I've never seen him do it in the cockpit." I replied.

Ayan fixed me with a serious look I hadn't seen from her until then. "So set him up as your Wing Commander in the drills and request a qualified commander from the Admiral. That way you're giving him a chance and providing for the possibility of him going off on his own when it counts. He'll have a second in command who can pick up the slack. I'm surprised this is something you haven't thought your way through. Excuse me, I have to get my staff together, it's almost time to resume the briefing."

Oz and I watched her walk away.

“She runs hot and cold on a millisecond's notice. Keeps us guessing, that's for sure,” he said quietly.

“She's under a lot of pressure, and the few of us who are officers are trying to balance the friendships we have here with our professional responsibilities. We're trained for it, but these are unusual circumstances. A lot of these people aren't used to taking orders from a superior officer.”

“Guess that's how she deals, one face for friends, another for command.”

“That's what they teach us in officers training, and she's right about the situation with Minh. I should have had that figured out as soon as I saw the roster. I'm getting distracted by worrying

when I should be thinking my way through these problems.”

“Sometimes it takes a few heads to come up with the best solutions. You're also taking on a lot more without as much experience. I trust you as our captain, I've seen you work in a lot of scenes, but there's a hell of a lot here you're not used to dealing with, like keeping a ship together when it's not in combat, managing a crew, setting up training, dealing with shortfalls and without a first officer to share some of

38

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com that with it's
twice as bad. But there's hope! You have

a security officer who can keep the crew in line, make sure people are where they are supposed to be, and you have a Chief Engineer with years served on this ship. Not just any ship, but the one we're on right now. Oh, and you just handed the Wing Command position over to a hyperactive pilot with something to prove, so I'd say let him take charge and watch him go."

"You're right Oz, that's a lot off my shoulders. Consider it done, you're in charge of crew and all that comes with it, and I'll hand Minh-Chu his orders after the briefing."

The rest of the briefing went well, Ayan's part was quick and professional. She marked the areas of the ship that

would be off limits in our drill simulations and the final scenario, went through emergency procedures and our inventory of weaponry. The *Sunspire* was equipped with eight rail cannon turrets firing any of six different kinds of ammunition, one heavy beam emplacement, two multi purpose torpedo launchers and one fighter bay that could launch seven fighters from small chambers located lengthwise along the underside of the hull. All the weapons could be secured and hidden away while not in combat.

The final refit of the *Sunspire* would include low energy shielding, multipurpose materializers distributed evenly across the hull, multi layered

refractive energy shields for redirecting incoming beam weapon fire away from the ship and a regenerative reflective hull. Using the emitters the *Sunspire* would be able to create its own wormhole jump point, leading to any of a few dozen known arrival points across the galaxy. It also had hyperspace systems for travelling to other destinations at a much slower rate.

She assigned everyone to review some of the schematics so they would know more about the areas of the ship they would be working in, and referred the crew to some short documents that would help them understand some of the technology the ship depended on before ending her part of the briefing. After she

was finished Oz gave his part of the briefing and informed everyone that there would be weapons training, that anyone with some proficiency would have to carry a sidearm during any and all drills and simulations and introduced the four members of his security team. The crew seemed comfortable with him and his team being in charge of keeping order on this ship. He was personable and as I watched him give his briefing at the head of the room I realized that he looked the part as well.

After the briefing was concluded I announced that the first drill would be in fifteen minutes to the surprise of most and dismay of a few. I had told no one that we would be drilling so soon but

Ayan, Oz and even Minh-Chu had the crew organized and on their way to their simulation stations in no time. As he rushed by, I caught Minh's arm and pressed a platinum wing pin into his palm. "It's official, you're my Wing Commander, congratulations Commander Buu." I said quietly. 39

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com He grinned broadly and pinned the wings to his collar. "Your best decision yet Captain!" He said before snapping me a salute and rushing his two pilots down the hall towards their simulation pods.

It was time to find out how much work we had ahead of us as a crew and within

two minutes of the beginning of the scenario it started to become obvious that we had a lot more work ahead of us than I had anticipated. The next day my requests for personnel were sent and by that afternoon they had arrived. All young men and women with spotless records. Several pilots with more than a year's experience and a mission success rate higher than our simulation win rate, deck crewmen who were just coming off leave, and a few computer systems and general systems maintenance personnel with medical and basic combat training. I couldn't have been more pleased, especially since they all seemed very happy to come aboard, had their gear stowed and were at work within twenty

minutes. They were in the next drill and boosted morale by helping us meet all the win conditions. Over the next three days anyone was lucky to get eight hours of rest and relaxation time, officers were fortunate if they got six. Drills, system reconfigurations, customizations, combat, flight systems and general training filled every hour of our waking days. By the last day only two of us were unarmed in the drills, we were getting comfortable with the new systems and the response time of the entire crew was better than I had ever seen when we were running in scenes in our spare time.

It took over a dozen drills and hours of training over the course of three and a

half days, but as I sat on the makeshift bridge in the middle of a semi transparent command hologram I realized how far we had come using only a fifth of our original team. Listening to the chatter and watching the tight precision with which everyone preformed, the small wing of seven fighters, six two man gunnery crews, engine efficiency and bridge crew all worked the plan moment by moment as one unit. The scenario that I was putting them through was famous for being difficult to coordinate and harder to win. It was called Three Stations and the objective was to wipe out their fighter squadrons and deploy a worm hole point generator so boarding parties could

come in shuttles and begin boarding operations. The seven fighters we had and the *Sunspire* had little if no chance of even finishing this scenario, let alone surviving for more than twenty minutes, but with everyone doing their best, working a good plan that changed as needed and reaction times lower than I'd ever seen, we were over forty minutes in, had three fighters left and had collectively killed or disabled more than half of the forty eight fighters we were against.

Just as we lost one rail cannon turret and the crew, who had abandoned just in time, were running to another, Oz tapped me on the shoulder.

“There's a command level

communication coming in sir, your eyes only.”

He said quietly enough so only I could hear.

“All right, scrub this drill in five minutes. We've already gone much further 40

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com than expected
with the people we have. I'll take the
communique in one of the storage
rooms.”

“Yes sir.”

I turned the command hologram off and got my bearings for a moment. After staring at a hologram that surrounded my command chair and rotated when I

turned my head for so long it took a moment to regain my balance, even though the hologram was partly transparent all around so I could see the bridge and my staff. The temporary bridge, which was set up just for simulations was in the forward section of the main engineering level, everything behind was still open to vacuum since they were just about to bring in the four new power plants. There was a storage room just a few feet down the hall and after I stepped in and the door was closed I called up a screen on the command and control unit on my left forearm.

“You were doing very well in that last scenario Jonas, it is too bad you could

not complete it, your chance of success was up to twelve point nineteen percent, rounding up of course.”

“Of course. Thank you Alice, I don't think we would have made it, but I think the crew is getting used to the odds. Do you think you could bring up that Command level transmission? I don't want to keep them waiting.”

“I'll put Admiral Rice on right away.”

With less than a second delay, the admiral's holographic visage was in front of me smiling. “Hello Captain, how are things going in dry dock?”

“Good afternoon Admiral, better than I expected. Those crew members you sent us fit right in.”

“I'm glad to hear it, but not surprised.

When we put your ship on the internal board as a volunteer posting we had over two hundred applicants, we let our psychologists pick for you. However, that's not why I'm on the line with you Jonas. I've been watching your drills whenever I could, and quite frankly I'm impressed. Everyone is holding together well and even the crew members that didn't start out as military are holding up to our standards.”

“Thank you Admiral, I'll pass that on to the crew when it's appropriate.”

Admiral Rice smiled, an expression I hadn't seen from her before, it was unnerving. “That doesn't sound like the young man who stood in my office a week ago, I hope there's some of him left

under that uniform. You've come a long way as well Jonas, you deserve some credit.”

“Thank you Admiral, I have a good crew.”

“I'm aware of that, now let's get to the root of the matter. I'm making your rank official and drafting everyone on the *Sunspire*. Her refit is getting a rush and she's to be ready in four days. Congratulations Captain.”

I must have looked like I had swallowed a bug, or just been told I had won a trillion credits, which one I'm not sure, but the Admiral ignored it and went on. “The *Paladin* is on her way back with a Triad Consortium fleet on its heels.”

“Isn't the *Paladin* a twelve kilometre long super-carrier?”

41

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com

“It is, but she's no match for what's behind her. The transmission they were able to relay to us indicated that they were searching for activity at the edge of our coreward territory when they intercepted a burst transmission. The decoded message detailed a Triad invasion headed our way. I can only assume that The *Paladin* was discovered and had to make a break for it. With two of our battle groups too far out to be of assistance, they have orders

to regroup in another sector and see what happens here, while our third battle group will arrive on time and the fourth at approximately the same time as The *Paladin* and her pursuers. We need every ship and since your crew is looking better than any of our fresh graduates and they know the *Sunspire*, we're activating you, promoting one of your officers and filling the empty spots on your roster. Your new crew should begin arriving in one hour and until combat orders are issued any qualified personnel should assist with the refit while others should continue the regimen of training you have them on already. After all, your training is harder than what we're putting our cadets through.

Do you understand our situation and your orders Captain Valent?"

"Yes Admiral, I understand and will carry them out." I said officially.

"Good luck, Admiral Rice out." She said.

I took a moment to look at our orders and the conditions of our commission and I was surprised. The *Sunspire* was to be renamed at my leisure and assigned to a blind battle group that would only be aware of the other ships in the group if necessary. There was another detail that made me grin and chuckle to myself. I turned off the screen and projector on the arm of my uniform and heard Alice whisper in my ear. "So, since you're a real Captain, do I get to live in one of

those big, powerful, and oh so pretty officer class forearm command consoles? I've always wanted to see what it was like to operate on eight trillion nanoprocessors,”

my AI said with a coo.

“I suppose you will, as soon as I figure out where I pick it up.”

“I believe it should be brought aboard by one of the new maintenance staff, it's in the roster you didn't have time to look though.”

“Right, no time. Broadcast a ship wide message, all *Sunspire* crew must report to the common room immediately.”

“Transmitting that message ship wide Jonas.”

“Can you do me a favour Alice?” I asked as I walked out into the hall.

“That depends on the favour.”

“Call me Captain,” I said with a grin.

I was one of the last to enter the common room. “Captain on deck!” Oz called out in his thunderous voice. Everyone lined up according to rank and I waited quietly as the last of the crew filed in. Their expressions ranged from the passive, readiness that came with training all the way to outright nervous.

“Sunspire computer. Change all crew uniforms from trainee to current profile rank and colour.” I called out. A moment later everyone's uniform turned 42

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com from green and blue to blue and black and the rank insignias on everyone's collar changed. The circular pips of the trainee reformed into slashes on their collars and a silent notification appeared on a small screen on everyone's wrist, informing them of their new rank and that they had new orders to review.

