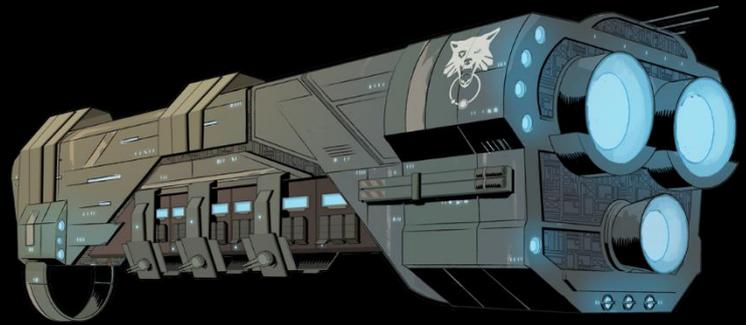

ASTRALIS STORIES

FEARGHAS' BETRAYAL



ASTRALIS
FORGOTTEN FIGHTERS

Story by Riccardo Piccini

The ship shook, gently as the high-speed projectiles left their mag cannons.

Twelve people stood silent, looking at a holographic projection of the battlefield.

After four minutes, the enemy vessel flashed red. Once. Twice.

Everyone looked at a giant mirror like surface, just as it lit up, showing the outside void. In the distance, an explosion flared and shined bright, dispersing debris, gas and people.

“Enemy ship destroyed, Captain. It was the last one. We have control of near space and high orbit.” One of the bridge adjutant said. “I have an incoming meeting call from the other captains.”

“Put it through the conference room”. It was an order, like always, but the captain’s voice betrayed his uneasiness with the mission, his doubts about the whole operation. Fearghas’ expression was the same, as always: stoic, calm, reasoned. To show doubt in front of your man, is a sign of weakness, one he couldn’t afford. Not now, not ever. He could only really show himself with his second in command, Corben.

“Why are we here Corben? On this forsaken planet?”

“To gain control of the sectors around the main front, to cut the enemy from....”

“Come on, don’t repeat to me what command said. It’s an excuse and you know it too. This sector has no strategic value. Its jump points offer no advantage. It’s not rich in helium, hydrogen nor Lumen. It was lightly defended. I wouldn’t even call this a defense.”

He stopped talking as they arrived in the conference room. Fearghas swiped his hand on the table and 6 holographic figures appeared at the sides. A small projector laser-scanned Fearghas. The Others acknowledged his presence once the scan was completed and uploaded.

The highest ranked official started the conversation. “The space around HOKLAS-4 is our, we can now proceed with the plan.” His voice was somewhat frail, sign of an old age never negated by advanced medical treatments. His chin was long, even for its species, and incredibly hairy. The antennas on his head were moving alternatively, like a seesaw.

“And what is the plan? Why the secrecy?” The youngest of the captains asked, almost shouting. He was nervous. His ship was the first to enter battle and the only one who took damage. He needed to know more to fully commit his crew.

“We are going to field test a new weapon. Order from the Nigama Council itself.” The old man continued. “We have finally built a High Energy Lumen-based Collimator. We will use it on this world, as a show of force.”

“Is it necessary, sir?” Fearghas asked. Everyone looked at him. “HOKLAS-4 numbers at a billion souls, it’s not of strategic value and...”

“It’s a billion souls ready to take arms, ready to fanatically follow their leader, for their holy mandate to reign over the galaxy. I will sleep easier knowing that there are less of them around, Fearghas.” One of the captain said. He still bore the sign on his face of a plasma inflicted burn. His skin graft was made hastily, to make him battle ready. It was practical, not elegant.

The old alien continued: “On my planet we did it at Lopunnavan. I believe on Earth it was Hirosuma? Hirosama?”

“Hiroshima and Nagasaki, sir” Answered Fearghas. “I understand. A show of force to end the war”.

“The weapon it’s currently in FTL transit, it will arrive at the jump point in half an hour. I want the fleet to form a defensive bubble around the weapon as soon as it exits the jump channel. Dismissed.”

All the figures disappeared from the room, and the holographic projectors retracted in the table.

“I see you troubled, captain. You’re not convinced.”

Still looking at the place occupied by the alien hologram, Fearghas gave voice to his concerns.

“The Atomic bomb back on Earth was a race. The war was going to be won by who could get it working first. Then it would act as a deterrent. This is different. The Trygonel Empire already has a superweapon. They used it on moons and asteroids. Just to make a point and make us run, to make us scared. We’ve been reinforcing our Premiere Worlds, leaving the frontier to fend for itself. We need to show them we have the technology too, to make them rethink how to pursue their strategy. But we don’t need to use it on a populated planet.”

“It’s to show them that we are not afraid to use it on civilians, on soft targets. To make us look strong.”

Fearghas slammed his fist on the table. Now he was shouting. “Strong? Strong? The Trygonel are fanatics. They’ve been toying with us with their superiority. If we show them we’re going to use superweapons on civilians they will start using their weapons on our worlds too!!”

He paused. Breathed heavily for a minute. He then calmed up and returned to his usual composed self. “We cannot allow that”.