The members of the crew that had military training before our endeavour began stood still and at attention, trying to suppress whatever reaction they would normally have but with little success. Everyone else celebrated. Oz looked to me and raised an eyebrow as I nodded in response. "Settle people!" He called out. Everyone was back in a quiet

line almost instantly and I addressed them.

“The Admiral and her staff have been watching us, which isn't surprising. What did surprise me was that our progress was apparently so impressive that she didn't see fit to enter us into an official test. Our progress and current Fleet conditions made an early decision necessary, and we're all being pressed into service. As soon as the refit is complete we will join a blind battle group. ” I could see Ayan trying to suppress a big smile and until that moment I hadn't realized how low my spirits had gotten. Seeing her so happy was all I needed, even though there was a great deal of business to attend to.

I went on. “The bad news in all this is that we are about to go to war. The Triad Consortium is less than thirty five hours away, right on the heels of the *Paladin* and we have to be ready. We'll be receiving more new crew members over the next five hours, so make them feel welcome. All qualified personnel are to aid in the final refit as directed by our Chief engineer, and we are all on orders of silence with concern to the details of our ship's role. I can give you all two hours before we get to work, so get something to eat and relax. Oh, and one more thing; welcome to the Freeground Fleet.”

I couldn't help but notice Oz look down at his wrist for the first time since

the uniform shift and a big grin spread across his face before he looked up at me.

“Commander?” he mouthed silently across the room.

I nodded and made the hand signal for first officer and his grin got a little toothier. I was so distracted I didn't see Ayan, who came to stand right beside me.

“Congratulations, Captain.” She said with a nod.

“Thank you, congratulations on your reactivation as Commander. Are you staying with us?”

“Those are my orders.”

The joviality drained from me and was replaced with concern. “Do you

want to stay with us?" I asked in a whisper.

"Nowhere I'd rather be." She said with a tired looking grin. She took my hand and shook it at someone off to the side. "Congratulations again, I'll be in engineering."

She was out the door before I could do or say anything that wouldn't draw the attention of most of the room. One of her engineering staff did notice what went on, and was looking towards me. I called her over. She was one of the original team members, Mira was her name in the simulations, but her real name was Laura. From 43

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com what I could remember from her file she held two Masters Degrees; one in advanced field mechanics and the other in hyperspace theory which earned her a higher entry rank than most of the team. “Can you do me a favour, Sargent?” I asked.

“Yes sir.” She smiled as soon as she heard her rank aloud for the first time.

“Take a few minutes to say congratulations to any friends you have here, then get a few sandwiches for yourself and Commander Rice and join her in engineering. Learn as much as you can about the systems down there while you have the chance, but refit or not, everyone has to eat sometime. Make sure you eat together.”

"I'll bring her favourite tea while I'm at it sir." She said with a salute and a smile. "You're good at this, you know." She said in a whisper. I really didn't know what to say, and it must have shown.

"Taking care of us, I mean. I can't see anyone else with these slashes, not on this ship, anyway." She said, pulling at the rank insignia on my collar and for the first time I think it finally sunk in. I was really a Captain, with all the responsibilities and respect that came with it. It should have been the most frightening thing but I couldn't have felt better.

"Thank you." I managed to say before she ran off to talk to a few of her friends.

I was just thinking how hard it would be to get used to the salutes and proper military salutations when Oz tapped me on the shoulder. Minh-Chu was standing beside him, polishing his new rank insignia of Lieutenant. "So, I'll be your first officer for this trip." Oz said.

"Better you than me, he's a handful. You should have seen him as a civilian, always coming around my restaurant, drowning his sorrows with lo mein and sweet and sour pork." Minh said.

"I never heard you complaining, and come to think of it I didn't see many other customers either."

Oz put one hand on each of our shoulders and shook his head. "Why do I get the feeling that I'll be sorting things

out between our lead pilot and Captain for at least the first few months?”

The next day seemed to go by in a flash of minutes. Single tasks seemed to take too long and there was never enough time for me to get other things completed as well as I liked.

I was finally starting to get used to delegating but people still had to remind me that there was always someone else who would be happy to finish most jobs I started. The second day went much more smoothly. My officer training had never been fully put to use before then and I found that as time went on it was all coming back to me. My own duties started falling into a specific order, and with no time to spare.

My job, if you will, was to ensure the well being and success of the crew and ship, and making sure that all the different sections were doing what I needed them to 44

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com when I
needed it was my central task when I
wasn't making general decisions for
everyone. Micromanagement was left to
all the Officers below me and there
were long moments of quiet between the
busy times where I could watch them
sealing up the lower hull after finishing
the implementation of our new power
plants, or load our twenty one fighters
and two combat shuttles. These were the

times where my Officers had everything well in hand and it was up to me to consider the big picture, tactics, strategy, and the strengths and weaknesses of the ship and crew. I found I was always researching details about crew members, the ship systems, our capabilities, and every few hours I had questions for one of my Officers. As a former engineering staffer I almost always had a place to start, some idea of what I was talking about, and as an Officer I knew how to point my questions to get the answer as quickly as possible and not distract my crew from the myriad of tasks we had to perform.

The new arrivals were all there because they wanted to be. I could see it,

walking the ship as Alice whispered all the crew requests and details that needed to be ironed out I may have looked like I was inspecting the ship, but I was more interested in seeing how everyone worked together. The trained staff who had just come aboard were more interested in helping the newly enlisted than turning their noses up at them, and I even saw one of our original team show one of the new arrivals a few improvements she had made. The crewman looked pretty surprised and even more impressed.

When I arrived on the flight deck, where a great deal of fine tuning was being done on the fighters we had been given, three groups of used but well

repaired Valkyrie Interceptors, Minh-Chu pulled me aside. “Do you know that all these pilots and mechanics are volunteers?” He asked, obviously surprised.

“From what I understand everyone volunteered. Playbacks of our last few scenarios leaked out while we were busy training here. I think the Admiral actually expected us to pass their test.”

“Most of these pilots have more flight time than I do, but they listen to everything I say, one is even modifying his ship so it's more like the mods I flew with in the scenes.”

“Well, that's what happens when you log a few thousand hours in simulations then wipe the floor with the academy

instructors on a hacked connection. We're the Fleet's new bad boys, and I haven't heard of anyone holding that title before us. Don't let it go to your head. We have to be better than ever to live through whatever the Admiral has planned for us. Something tells me that she won't be pulling punches just because her daughter is on board."

"What do you think she has planned?"

"Well, we're in a separate battle group in a newly refitted ship. They haven't resurfaced here either, so I'm assuming that our ship looking a lot older than its systems might play into our strategic placement. Whatever it is, I'm thinking it'll lead us into a very dangerous situation pretty early on."

“Is it true that we've been refitted as a gunship? The gun crews have been 45

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalande

www.spinwardfringe.com loading
ammunition materializers bigger than I
had ever seen in the infantry. They got
that technology to work just in the last
few years. Our cannons will never run
out of ammunition. How many turrets do
we have anyway? I counted at least ten
materializers.”

“The final refit has us loaded with
twenty eight rail turrets, and all of them
are retractable and hidden, only one
beam weapon though.”

“Why did we only run our drills with
eight?”

“It's the original compliment of cannons for the ship, there were some things we couldn't modify. I also don't think they wanted us to know about it in case we failed the final scenario.”

“Good point, well, I know which direction to go if I need cover.” Minh said with a chuckle. “Twenty eight variable load rail cannons on turrets that never run out of ammunition as long as there's power for the materializers. I thought these Valkyries were heavily armed for their size. A pair of rail guns, two particle cannons and a rocket launcher with enough room for forty eight missiles. There's even retractable exterior clamps for extra heavy weaponry. I don't think they're outfitting

us for espionage.”

“I know you'll find a way to hide when you have to. Knowing Fleet Command, they'll find a way to use that too.”

“Well, a small cloaking field on each ship may help, think you could ask for me?”

“Put in a requisition, I'll forward it on.” I said with a grin.

“Oh, put an extra couple slashes on your collar and you're Fleet's man now, I see how it is.”

“I'll see what I can do, but a requisition would still help.”

“Sure, as soon as we get back from whatever Fleet has us doing. I'll ask for energy shields and a cup holder while

I'm at it. That way I might get the cup holder."

"There's a transmission from Fleet Command Captain and they need you on the bridge," Alice chimed in so both Minh and I could hear.

"Looks like things are about to get started." I said. "Are you ready?"

"We're fully loaded and just fine tuning. Good luck Captain." Minh said with a wry grin.

"Good luck, Commander." I said before walking away. I stopped at the main hatchway for a moment. "Commander Buu." I called out.

"Yes sir." He shouted in response. It was an image that is still so clear in my mind, him standing there with one hand

on the cockpit of his Valkyrie fighter.

“May your life be interesting!” I shouted before continuing on to the bridge. When I arrived on the bridge I checked the transmission from Fleet Command. Our orders were in and we were out of time. After reviewing them as quickly as possible I forwarded them on to the Officers and knew that within minutes briefings would begin all over the ship and we would be greeting the Triad Consortium fleet in our own very special way soon after.

46

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **The Defence**

The ship was adrift amidst a field of

compressed waste, left over unprocessed materials and old hulls that were in queue to be recycled. At any given moment there was a field of this kind of garbage that occupied a space near Freeground Station. It was always changing shape as different materials were being recycled and added and with our power plant almost completely idle, our systems supported by cold capacitors we would appear as just another piece of flotsam to any thermal or electromagnetic sensors.

The Admiral was wise to post us in such a hiding place, and it showed that she actually had reviewed many of our scenarios. Hiding in plain sight was a tactic the original team used all the time,

one of our specialities, and it made all the new members of Fleet aboard feel like this was somehow familiar. Minh-Chu and his entire wing of twenty one fighters were individually hidden as well. Looking to the thermal, electromagnetic and visual scanner results projected in the middle of the bridge, I could see that none of us were emitting detectable levels of energy, there was no way to separate us from the trash. I set my command hologram to view the field specifically and it appeared in the main field of view. I was still getting used to the newer version which was always broadcast in front of me just below chest level instead of all around me. It still

contained two visual representations of the ship's position, another broader view of the entire combat area, ship system details, communication summaries and the command controls but everything was much more streamlined and Alice was able to interact with its functions, so she could assist in carrying out my decisions and prioritizing information.

“Set the main display to viewpoint thirty eight and encompass the coreward side of the station.” I commanded. The ship computer rotated the main holographic image so my viewpoint started at the station's center and looked out towards the core of the Universe to the point in space we expected the *Paladin* to drop out of hyperspace.

The bridge crew were all still. Oz stood beside me, and I looked over the rest of the bridge staff who were reviewing the status of their systems, glancing up at the main hologram in the middle of the bridge occasionally and collectively holding their breath.

Without thinking I squeezed Jason Everin's shoulder, one of the people who I knew from the simulation team who was qualified as a communications and intelligence officer. "Deep breaths, just keep your mind clear until there's an enemy 47

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com transmission
to decode." I said quietly.

“Yes sir.” He replied, trying to disguise his tension with a half smile. In the space of a heartbeat our circumstances became very real. The *Paladin* decelerated out of hyperspace, dispersing the white and red particles that covered the ship during faster than light travel and appeared in front of the Third Fleet, which made a hole in its center for the allied ship to move through. After a few seconds I realized my hands were balled into white knuckled fists. I shook them open and sat down in the Captain's chair. “Easy, the Triad Fleet should be right behind. Silent running.”

Seconds, then minutes passed, and hearing Sergeant Everin's console come

alive with incoming enemy transmissions was as more a relief than anything. The sound made the other communications officer beside him jump in her seat. "Enemy wireless noise." He said as he started working his holographic and key command console with blinding speed. "Decoding, looks like ninety four layer ten twenty four bit encryption, we'll be unscrambling their transmissions over five minutes behind using the codes we already have to start from."

"Just keep working and remember to patch into the station's cypher database as soon as we can start communicating with fleet again. They might be able to provide us with more up to date codes."

“Yes sir.”

“Computer, start a count down on all ship displays coordinated with the arrival counter on my command console and label it 'Triad Arrival.' Base the counter's value on when we first started receiving transmissions.” The count down started on everyone's display at seventeen seconds, floating just off to the side of whatever task they were doing. Watching those seconds tick away seemed to protract the time.

On the main display I could see the *Paladin* forming up with the rest of the third fleet which consisted of several other carriers half the size, fifteen destroyers, a five kilometre long command ship, and over a hundred

smaller ships. The *Paladin* began launching wings of fighters and small gunships.

My eye wandered to the half of the station I could see on the display represented semi transparently. At the current magnification I couldn't see the hundreds of gun emplacements, only the general shapes of habitat rings, platforms, extensions and construction frames. Even though it was my home all my life, it had never looked so beautiful or so fragile.

As the seconds counted down to zero and the digits disappeared, the Triad Consortium attack fleet appeared right in front of the Freeground Third Battle Group. Both sides opened fire

immediately, and even from where we sat we could see flashes of light through the window. The main holographic projection switched to tactical mode and Sergeant Everin looked up from his display. The Triad fleet was easily twice the size of our forward defences, and the Third Fleet began a planned retreat to draw them towards the station. The immediate combat status appeared on my personal command screen and I made it too small for 48

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com anyone else
to see. The cost of drawing the enemy
closer was mounting by the second.

“Wormhole distortion detected, a

second enemy fleet is about to arrive!”

Sergeant Everin marked the projected arrival point on the main display and returned to deciphering enemy communications.

“Command expected this, it's why we're here.” I said just as much to myself as to everyone else.

“The communications we can understand indicate they're pre-plotting fighter launch sequences. There must be more than one carrier coming in.”

“Nice decrypting Sergeant.”

The marked point was right between where we were hidden and the station and I stood up, looking at nothing else. Five Triad carriers came out of hyperspace just outside the engagement

area. “They don't come light, do they?” I said. “Continue holding, we need to give them time to launch fighters. Recheck the loads on our rail cannons. We'll only get one good shot at this dirty little trick.”

“Gunners all report one hundred twenty rounds of munition seven loaded. They're ready to switch to piercing and explosive shells after their initial barrage.”

“Good. Get ready to fire everything up on my command.” I could see the first waves of fighters and smaller gunships launching from the Triad carriers and waited for the second group. It came just seconds later.

“Their launch crews certainly are efficient,” Oz said from just behind me.

“With the credits the Triad has, they're probably all automated.” I said as I watched the third wave launch. “They can probably afford combat androids.”

“Or they're mass produced genetically altered clones. Messy but effective.”

I nodded at Oz's supposition. “Just one more wave,” I didn't have to wait long before I saw another mass of fighters and other small ships appear on the main display. “Ahead full! Begin firing sequence and get me a firing solution on the nearest carrier. Prioritize her sensors with the beam weapon and launch bays with both torpedoes.” I commanded.

The dead silence that had threatened

to smother us was gone, and the hum of the ship's systems and burning of the massive Ion engines thrusting harder than ever added to my enthusiasm. The bridge crew of fourteen officers were busy all around.

“Bring refractive shielding online, and focus our energy shield on the bridge. Be ready to counter charge the ablative layer of the hull.”

“We've got to look like a flare on their sensors,” Oz said with a chuckle.

“If we're lucky it'll be the last thing all those fighter pilots see,” I commented as I watched the orientation of the ship shift as the rail guns pointed towards the groups of fighters, bombers and gunships headed towards the engaged fleets fired

off their one hundred twenty rounds of micro nuclear shells. In less time than predicted, nine seconds, all the rail guns had fired their shells. The deadly projectiles drifted towards the multitude of enemy ships, emitting no detectable radiological, magnetic or thermal signal and too small to track individually on most sensors. I held my breath as the shells closed the distance between the hundreds of 49

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com fighters
headed towards the station and our fleet.

The carriers began firing beam weapons at our ship, but our refractive shielding redirected the energy and light

components of the beams and our thick ablative hull absorbed the impacts of the tiny charged particles. I kept watching the progress of our nuclear shells, I couldn't look away. The enemy ships began turning suddenly, they realized what we had fired, but only too late. I couldn't help but bring my fist down on the arm of my chair as I saw thousands of points of light wipe out or disable all the fighters, bombers and shuttles the carriers had launched. Six waves by the time the shells went off, their entire offensive compliment. I wasn't the only one, most of the bridge crew couldn't help cheer momentarily as the bulk of the Triad fighter cover for the engagement was destroyed. All that read on our

sensors was a mass of ruined hulls where the small crafts had been. The most diminutive of the craft had been utterly vaporized. The fight was far from over, however. The *Sunspire* was headed towards the carrier group, still rotating slowly, giving our rail cannon turrets even access to targets and preventing any overheating. “Prioritize rail cannon fire on any incoming torpedoes or other projectiles. Don't let anything through. Fire the beam weapon at any sensors you can lock onto, we just need to keep them blind long enough to use the nearest carrier as cover so we only need five percent intensity.”

“First torpedoes are away sir.” I heard the tactical station report.

“Target their projectile weapon emplacements and fire both tubes until we get to one thousand kilometres, then load tube two with a high focus nuke and hold it. We can deal with any beam weaponry they've got and maybe redirect their fire back at them once we're close enough.”

The first of the defensive screen of fighters began heading towards us from the nearest carrier and I smiled, flicking a switch on my chair. “Are you still awake out there old friend?”

“Barely. Need some cover?” Replied Minh-Chu. A second later the field of debris behind us lit up with thermal readings, as our screen of twenty one fighters came to life and fired their

engines to close the short distance between them and the enemy.

The first wave of the enemy fighter screen was destroyed in seconds, and our fighters took up position behind the *Sunspire* to keep pace and stay out of the way until we needed more cover.

As we drew closer to the nearest carrier, its size was becoming apparent. It seemed to stretch on forever to the right and left, over eighteen kilometres long with dozens of beam emplacements and several large rail cannons. We were closing on the four hundred kilometre range, and all the beam weapons on our side of the destroyer were firing. Most of them didn't carry any particles, and our twelve layer refractive shielding

was redirecting all of it away from the ship. There were only two rail cannons left that were large enough to damage us, but that was two too many. "I need those rail guns destroyed." We were close enough for our next torpedoes to travel so fast that the chance of hitting before the enemy 50

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com perimeter
cannons could destroy them were very
high, but I had other plans for our
torpedo bays at this range, so I opened
communications with Minh once more.
"Take out those rail cannons," I
commanded, knowing I was sending his
wing into the most dangerous zone on

that side of the enemy ship.

I turned to Oz then. “Fire the nuclear torpedo right into their launch bay, set it off deep.” He knew there was no time to argue, we were closing on three hundred kilometres. “Helm, reverse thrust and turn us sideways as soon as the torpedo is away. Take us along her starboard side,” I flipped the switch on my chair that was set to speak with engineering. “How are our power systems holding out?”

“Generating forty percent of capacity, storage cells are all holding at ninety seven percent. We have enough to run another ship our size.” Ayan replied. I was more than a little surprised. “Hull integrity?”

“No serious damage yet, seems the Triad didn't expect anyone to use refractive shielding since it was phased out a century ago by most corporate outfits.”

“Can you give me another eight layers? I think it's time we cause some real damage.”

“Yes sir!”

I looked to Ensign Fielding and she nodded. “We have enough refractive layers to redirect their beam weapons right back at them sir.”

“Let's cut them up a bit,” I ordered with a grin.

Just as I gave the order, the nuclear torpedo that had targeted their exposed launch bays went off, and I double

checked the status of our fighters. Only two had been destroyed so far, and none had been caught in the nuclear blast. I couldn't help but look at the damage we had done to the launch bays as the area became visible through the bridge windows. It was a glowing pit of a wound, outlined by molten metal and sections explosively decompressing.

“Commander Buu reports both rail cannons have been disabled,” Oz reported from behind me.

“So Minh made it out of there?” I realized how unprofessional the question was as soon as it was asked. Oz didn't seem to fault me for it.

“He made it out fine.”

“Good, get him out of the high risk

zone and tell him to use the *Sunspire* as cover. We'll need them for more important tasks.”

We had crippled the carrier, but as we moved past the rear section and ruined launch bay it became obvious that we hadn't disabled her. All their beam emplacements fired at once, along with her much smaller remaining rail gun turrets. The beams were reflected straight back at the carrier's hull, cutting into and opening entire sections.

“Sir, we're not taking any direct damage from weapon's fire, but our hull is heating up fast from the near misses and their rail guns are all targeting the bridge. The energy shield won't last more than ninety seconds at this rate.”

I didn't have to think about it, the words just came out; "Abandon the bridge, head for the emergency command center." I opened communications with Ayan as 51

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com everyone stopped what they were doing and made for the pair of lifts at the rear of the bridge. "Reinforce the shields on the bridge for two minutes and take command. We're headed down to the emergency controls."

"Yes sir," she replied. I felt the deck shake violently and heard an impact that made my ears ring. As the lift closed I remember thinking; *that wasn't a small*

rail gun impact.

52

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **Dawn**

There was no warning; only bright lights and doctors. I was out of the medical bed and on my feet in what felt like the blink of an eye. I glanced around the room and saw the bed, restraints, two medical technicians who were in an absolute panic, an emergency cart, and a neural interface cart with the cable ripped out. The technicians were on their way out the door and I grabbed one by the elbow. "It was simulated?" He looked at me nervously and nodded. Security came running and stopped at the

door. The technician freed his arm and waved them off. "He just came out of it a bit too suddenly and ripped the cable out of the neural image converter. Other than a really sore neck, he'll be fine." I reached up to find the headpiece still firmly seated on my head and the cable leading from it. My neck was already aching and getting worse by the second. Oz and Ayan were in the doorway a moment later. "Some scenario, wasn't it Captain?" He asked, flicking his rank insignia with a finger, looking a little disappointed. Suddenly I felt very foolish and took the head piece off properly, put it on an instrument tray and nodded. "I wonder why they felt they had to trick us into it?"

Ayan stepped into the room with a crooked grin. “At least you didn't actually get crushed in the remains of the bridge. They put us all under the night after you met with the Admiral. None of us were told.”

“The Admiral, your mother.”

“Yes, my mother,” she affirmed, a dark expression came over her. “This has got to be the most twisted thing she's ever put me through,” she looked up at me for a silent moment. “Anyone through.” She added.

Ayan and Oz were both wearing their duty uniforms. I was also still in uniform, dressed for a shift on the station command deck. I fixed the security officer with a level gaze. “Lead the way,

private,” I meant to say cordially, but realized after I must have sounded forceful. I knew there was a debriefing coming, and soon. He'd know where to take us so we could get on with it.

He did exactly as he was directed and lead us to a large briefing room furnished with a long table and chairs. I felt betrayed, deceived and even a little stupid at being fooled into thinking that all that had happened over the past several days was true. I tried massaging my sore neck while wrapping my head around the idea of just lying in bed for however many days had passed instead of living through the challenges we had faced.

After a few minutes Ayan got up from

where she had sat and took a seat 53

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com beside me at one end of the table and Oz sat on my other side. She rubbed my shoulders and neck. "I shouldn't be this angry," I said quietly. "If that were real I would have gotten us all killed."

"No, most of us survived until the next allied battle group came out of hyperspace behind the Triad carriers. I was leading a rescue party into the lift shaft when they shut the scenario down."

"Even I managed to survive." Minh-Chu said as he walked in. He dropped himself into a chair. "I was about to take out a fighter as they woke me up," His

mood was equally dark but somehow casual, relaxed. "Going back to making romin and egg rolls is going to be difficult."

Others were coming in, their moods unsure, no one was talking.

"I can't call it, did we meet the win conditions?" O z asked n o o n e in particular. "First Officer felt good. *Real good.* "

"That's the question, after all this, living days in a simulation without even knowing it, did we pass their test? Did they like what they saw?" I agreed.

"I suppose they did see everything," I heard Ayan say to herself quietly, there was a sedate sadness in her voice and I took her hand.

“About time we met for real,” I said to her with a smile. It took a moment for her to realize that it actually was the first time we had met in person, and she smiled back as she put her chin on my shoulder and took Minh's hand. He took Laura's, Laura took Jason Everin's and so forth until the circle led back to Oz and I. It took me that long to figure out what I had to say; “No matter what happens here, we were a damn good crew in there.”

“All or none.” Oz said quietly.

“All or none.” several people in the room replied. The twenty one crew members that had started in our regular simulations were all there, and I couldn't have been more proud of them. The

chant began, and by the time a sergeant entered the room I'm sure half the station could hear us.

“Attention! Admiral on deck!” The sergeant called out, silencing the room. We all stood at attention, most of us falling back on reflexes learned in the recent simulation, not so much in real life.

Admiral Rice and another Officer with the rank of Admiral, a woman in her fifties with long blond hair, walked into the room and sat down at the table opposite me. “Be seated everyone, at ease.” She said in a raspy voice. When we were all seated she went on. “I am Fleet Admiral McKinley. Before I begin, Admiral Rice has a few things to

formalize.”

“Thank you Admiral. The decision to insert you into a surprise scenario came from Fleet Intelligence. After reviewing my reports on you they thought that we had to increase the perceived risk factor. After reviewing the preliminary results, I can see that we satisfied their requirements and passed their psyche evaluations. Having said that, it is my distinct pleasure to inform you that all charges have been dropped. As a crew and as individuals you have surpassed the expectations of Fleet Command and met all win conditions of the simulation in which you have 54

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com participated in for the last six days.”

The last sentence was more of a matter of record, with all the cheering going on in the room we didn't hear it. It took at least a few minutes for us to get it out of our system. When we had, Admiral Rice went on. “The results of the exercise are being studied, since you had many unconventional solutions for the problems we put in front of you, and once we have finished our study your Captain will receive all the data as well as the full analysis of your performances.

Each one of you will be provided with a report on all your actions during the simulation by a certified Fleet

Academy trainer except for those of you who were already enlisted. Servicemen and women should see a report from your former commanding officers tomorrow morning. It is our expectation that you will all review the reports carefully, the advice could be critical as enlisted officers. I realize that most of the people at this table never went through Fleet Academy, and if conditions were different, I would send you there, but we don't have time. The threat that we included in the simulation you just experienced is real. The *Paladin* is on her way back with a Triad fleet on her heels. In less than five days she'll come out of hyperspace and the third, fourth and seventh Battle Groups

will be out there waiting to greet her and defend the station. We expect to defeat whatever comes, so you won't be part of the defence, not this time anyway.”

Admiral Rice sighed and smiled a little. “To be honest I'm surprised, I expected some people to carry the weight while others spent all their time fighting their way over the learning curve. Instead I had the opportunity to witness everyone play to their strengths and offer their support to the crewman next to them. It normally takes months, even years to form such a camaraderie and fellowship. There are instructors who are very unhappy you succeeded, and more still who are examining every detail of the simulation replays to find

out how you did so well. With that thought, I'll turn the briefing over to Fleet Admiral McKinley. Good luck."

"Thank you. Now that's you're all pleased with yourselves, I have the pleasure of asking one last time before enlisting the lot of you; if there is a man or woman here who does not see themselves as fit for service, please leave the room now, there will be no dishonour or punishment in doing so," she waited several seconds before continuing on.

I looked around the table to see that everyone was firmly planted in their seat, and I nearly laughed aloud when I saw Minh-Chu leaning back with his fingers knitted behind his head, looking

very pleased with himself.

“Good, I'm going to need you all for what I have planned. Before I get into the details, let me catch you up on a few things. The results of your simulation have provided us with some interesting ideas for t h e *Sunspire*, a n d we're refining the modifications and alterations that were applied to her during this refit. The promotions granted in the simulation stand, and you're all being assigned to her. It is a controversial decision, but a good one I feel to put Captain Valent in command as well. If there is one thing I have learned from three decades as an officer, it is to *not mess with what works*. I'll be clear, this is not a light assignment. The only details 55

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com you are allowed to divulge to your families and friends is that most of the charges against you have been greatly lessened and you must serve in the Freeground Fleet as part of your sentence. If they ask for more details, tell them you have none. Your loved ones will be looked after and if they are in need we will help them. The rest of the details stay in this room and on that ship.

After the refit is complete the *Sunspire* will leave for the Argus Common Sector, you are to rename her and remove any details of her Freeground Shipyard origins from her

transponder. You'll be right in the middle of a cluster of heavily populated systems where there are dozens of corporately owned worlds. You're not being sent out on any normal kind of mission. The *Sunspire* will seem like an independent mercenary or heavily armed trader ship. You'll carry out missions under the direction of Freeground Fleet Special Operations while being left to fend for yourselves for the most part.

This is the kind of assignment that people dream of, you will see places and do things that most of us could not imagine. When looking for moral direction, you only have to think of home and whether or not what you are doing would be best for your crew, and best

for Freeground. There are only two other ships on the same assignment you are about to engage in, and they won't know you're there, you'll probably never see them, and if you did you probably wouldn't realize it. I have faith in you all, however. After doing nothing but reading your backgrounds and reports on your actions in the simulation for two days, I have faith that you are the right unusual crew for this unusual assignment.

Your primary mission as a crew will be to acquire information and technology that will help Freeground. That means that under your commanding officer's direction you will buy, copy, steal, and learn about anything we don't know

about or have already. Once your senior staff comes to a consensus that you have enough to make a significant leap forward in knowledge and technology for Freeground you will return. I expect your mission to take years, the crew members that will be augmenting you will be aware of this as well. Under special circumstances you can form ties with the governments you meet as a prelude to passing that relationship on to Freeground itself at the completion of your mission. You have one day to visit family and friends on the station and put your affairs in order.”

I had one more opportunity to speak to Admiral McKinley. As soon as our meeting was finished and everyone went

their separate ways for that last day on Freeground, Alice told me I was to report to the Admiral's office within the hour. I was watching the crews move my personal fighter into the launch bay of the *Sunspire* and had little else to do so I stepped into the nearest tube. I was so busy thinking my questions over that I didn't even notice the time passing as the tube car shuttled down several kilometres of tunnels and shafts.

Before I knew it I was crossing the Admiral's threshold. "Have a seat, 56

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com Captain," she said without looking up from a flat display in her hand. I sat down and

waited for her to finish. She turned the screen off and it disappeared leaving the thin display projector, a cylinder smaller than her little finger.

“You're here because I need to answer your questions before I send you off into civilization with your crew. Someone was supposed to go with you on the initial trip, but he's been directed elsewhere. This question period is all you get. Where do you want to start?”

I thought for a minute before uncorking a bottle that I knew I'd never be able to close up again. “Wouldn't it be better to put someone who has a lot of experience in Corporate Territory in command? I don't know much about what's out there.”

“You make a good point, almost no one in your initial crew or anyone I'm assigning to the *Sunspire* has any experience where you're going. It's important to think of the situation another way. Ask yourself; is there anything you can imagine out there that would ever convince you that your home isn't Freeground?”

I pondered that for a moment, and at the time, I couldn't imagine how I could call any other place home. “No, I can't say I can.”

“In this case that's what's most important. You're all patriots, all born here and everyone has spent most of your lives here. You're also skilled, but many of you are not trained militarily.

So when it comes down to it, many of your crew would not think or behave like you're military. You may use your Officer training, know how to interact with Freeground Fleet personnel, even understand how our systems and procedures work but you think differently, you'll reflexively behave differently.”

“That's quite an answer.”

“You can thank Admiral Rice. She's the one who built your profile.”

“I don't have a right to know, but I was wondering why we were switched from her command to yours.”

“It wasn't because of her daughter. Ayan is right in the middle of this and even though the Admiral is an exemplary

officer she can't be expected to be absolutely objective. Besides, Fleet Command has decided it's time for her to have her own command again. Admiral Rice will be leaving after the *Paladin* arrives and we've defended Freeground. Things are changing, and she has to be out there."

"Does Ayan know?"

"She will today." The Admiral leaned forward then, her tone quieted. "Some time ago the upper ranks in Fleet Command realized that our isolation didn't guarantee our safety, in fact it is becoming more of a liability than ever. Free worlds and stations are under assault, whether it be economically, socially or by military force. As one of

the last free ports within thousands of light years we draw immigrants of all kinds and they're saying that almost everywhere else it's becoming impossible for an individual to own something, and just a shard to not become someone else's property in some way or another. We have also been losing ground technologically for over a hundred years in military, medical and social sciences. By the same token we are generally more advanced in power management, agriculture and habitation technologies. Our strengths benefit us and attract negative attention at 57

First Light Chronicles	Freeground
Randolph	Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com	the same

time.

Just think, Freeground manufactures more than it can use in almost every category. Food, air, ships, anything you could imagine is inexpensive to residents because we sell up to half of what we make, we just have too much. We also have a parliament, a real democracy and a military that answers to the people through our governing body. You grew up here, so you wouldn't know, but it has been very hard to find any place where those conditions still exist. When a place becomes as successful as we are, it draws attention to itself and we're out here all alone now. We have the attention of half the galaxy and barely know what's out there

anymore because of our isolationist ways. I know I've only seen three planetside cities in my life, visited a handful of worlds, so in just a few months out there I bet you and your crew will be able to *teach me* something.

When that time comes part of your mission is to find technology and knowledge that may be useful to Freeground and acquire it any way you see fit. We have targets for you, but it's just as important for you to be our eyes and ears, find your own targets. Just remember, as soon as you leave Freeground, you're no longer military and as far as the Galaxy is concerned, you own the *Sunspire* and pay your crew just like any mercenary ship. Of course

your crew don't expect to be paid until you return, but you can always take the opportunity to do so if conditions permit and you think it wise.”

“I think I will. Thank you Admiral, that answers everything on my mind and a bit more,” I stood and snapped her a salute.

“It's your ship Captain, accomplish your goals however you like. Just remember us out here in the dark.”

58

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **Boarding**

The officer's quarter on the station was more like a first class hotel and the lounge was larger than most nightclubs I

had seen. There were instantly noticeable differences, however. All the colours were subdued greys, crimsons and blacks, the lighting was low in habitation areas and clear and bright in main hallways. The quarters they gave me were even larger than the captain's quarters on the ship, and the furniture looked new. If there was one thing I could take with me to the *Sunspire* it would have been the bed. It was absolutely huge, a king size, and felt amazing. I didn't know then that while we were off ship in stasis, they had quadrupled the refit crew, and the quarters, even the misused common room had been rebuilt and refurnished. The bed waiting for me in my new

captain's quarters was much better than what I had experienced in the simulation, even if it didn't quite match the one in the station's officer's quarters.

Despite the creature comforts, I couldn't sleep. At four in the morning Fleet time, I found myself sitting in the main lounge, sipping decaffeinated coffee, looking out one of the transparent bulkheads to the *Sunspire*. The refit was finished, and she was set up front and center in full view of the lounge for the launch. Every part of the ship had been somehow changed, they even reshaped parts of the outer hull, expanded the launch and retrieval bay, and added retractable cargo carrying systems. The twenty eight retractable rail cannons

were all hidden under their armoured hatches and the long, graceful curves of the hull had been restored to the original reflective surface. It was a gracefully shaped antique on the outside and not as large as most carriers but larger than most destroyer class ships. I couldn't believe I was put in command.

I was still letting recent events sink in. My old life felt like a dream and I knew I would miss all the people I had come to know well over the years of simulations we had done together in our spare time but everyone knew I was moving on to something that felt right, gave me purpose and direction. I smiled and sighed quietly, looking over the shape of the ship and still not quite

believing how everything turned out.

I nearly jumped out of my chair when Oz clapped me on the back. “Couldn't sleep either, huh?”

“Sneaking up on a superior officer should be a court marshal-able offence.”

“Ah, rank isn't an issue in the lounge, didn't they tell you?” He looked out at the *Sunspire*, “She's beautiful, isn't she?”

“She is. I would have never thought that the ship I saw just over a week ago

59

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com would turn
into this.”

“I've never seen Ayan so happy. We

got the early tour from the Admiral, they even changed the hallways. I spoke to one of the Engineering Staff Sergeants while the Rice ladies were off talking, he said working on the *Sunspire's* hull was more like art than structural engineering. They used some kind of reshaping tool that worked on the regenerative hull for most of it. Now I didn't understand much of what he said, but I think the Fleet is really hot for getting their hands on more of what she's made of."

"So I've heard. Two of our objectives out there are to quietly alter conditions so Fleet can come in once we're gone and take over ergranian mining operations and ore stores. We won't just

be buying and stealing out there, we'll be saboteurs and shock raiders if we can find the opportunity. At the same time no one can know where we're from, that we are part of the Freeground Fleet," even though I was in a secure section of the station, I found myself looking over my shoulder briefly.

"That explains why they're so comfortable setting us up on the *Sunspire*. They only built a few since they were too small to be an adequate deep space destroyer or carrier and too big to be a heavy corvette and she's almost two hundred years old."

"You're right, we can't let anyone on board though. She may look like an antique on the outside, but I don't think

they left any system untouched. The only thing I think they really should have changed is the location of the bridge. I don't think shielding it is really enough and it's too easy to recognize it as a rich target.”

“We'll have to talk to Ayan about that.”

“You know, I can't help but wonder how long we'll really be out there.”

“Do you have someone who'll be waiting for you?”

“I have three sisters, two of which like having a trained infantryman as a babysitter.”

“I keep forgetting that's something you and Minh have in common.”

“Too many sisters? Yup, it's good to

have someone who understands. I just hope our sisters never team up. We'd be done for.”

“Probably,” I stood up and walked to the window, Oz stood to follow me. “I don't know how long we'll be out, we won't need supplies, and we're generally going to avoid getting into a firefight whenever possible. I expect leave will take place planet side while we're out there. I really can't say.”

Oz laughed quietly and shook his head.

“What?”

“You already sound like you've been in the captain's chair for years.”

“Oh, I'm sure my inexperience will show.”

“Sometimes, sure, but I've got your back, and Ayan won't let anything happen to her ship if she can help it.”

“I'm glad I'm letting her rename it.”

“So is she. I'm surprised you didn't tell her yourself, it was just there in the briefing notes you sent us. We got them while we were touring the ship and she was 60

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com so happy she actually squealed.”

“I don't know that she wants to see me right now. Sometimes it feels like I'm talking to the Ayan I knew in the simulations, and other times it seems like she couldn't be more distant if she

were across the galaxy.”

“The first thing she asked when we met Admiral Rice for the tour was 'Will Jonas be joining us?'" He said in his best imitation of a British accent.

“Probably asking for her own protection.”

“Ah, she's crazy about you, but she's not like us either, she's a former military brat who had to work her ass off to get what she has and she's been through a lot. Or it's just as simple as not wanting to break regulation.”

“Break regulation?”

“Well, you're a Captain, she's a Commander, the two of you get together and it's grounds for disciplinary action for both of you unless you can keep

personal interactions to shore leave and official downtime. She's career, and now you've gone career and that makes things even worse.”

“I know how much that means to her, not much either of us can do except maybe go covert and both serve on a mercenary ship where the regulations regarding inter-crew relations are reduced to the same point as long voyage vessels.”

“I almost forgot about that, we're allowed to fraternize at any rank while we're off duty according to those regulations. That should be interesting.”

“Most of the other regulations will be relaxed as well, it's not going to feel much like a military ship. We'll have to

redesign our uniforms, drop salutes, and even implement only the most important procedural procedures. Unless we're on watch or in combat she won't feel much like a military ship. I hope Ayan and I get a chance to enjoy some free time once we're under way, I know I'll do my best to make the time.”

“Now that's more like it. Think positive, she chews my ear off about you when I see her, unless she's in the engine room that is, and you chew my other ear off about her when we meet up. If this doesn't stop I'll just lock the two of you in a room.”

“That's a court marshal.”

“Nope, I'll just report both of you unfit for command.”

“That's dirty.”

“First thing they teach you in hand to hand; the dirtier fighter almost always wins.”

The deck shook just slightly, we both felt it but couldn't see anything wrong in the lounge or outside in the dry dock. “Alice, what's going on?” I asked, bringing my new command and control arm console, much larger and more powerful than my old one, up to project an image of Alice or any other information she needed to present.

“I'm checking now, but all communications from the Operations deck have stopped. One moment.” Oz and I waited patiently while Alice tried to collect more information. “Security is

responding to a n explosion i n main
Operations a n d a section of the
command deck, all ships are on alert
status and they're launching 61

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com fighters. No
one seems to know exactly what's going
on yet Jonas.”

I looked at Oz; “Wake the crew?”

“I think so, heading to the nearest
weapons locker wouldn't be a bad idea
either. I may not know what's going on
but I'd rather not be unarmed if I can
help it.”

“It's a start. Alice, alert the crew and
send them up to date information on
what's happening. Include instructions to

assemble on the *Sunspire* immediately,” I followed Oz to the nearest weapons locker. He punched in his security code, opened the heavy security door and handed me a holstered particle driver. I made sure it was fully charged and strapped it on. As far as sidearms go, I thought it was overdoing it a little. Not hard to aim but it was the only hull friendly weapon that I had heard of that fired ten rounds per second and carried several days worth of charge. Then I looked at Oz's selection.

He strapped on the same sidearm I had then took what looked like some kind of grisly antique out from the bottom of the locker. “What the hell is that?”

“It's called a semi-automatic shot gun with recoilless reciprocating barrels. It fires a variable load. I prefer buckshot myself. I call it *the crowd pleaser*.”

“Sometimes I think you like your job a little too much. Let's head to the *Sunspire*. I get the feeling we'll be put to work even earlier than we expected.”

"Again."

We ran down two hallways, I made sure I was following Oz's movements carefully. We were moving quickly but covering our corners and making sure the way was clear before passing down any corridor or through any open room. I was about to ask why when I looked through one of the large skylights over a hallway hub and saw ingress pods

heading towards the station, there were thousands of them and the defence turrets weren't all on line, so some were getting through. "There!" I pointed.

"Oh, now that's not good," he said before tapping his command and control unit to open a link to station security. "This is Commander Terry McPatrick of t h e *Sunspire* currently located in junction 14b of the station officer's quarters. Incursion pods have been sighted, looks like some of them will make it through defensive fire."

"Thank you Commander, security teams are on their way. You are instructed to leave the Officer's deck as soon a s possible and find another safe location. Coordinate with a security

team if you encounter one.”

“Thank you, I'll be on the *Sunspire*.
Commander McPatrick out.”

I heard the first of the pods hit a hallway somewhere behind us and start cutting into the hull. “Lead the way!”

“Time to go, try to keep up!” Oz shouted, and for the next few minutes I found myself wondering how a six foot four behemoth like him could move so fast. We were lucky and didn't run into boarders on the way, but we could hear gunfire. We stopped at the corner before the lift that lead right down to the boarding ramp leading to the *Sunspire*. I was fighting for breath.

“You're out of shape, we'll have to work on that,” Oz pointed out, barely 62

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com winded at all.

“My last fitness review said I was in great shape.”

“For a station bound civilian. You're Captain now, you should be tip top. Besides, when was the last time you ran anywhere for real? I bet you only remember what running is really like because you've done it in simulations. I'll get you back in fighting form, Jonas.”

“I'm Captain of a star ship, not joining a wrestling team.”

I crossed the hallway to check the next corner and felt something brush right past me but didn't see it. Oz picked up on my reaction and fired his shotgun right

beside me. The noise was so sudden and brutal it was painful, and he caught what brushed by me full in the back.

Without hesitation Oz turned in the other direction, fired once, then fired down the third hallway. His third shot seemed to cause the air itself to erupt with bits of blood and debris and I opened fire on the area. My left ear rung and my left arm stung like crazy but I cut a line of fire across the middle of the hall and one of the targets became fully visible. He was wearing an all black vacuum suit, my shots had hit the control on his wrist. The way he was laying showed that another body had fallen under him.

“Stealth suits? I've never heard of it

being done so well,” I said while trying to guess the outline of the invisible body trapped under his comrade. “Grab the controller on the invisible one's arm,” I pointed with my sidearm to where the body should lie.

Oz felt around and after a moment he yanked hard without success. He took aim with the shotgun and I ducked around the corner. It was as he blasted the man's arm off with two shots that I realized that Oz's first shot actually hit my arm. Glancing down I could see at least a dozen small holes. “You shot me!” I yelled as loud as I could, though I could barely hear myself.

Oz came around the corner with the fallen man's arm, controller still attached

and gave me a sheepish grin, “I was hoping you wouldn't notice.” He shrugged. “Let's get to the ship.”

Oz fired once down the last hallway, didn't catch anything and we sprinted down to the lift. I held my left arm as we descended and looked down to see that it was covered in blood from many little entry wounds. “You shot me!” I repeated at Oz in angry disbelief. “With an antique weapon!”

We arrived at the bottom and met up with other crew members coming from different sections of the station. The boarding ramp was wide enough to transport massive equipment as well as providing plenty of room for people to embark or disembark in large groups.

Minh-Chu was watching the entrance with plasma rifle in hand. "What happened to you?" He asked as I ran past him.

"Raiders." Oz replied too loudly, the shotgun had obviously effected his hearing as well.

"He shot me!" I protested. As soon as I stepped onto the deck of the ship all 63

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com that was nearly forgotten, however, and I headed straight for the bridge. I could hear the power plants warming up. A shocked Ensign wearing a Fleet Medical emblem on his collar looked at me wide eyed. "Sir, you should-"

“You should see if there are any other wounded then come see me with an emergency med pack in the bridge.”

“But sir!”

“That's an order!” I barked as the lift doors closed. There were other crew members in the lift with me and I tried to keep an absolutely straight face as I did what I knew I had to. “Alice, medical analysis; how bad is it?”

“Not fatal, there are thirty one small punctures with only eighteen pieces of metal embedded in bone or muscle tissue. You'll live.”

“Good, now close the holes in my vacsuit, compress on the wounds and seal it. That should hold until I can get treated.”

“You know, you could stop off in medical.”

“Just do it,” I ground my teeth together as she followed my instructions, and then the doors opened onto the bridge.

“Captain on deck!” I heard a voice call out, but didn't much care to look who it was.

“At ease, I have the feeling we have our work cut out for us.”

Sergeant Everin cringed at seeing whatever face I had made while the doors were opening and looked back to his station, “Orders from Admiral McKinley, video message.” He reported.

“Put it up,” I instructed as I sat down in the Captain's chair carefully. The

Admiral's full form appeared in the middle of the bridge, the holographic image was so clear it almost forced me to my feet for a salute. "Captain Valent, you are to take on your crew, set a course and head straight out. Do not engage the enemy on your way out of the area, enter hyperspace as soon as possible. Oh, and say hello to Alice for me. That is all, good voyage."

I looked at my command and control unit and noticed that it had taken a piece of buckshot as well, though it only did superficial damage. "Hello Alice?"

"That was code sir. When I was transferred to this unit I found orders waiting in case there was an early attack on the base. We are to select new

coordinates far away from Triad Consortium space, destroy our uniforms, delete all evidence and record of Freeground and Fleet from our computers except for what you would find in a normal merchant or mercenary ship's computer and disregard all Freeground Fleet orders and instructions. The Admiral is operating under the assumption that Freeground Fleet Intelligence has been compromised. They will find a way to contact us at a later time if necessary. It looks like we'll have to make our own allies out there if we want any help Captain. There are other details here, but I doubt they relate to our current situation.”

I realized when she finished that everyone on the bridge heard what my AI had said, so I regarded the bridge staff directly; “Everyone hear that? New orders, it's time to leave.”

64

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“About time we got out there,” I heard Oz comment from behind me. He stepped in to my right side and directed a Fleet doctor to my left, “I can take us out while you get treated Captain.”

“Not on your life.” I said with a chuckle. “Treat me here doc.”

The doctor shrugged and nodded. He was a much older fellow with greying

hair and seemed unsurprised by everything going on, as though this were just another day on the job. “My name is Doctor Anderson, now just stay still and you won't feel a thing, Captain.”

I looked to the navigation station, where both Ensign Tommin and Lieutenant Commander Fields worked to ensure everything was in order. “Plot us a course for the Gai-Ian system. Just the first jump will do for now.”

“Yes sir!” Answered Ensign Tommin, a young officer who had only graduated the academy the last year.

The Doctor smiled as he sprayed on a local anaesthetic. The relief was instant and welcome, “Good choice Captain.”

“You know it?”

“Was just there a couple years ago on the Apollo, the ship I serve on. It's mostly an agricultural planet, but they're good people with deep roots.”

“That's good to hear, I only knew it was a free system. Isn't the Apollo out of the area though? How are you on Freeground?”

“The station is hiding two entire battle groups including the Apollo. We have a surprise waiting for whatever is coming for us. Looks like we'll have to spring it earlier than we thought.”

“Then you should get back to your crew.”

“No point now, operationally I can't leave the ship, I already know too much and your orders are to get us out of here.

So I'll fix your arm, you get your crew out of the area and on mission," Doctor Anderson whispered. "Then maybe I'll see what your medical section looks like and whip your triage crew into shape, with your permission, of course."

"Of course."

Oz smiled at overhearing the exchange as he checked his holographic command console. "We're only missing three, sir, a mechanic, a pilot and medic. We've taken on eleven extra who were blocked off by fighting on the station."

"Let's be underway, Commander."

"Yes sir," Oz replied with a smile. "Release umbilicals, moorings, seal exterior hatches, signal secondary operations to open the nearest launch

doors and give us our trajectory.”

I picked up where Oz left off, he was doing the departure list for the first time, after all. “All department heads report in.”

Over the next few minutes I heard the voices of many friends, it was like being back in the simulations again, that feeling of being surrounded by people who were all glad to be there, all looking to work together towards a common goal and when the helm reported ready I couldn't help but grin. “Take us out, best speed. Put 65

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com the exterior
view up on the main display.”

We manoeuvred through the dry dock where every able ship was being manned and made ready. There were only a few ships that were still in rough shape or mid refit, so there were two dozen various ships almost ready to go. We passed through the doors, which really seemed only just large enough. I looked down and saw that the doctor was actually just finished repairing the damage to my arm.

“Thank you doctor.”

“Just try not to get in his way again,” he replied, gesturing towards Oz while shaking his head.

My first officer had no time to reply as he commanded refractive and bridge shielding to be raised and requested

reports from tactical and navigation.

“We have several thousand enemy targets on the coreward side of the station sir, they're matched by our ships,” Ensign Thomas answered from tactical.

“Coordinates are set for our first course, waiting to reach a safe distance before engaging the hyperspace systems,” answered Lieutenant Fields from Navigation. “A ten count will get us there at our current speed Sir.”

“Then start the counter at ten seconds. We don't want to damage the station.”

I set the main viewer to display the station with one of the control pads on my chair.

“Just don't forget us out here in the

dark,” I said to myself as I watched Freeground shrink into the distance on the bridge holographic viewer. “Sir?” Sargent Everin asked, turning towards me from communications.

“Something Admiral McKinley said to me the other day. Fleet is putting a lot of trust in us. We're skilled, intelligent, and glad to do our part, but the largest reason why we're here is because we all call that station home.”

Once we were a safe distance away we entered hyperspace and after the post entry check list had been run through, I addressed the crew on the ship wide communications system. “This is the Captain. As you're all aware, this wasn't the way we planned to leave, but as far

as departures go, I can say this isn't the worst I could have imagined. There was supposed to be a launch this morning, and our Chief Engineer, Commander Rice, was to name the ship in honour of those who have served on her before.

They were a good crew that faced terrible odds and never gave up. I doubt that we will have a chance to have that launch now, but I believe that we have had something better. This ship has been christened by purpose and we've been given the gift of trust. We, as the sons and daughters of Freeground are to go incognito into the darkness and find assets that will aid the people back home before eventually returning there ourselves. Though we will not be

wearing uniforms, we must still honour those who have come before us and those we leave behind so we may return with our heads held high.

In honour of them and her last crew, this ship will be called by the name *First Light*. I ask everyone to take a moment of silence for those who have given their lives on this ship when you can. Then welcome unfamiliar faces aboard wherever you see them. They are your new brothers and sisters. That is all.”

66

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com Everyone on
the bridge got back to work, though there

was little to do since we were safely in hyperspace. “Well said Captain,” Oz said with a smile.

“I’ve heard better.” Doctor Anderson said quietly. “But not often,” he added with a wry grin.

67

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com **Hyperspace**

I spent the entire next day on the bridge, reading reports and making sure that the ship was doing well for it's first long hyperspace journey since all the systems, engines included, were replaced. There was nothing major amiss. Oz and I found ourselves agreeing that we were glad that department heads

wouldn't have to submit daily reports any longer because with few problems to solve it got pretty boring. Neither of us were used to reading for hours every day. Ayan was another story. She seemed to be perfectly settled in, and whenever our paths crossed she was always reading or listening to a report while doing something else. It was obvious that she was quite used to being a senior officer. The chilly demeanour was gone, however. She was busy, sure, and was taking a personal hand in all the fine tuning that was necessary after a refit, but she always had a moment or two for a smile and a few words.

The dress code in engineering had gone the way the rest of the ship had, no

more Freeground uniforms. Ayan and the senior engineering staff had instead assigned their department grey vacsuits that had room for all their essential hand tools, an optional pulse sidearm, and included conductive weave that rendered them all immune to electromagnetic weaponry and most accidents resulting from current. It was also designed in such a way that it could not snag on anything and was resistant to impacts and most punctures. All the technology existed before, but was normally reserved for specialist uniforms. After I saw them I was more than happy that the engineering department had taken the opportunity to improve things. After seeing the work

that had been done on uniforms there I ordered all other departments to design their new vacsuits. They were to include the safety measures that the engineering staff had implemented since they added no extra bulk, very little weight, and left room for other improvements.

Two days later, in the early morning I ran into Ayan, who was just on her way into engineering from the main hall. She had her coffee in one hand and was projecting a holographic representation of one of our reactors from the thin command and control unit on her other wrist. She stopped before the door opened and fixed me with a smile.

“Good morning,” she said brightly.

“Good morning. I haven't had a

chance to tell you yet, but the new uniforms look great. I think all the other departments are treating the assignment to design their new uniforms as a competition.”

68

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

“Well, it beats most long hyperspace voyages. It's all people are talking about, but at least their talking. I hear the gunnery crews are almost finished theirs and Minh-Chui is keeping the pilot uniforms a secret. How are the bridge staff uniforms coming?”

“We haven't really had time, to be honest. On one hand we're taking care of

the routine hyperspace travel watch, on the other there are new communication, leave and general security protocols to review. Jason, or Sergeant Everin, rather, is doing some great work on our encryption, but it's taking forever to test and finalize.”

Ayan's expression slowly grew into a grin. “Just a few days out here and you're already sounding like you've been in command for years.”

“Most of the time it feels that way,” I agreed as I followed her into the center of the engineering section. They called it the pit. There was a ramp leading down into a octagon shaped control section where all the systems could be monitored on control panels and through

holograms. “Other times something comes up that I've never even heard of before.”

“That's what we're here for. Your senior staff. If you haven't seen something, chances are we have. If not, well, we can just figure it out together.”

“True, that's taking some getting used to.”

“I could imagine.”

I looked around and realized that we were right in the middle of four five story tall reactors. “How is the refit looking?”

“Fantastic. Lots of things to iron out, sure, but these new reactors are amazing. They don't require the maintenance that the old ones did, and they put out a lot

more power while having no harmful radiological footprint. No worrying about containment, cooling, they can't explode and there are so few moving parts that they barely look like reactors at all. I'm glad I was keeping up with engineering advancements, otherwise I'd be pretty confused."

"Well, you have work to do and I should move on myself. I'll see you soon I'm sure."

Ayan put her coffee down and locked the mug to the shelf with the press of a button. "I'll walk you out."

"I'm surprised the power plants aren't larger."

"They're smaller than I expected too, more than half of the space the old

systems took up is free in engineering. When we find some of that new technology that we're after, maybe we can add it to the ship.”

“That's what I was thinking,” I said, smiling at her.

She fixed me with a warm, glad expression as we reached the door. “I'm glad we're thinking alike. I'll see you later?”

I nodded and started walking away.

The Doctor, who was jogging towards us and witnessed the end of our exchange stopped to run on the spot beside me as she walked back towards the center of engineering and the door closed behind her. “Now that was some smile,” he whispered.

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com

“It was.”

“Well, regardless of whatever chemistry you have going, I'm glad to see that you visit your department heads where they live. It shows that their ideas are important, that you want to be involved and familiar with the entire ship. That's critical to winning the respect of your Officers, especially on a ship without Fleet uniforms. It might be a good idea to stop in on engineering every morning as well, should help things between you two.”

“Between us two?” I asked with a

raised eyebrow.

“ O h , c o m e o n n o w Captain, everyone's watching you both. People are pairing up, and we're all wondering when you two will follow suit.”

“Everyone? It's only been a few days.”

Doctor Anderson g r i n n e d and resumed jogging down the corridor. “You should join me sometime, looks like you could use a run.”

I had only been on one long hyperspace voyage before. Though it's the second fastest method o f travel next t o moving through h i g h compression wormholes, it can get very long. I took the Doctor up on his advice the next day, and the day after that.

Doctor Carl Anderson, or Doc as I had started calling him, had been given the Medical Department head position since he had the most experience in Fleet and in medicine. He had been a doctor for over a decade before joining the infantry, where he served eight years. He signed up with Fleet afterwards and spent twenty seven years on different ships treating the wounded and from what the file said he was forced to take command on six different occasions. He was eighty five but had to slow down on his jogs so I could keep up. Every morning he jogged around one deck of the ship three or four times.

“So, are you going to the party tonight?” Doc asked as we jogged down

the main hallway of deck 13, which was part engineering and part crew quarters. The main hallway, which looped around the entire deck, had been reshaped during the refit so it could accommodate four abreast.

“Their calling it the Pilot's Ball, and I have to go, I'm the Captain.”

“Not to this one, Commander Buu is throwing it. Technically you can just stay on the bridge or make a token appearance and leave.”

I thought about it for a moment. “That's tempting, but it's the first social event and I've barely seen a lot of people since we entered hyperspace. For a quiet hyperspace trip everyone has been really busy. Some of us barely get

enough rack time.”

“Ah, the first voyage after a refit is always like this. Lots of bolts to tighten, even a few to loosen up. Just be glad no one forgot to finish installing anything.”

“How many refits have you seen?”

“Two, the Andromeda and the Ramses.”

“How did those work out?”

“The Andromeda started falling apart right after her relaunch. Downright 70

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com embarrassing for the refit crew, damn funny to everyone who was praying for an extra couple weeks leave.”

“I could imagine.”

“Are we having much trouble with the refit? Seems pretty smooth in medical. Other than having to re-hang a cupboard, nothings come loose or fallen over.”

“Well, Ayan shut down reactor three for a day or so.”

“Impressive. I didn't even notice her switch power plants.”

“Well, she's right into her work, literally. I went by to see how the repairs were doing yesterday morning and she had crawled inside the power plant. I didn't think there was room in there for anything.”

“Whatever she's doing, it's working. She's going t o the Pilot's Ball you know.”

“Oh?”

“Aye, she was talking about it when she came into medical to get a bone density treatment. We ended up talking for a while, turns out I know her mother.”

“So you already knew about reactor three and how things were going in engineering.”

“What would make you think that?”

“Because if you ask her how she's doing she talks about engineering. She could have grown a new head since you last saw her and she'd still talk about how the ion intermix is a little off, or the deck plating under reactor two has developed a little creak during gravity adjustments.”

“You caught me, I must be losing my

touch in my old age.”

“Ah, us humans are living to four hundred these days, you're still a young man.”

“Even longer soon, but that's not the point. I ' m t w i c e t h e o l d e s t crew member's age and then some, if I don't live vicariously through at least a few of you young pups I'll spend this whole trip bored out of my mind. Besides, that's the price of this old man's advice.”

“For an old man you run me ragged on these morning runs of ours.”

“Ah, you're mistaken, i t ' s m y run, you're just following along.”

“Right, so what's your advice old man?”

“Go to the Pilot's Ball and try to keep

up,” he said with a playfully challenging finality before increasing the pace for the last stretch of our second turn around the deck.

71

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com **The Pilots
Ball**

That night Minh-Chu was in his own paradise. It was the first chance he had to show off his new flight crew. The twenty one fighters that had been assigned to pilots were spread out across the launch bay and each one had been labelled with their call signs. The main observation deck, which had a semi transparent floor to show the

fighter bay below and a fully transparent wall in the front for a view of open space, was abuzz with the majority of the crew. Only a skeleton crew was manning the stations, which was more than enough for hyperspace travel. It was so good to see everyone casually and only the pilots were dressed the uniformly. Their new pilot gear included a thicker black vacsuit, a protective helmet with a fully transparent face and a flight jacket that looked like it was pulled right out of an ancient museum. There were no identifying markers on any of them.

“Creative,” I said to Minh-Chu, clinking my glass of champaign to his.

“Thank you, Captain. We all

contributed something. Our new pilots are doing well too, we've been drilling since we entered hyperspace.”

“So I've read, but I haven't had time to watch any of the results.”

“Oh, so you become Captain and don't have any time left for Minh. Well, when you can make time, you should watch yesterdays second drill. I thought running scenarios with you guys was intense, but these pilots are insane.”

“Now you know how we felt.”

Minh laughed and nodded as Oz joined us. “Hey Minh, how do I get one of those jackets? The materializer won't make me one.”

“Ha! You have to be a pilot or mechanic! I restricted them,” replied

Minh, I noticed right away that all the pilots in hearing distance had quieted down and were listening in.

“Well, I happen to know the Captain, I'm sure he can do something about that.”

“Sorry Commander, if my top Flight Officer says they're flight deck only uniforms, you'll have to live with it or apply for his department.”

“Well, I'll have to come up with something for bridge officers then. Maybe we'll all wear long coats like the Captain here,” Oz said smugly, gesturing at my engineers trench coat.

“Sure, just don't make us look like we're in our pyjamas.”

“Now why would I do that?”

“It could happen, I never know with

you Oz.”

“Well, I hope that that's the new Engineering uniform,” Minh said as he

72

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com looked across the Observation deck. I turned around to trace his line of sight and I swear my heart stopped.

Ayan had arrived with a few of the engineers, she was in a long white dress with a scooped neckline. Her red hair was curled tightly into ringlets and hung down to the middle of her neck where a white choker was wrapped with a blue jewel formed in the shape of a circle with a sword struck through it, the

emblem of Freeground. Around her shoulders she wore a long shimmering white shawl that reached down past her knees.

She smiled at me and walked to the bar with Laura, who was dressed similarly in black and looked nearly as stunning. The both of them walked with such grace and confidence that they seemed all together separate from everyone else. I crossed the room to the bar and smiled at her. I'm glad she spoke first, because I don't know what I would have said if she hadn't.

“Good evening Captain.”

“How are you Commander?”

“Great, I'm celebrating.”

“Oh? Is there an occasion other than

Minh showing off his crew?"

"We finally have everything just the way we want it in Engineering. Where's Commander Buu by the way? I want to thank him for putting all this together."

"Oh, he's right over there," I pointed.

"Thank you, I'll see you later, Captain," she said as she walked off, flashing me a smile. Her light Britannic accent and graceful manner had me absolutely dumbstruck. I could do no more than watch her glide away.

The bartender, an Ensign from general maintenance, grinned and handed me something blue and frothy in a tall mug. "That might take the edge off sir." She said with a grin that almost touched her ears.

“Thank you,” I said before taking a sip. To my surprise it was very good. I took a seat on a barstool and put my mug down. Unlike the mornings when I visited Ayan in engineering and it seemed there was always something to talk about and never enough time, I was completely tongue tied. I found myself watching her and tried to look away casually. She was Ayan, but in that dress she also seemed to be someone altogether different.

The doctor came over and leaned against the bar beside me, looking at my drink. “Noganto ale, a little bitter with a sweet aftertaste, haven't had it in years.”

“Ah, that's what this is called.”

He gestured for another. “One of my

favourites. No alcohol, but there is a blend of other natural substances that will make you feel relaxed and just a little euphoric. Just don't overdo it or you'll be in medical thinking you're a cloud for hours.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

The doctor and I peeled away from the bar and continued our mingling, I managed to meet and talk to everyone I wanted to see that night. I was even 73

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com introduced to most of the new crew members we had taken aboard when we took our sudden leave from Freeground. They were mostly experienced crewmen, and none

were displeased with their predicament. At least not so displeased that they'd take that occasion to make me aware of it. Always, my eyes drifted back to Ayan, I couldn't help it. She caught me more than once and would flash a smile or pretend she didn't notice. Once she raised her glass while looking back at me from across the room. I had to return the gesture and everyone I was speaking with at the time looked over their shoulders to see who I was regarding. When they turned back to face me there were great big smiles all around.

The night wore on, and when things started to quiet down I saw her walk through a side door that led to a smaller section of the observation deck with

more subdued lighting. I didn't think, I just followed quietly. The room was quiet, dark and unfurnished. The only light to see by was the faint blue and white coming through the transparent wall. The din of music and conversation in the main room behind had disappeared, dispersed by a noise barrier and Ayan stood looking out the window, the gentle illumination of hyperspace danced across her features. Visible solar winds and the flow of energy, radiant stars and nebulae in distant space all drifted by, ethereal and unreal, like it were some luminescent dream.

I crossed the room and put my arm around her waist. It felt like the most

natural thing to do. She relaxed and leaned against me. “Not in my wildest dreams did I think you were this beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “You’re not too bad yourself. I love the coat.”

“It was my father’s. He gave it to me when I entered the service as an engineer.”

“Tell me about him.”

I was surprised at the request, and as she put her arm around my waist and made herself more comfortable, I went on; “He grew up on Osiris, and trained as an engineer. He left the system and travelled as a journeyman for a few years.”

“How did he meet your mother?”

“Well, she was born on Osiris as well, and the way he used to tell it, he was a little down on his luck until he met her on a transport heading back home. He pursued her for weeks after they met. She would pretend he wasn't even there, until she finally gave him a chance.

She used to tell me that he was so relentless, but charming, and she didn't understand that his motives were pure, well, fairly pure. He took her to the Giardini Dell'acqua, and showed her how the water gardens worked from the mechanical side before taking her outside in time to see a gold and blue sunset.”

“I would have liked to meet your

parents.”

“I didn't think about them much for a while, but lately my mind has been wandering back. I remember when I last saw my father. He walked me up to the boarding ramp as I was disembarking for All-Con Prime. He wasn't a man of many 74

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com words, but just when I was about to say goodbye, he shook my hand and said; 'I'm proud of you.' Those were his last words to me.”

“So this is the Jonas that no one sees.” She whispered, looking up to me. “I think I like him.”

We stood together quietly for a long

time, looking out at the stars as they came closer very slowly.

“I'm finally okay,” she said after a while. “Thank you for letting me rename the ship.”

“*First Light* is perfect, I'd have it no other way.”

“I read all the orders through. We're really on our own out here, they want us to make our own rules and find our own way. When we're finished they'll probably debrief us for a year and even change how they run some parts of the fleet if we do well enough.”

“I know, I try to think about how things might be different after a few years out here, what it might be like to return home after being gone so long,

and I just can't wrap my head around it.”

“Some people are already decorating, I think it's starting to sink in that this will be our home for a while. Laura's quarters are starting to look more like an apartment, she even put up a picture of Sergeant Everin.”

“Jason's picture? Lucky him, I'll have to mention it next time I see him on the bridge.”

“Don't you dare, they've only been on one date.”

“People are dating now?”

“He found a quiet corner and set up a table and chairs. She said he was a complete gentleman. I think they're supposed to meet after his shift is over tomorrow.”

“I forgot mercenary ships allowed fraternization until Oz mentioned it the day we departed. That's something the simulation didn't prepare any of us for.” We stood quietly for a while longer, just enjoying the view and the quiet moment.

“I'm sorry I was so cold while we were in the simulation,” she said quietly.

“Officers in the Fleet aren't allowed to fraternize while aboard.”

“Yes, but they're still allowed to behave like friends. I brushed you off and avoided you. My training told me to forget everything but the fact that you were my commanding officer, anything else was a distraction, and I tried,” she looked up to me and I could see the tears in her eyes. “There was nothing I wanted

more than to get to know this man I had met in the simulations better in person. When I met you and wasn't disappointed, it was so hard to not let that get in the way of what we had to do. I couldn't stand the idea of getting close to you and having my mother criticize me for it. There were too many reasons for me to keep you at a distance, but I never wanted to. After that first morning, how you helped me, I couldn't forget, and when the bridge was destroyed I thought it might have been my crew that didn't react in time. I had just lost so much Jonas, and I thought I had lost you before I could know you.”

Randolph

Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com I stopped her and softly caressed her tears away. "I'm here," I said as I drew her fully into my arms. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around my neck, I lowered my lips to hers. Our kiss was a touching that was so soft, we moved so slowly, savouring every second and lingering on the feeling. For those long moments there were no other sensations outside of the feeling of her in my arms, our long kiss, and the sound of her breath. It ended as gently as it had begun.

She rested her head on my chest as we held each other and sighed deeply.

"I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not letting you go," I whispered.

“I think I'll like being a mercenary,” she replied.

The night went on, and few people left the party after midnight. It seemed like every crew member wanted to make the most of every moment and when Ayan and I came out of that side chamber, hand in hand, trying not to make a scene, the whispers and smiles were everywhere. We couldn't help but be all smiles ourselves as we ordered champaign from the bar and tried not to be the center of attention.

“What do we do?” I asked in a whisper.

“I have no idea, I've never had a relationship with the entire crew watching before,” she whispered

without moving her mouth.

“You keep smiling.” The Doctor said from behind us. “And beware drunken toasts given by pilot hosts,” he advised, pointing to Minh-Chu who was shakily climbing on top of a table as one of his pilots helped him with his balance and another held the table steady.

“Thank you for coming everyone!” Minh said loudly while very carefully taking a glass of champaign from one of his pilots.

“How much has he had?” I asked.

“I have no idea, I'm off duty,” replied Doctor Anderson.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as Commander of *First Squadron* I pledge that my pilots and I will keep you all

safe. As you take care of us as we go between the stars, we will be you, I mean, take care of you when we make stops! So to you, and to our promise to you.” Minh raised his glass high on shaky legs and I raised my own.

“That wasn't so bad,” I whispered under my breath.

“And to our Captain and his lovely wife!” Minh's eyes went wide a second after the words were out of his mouth and he quickly tried to recover. “Engineer! I mean Engineer!” The room was filled with laughter until Minh lost his balance entirely. Fortunately, two of his pilots mostly caught him. He took his feet and drank the drop or two left in the bottom of his glass. Those present drank

to his toast, more than a few even applauded.

The little that remained of the night was much more of the same, with Oz asking every eligible woman present her advice on what the new command uniforms should look like, Minh being led off shortly after he slurred a couple apologies to Ayan and myself, and people generally having a great time. 76

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com The
following two days in hyperspace
weren't uneventful, and everyone found
themselves with more than they expected
on their plates. Ayan and I were just
barely able to make time to have lunch

and dinner together as we both had to put in long hours.

The crew was proving themselves as hard working and as the end of our hyperspace voyage was drawing near the ship was finely tuned. Any rough edges left over from the refit were absolutely gone.

We felt like we were ready for anything.

77

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde
www.spinwardfringe.com

Epilogue

At 05:50 on the third day we prepared to emerge from hyperspace near the outer most settled world in the Gai-Ian system, and as Oz had promised the bridge crew had their new uniforms. They were decidedly tilted towards utility. Based on a black vacsuit, he had the new uniforms outfitted with a pocket on the left mid thigh, a low, quick draw sidearm holster on the right, and we were all given long grey jackets with built in survival gear, general purpose power cells, an extra air exchanger, and ammunition for the small pulse sidearm that came with the uniform. All the safety features the engineering staff had were

included as well.

Our ranks were marked on our wrists, counting backwards, so I had seven bars going around my wrists, while the Ensign had nineteen. As it was certainly untraditional, it was also ingenious from a tactical point of view, even though the thought of being captured by some unknown enemy wasn't exactly something I liked dwelling on. Having our captors under the impression that the lowest ranked among us was the highest for a while was a great idea.

I looked to Oz as I sat in the Captain's chair. "I like the new uniforms, they'll need some refining I'm sure, but it's a good start."

"Thank you sir."

I brought the forward view up on the main holodisplay and leaned forward.

“How long until we're out of hyperspace?”

“Looks like we'll have to come out early sir, there's a gravity field coming up in thirty eight seconds.”

I brought up my command display and braced myself. “Bring us out now, lieutenant.”

“What is it sir?” Oz asked.

“That's not on the charts, if it's an artificial gravity generator, I want to be on the edge of it so we have options.” We came out of hyperspace and my tactical display lit up with armed ships all around us. “Condition red! Bridge and refractive shielding up, signal

neutrality to all nearby ships and try to open communications with the main docking ring in orbit.”

“Gai-Ian IX station is on the communicator sir.”

“Put it on secondary display.”

The holographic form of an officer on the station appeared above the main display in the middle of the bridge. “This is Gai-Ian IX command, we don't recognize your profile and your ship's transponder is unregistered.”

“I'm Captain Valent of the *First Light*. Here to trade with the free worlds in 78

First Light Chronicles Freeground
Randolph Lalonde

www.spinwardfringe.com this system.”

“Well, Captain, we're still a free

world but who knows for how long. The Vindyne Corporation has made an expansionist's claim on this world.”

“Expansionist's claim?” I asked.

“It's a legal term that entitles them to poorly utilized resources if their population and needs are growing faster than the occupants of the property,”

answered Sergeant Everin. “I scored high in Galactic law while I was in the Academy,” he said with a shrug.

The entire ship shuddered then and I looked at my command display. One of our rail cannon turrets had just detonated an approaching torpedo. I tracked it back to it's source, a Vindyne corvette class ship. “Give me a few seconds, will you?” I asked the Gai-Ian IX Officer

before putting him on mute.

Oz leaned forward and whispered in my ear. “We’re trapped sir, it’ll take us at least twenty minutes at our best speed to clear the artificial gravity field and enter hyperspace.”

I nodded. “Have you been listening Ayan? Minh?” I asked through the communicator.

“Listening and watching, I think it’s time we tested these new fighters. I hate invaders,” came Minh’s reply through the comm.

“I have, sounds a lot like the trouble back home. It’s not what we’re here for but I wouldn’t feel right leaving them,” Ayan replied.

I looked at Oz for a moment, and we

nodded at the same time. "I think it's time to start making some friends out here."

I stood up and looked around the bridge, everyone was on the edge of their seat waiting for the order. "Open all rail cannon hatches and expose the turrets. Even numbered cannons target incoming, odd numbered cannons fire at targets of opportunity. Launch all fighters with instructions to stay close. Ready torpedoes, start angling refractive shielding to redirect any beam weaponry from one enemy ship to another or straight back at the aggressor. Let's join the line."

I turned the mute on the communicator off and the officer turned in his chair

towards me, surprised at what I assumed were the visible changes in our ship on his tactical display. "Yes, Captain?" He asked.

“*First Light* reporting with a flight of twenty one heavy interceptors, where do you want us?”

79

The Adventures Continue In:

First Light Chronicles Limbo

First Light Chronicles Starfree Port

First Light Omnibus (Collected Edition of the First Light Novellas)

Spinward Fringe Resurrection

Spinward Fringe Awakening

Spinward Fringe Triton

Spinward Fringe Frontline

And Other Books In The Spinward

Fringe Series

Please

visit

www.spinwardfringe.com

for more details.