Fearghas strode hastily towards the bridge. Once he arrived he took position in his command seat. He stood there for a couple of minutes in silence. Looking at his men. He flipped the switch for ship wide communication. He looked at the grills of the microphone on his chair for a long minute. He took a deep breath and started talking.

“To all Women and Man aboard this ship. This is Captain Fearghas speaking. We are going to make history today. But not in the way you would expect. I handpicked many of you to serve here on the Xenofonte. I needed loyal, honorable and caring men to better do our job. We are part of the Nigama Savieniba intercorporational army. Our decree is to be the authority above those of the corporations, to clear disputes, to shield the weak from excessive greed and manipulations. To uphold an ethic that is often forgotten in this Galaxy. This war already took a heavy toll upon us. We lost friends, homes, planets, resources. But we cannot make war twist us, or we will become like the enemies. Today, we are ordered to fire a superweapon upon a Trygonel undefended planet. Just to make a point. To kill a billion soul, just to make a point. A terrible proposition that would make this war only escalate more. I am going to bely that order. It’s mutiny, we’re going to be called traitors and court martialed if we’re caught. But in my conscience, I cannot stand watch while this atrocity is perpetrated. To everyone listening: if you remain on this ship you will be a traitor to the Nigama. I offer you a choice. Embark on escape pods if you want to have nothing to do with this. If you still want to see your family, your loved ones. Remain here, if you want to make history, even if it means we will be the enemy, the traitors. You have 20 minutes to make this choice. I want the ship battle ready 5 minutes after that.”

Not a single escape pod left the Xenofonte. The ships of the intercorporational army were like islands. Independent nations unto itself, each one built for a different purpose. This assured fierce loyalty between the crew and the captain, all but needed when waging war against insidious corporations, expert in manipulation and trickery.

From the outside, nothing looked amiss. The Xenofonte formed with the other ships a defensive bubble at the exit jump point. 43 seconds later than expected, the Lumen Collimator arrived.

It was a kilometer-long cylinder, with a bridge, some engines and a power plant attached without much concern for the overall shape and feel. It was crude, purely utilitarian. It was not an elegant weapon to show the enemy how good your engineers and designers are.

The weapon needed to reach near space to fire effectively. Its engines fired. They were civilian grade, underpowered for the job. The behemoth started accelerating very slowly.

The other ships didn't expect it and drifted further away, stretching the formation, leaving the front too far to effectively reinforce the rear. The perfect opportunity.

Xenofonte sprang into action. The powerful Hellenic Tractor Beam connected with the Lumen weapon hull, halting its acceleration. It took more than a minute for the other ships to notice what was happening. Their distance was too much for a quick reaction. The only ship capable of hurting the Xenofonte was the other one left in the rear of the formation, but it was another defensive class, without the needed firepower.

Every single Xenofonte engine ignited with tremendous force. The auxiliary high-speed maneuvers thrusters were all engaged at maximum capacity. The ship became a projectile, intending to ram the lumen weapon with as much the kinetic energy as it could muster.

Xenofonte shields lit up, while some cannon fire tried unsuccessfully to slow it down.

The impact was tremendous for both parts. The cylinder broke at the impact point, with all the lens of the array shattered. The Xenofonte didn't lose much momentum and kept going in a straight line, creating an exit wound.

From the outside, it was a silent display of catastrophic destruction. For the people inside the Xenofonte it was something else. The metal screamed in pain as it bent and broke due to the sheer violence of the impact. The inertial dampeners were not sufficient to shield the crew, which was thrown around as the Xenofonte smashed the superweapon. Systems failed. Alarms kept screaming. Emergency shutters activated all over the ship.

Fearghas remained on his seat, calm as always, ordering his crew, like this was a normal, routine battle.

All of Xenofonte engines shut down. Its shield went offline. It was an easy target now, drifting along on a predictable trajectory.

The Lumen superweapon was irremediably crippled. Billion credits and years of research lost in an instant.

The others ships began firing. Dozens of projectiles hit the Xenofonte, smashing and bending its hull with. Lasers flared and melted section of the ship, trying to expose its inner parts. The ship was getting pounded, but it was still in one piece.

No superheated gas, no depressurization accident. It was still operational.

Some of the Xenofinte guns fired. Hidden in the mist of normal projectiles, there was an EMP warhead. It was detected too late. Enemy ships deactivated, run on backup powers. Even if for mere seconds, it gave the Xenofonte enough breathing room.

Space around the ship began to fold. Its shape becoming distorted, elongated and then compressed. In an instant, the ship went at FTL speed, leaving the wrecked superweapon weapon and the defending ships behind.

“Captain, we are in orbit around the Cryntex Minerary Colony. Our allies board parties have descended to secure the place.”

Allies. Fearghas didn't like that word that much anymore. One could fight together with a ship one day, and against it the next. The Forgotten Sectors were a brutal place. Were only survival mattered.

Today's ally was not that much trustworthy by himself either. He was a Dranich scientist, too much enamored with its research to actually have a clean mind on this mission.

“Sir, we have a contact, just emerged from FTL., putting it on the holo”

“What kind of ship is that? It seems like it's going to fall apart at any moment”

The small enemy ship engines fired, with the rear of the hull becoming red hot under the excessive heat. The metal bent, changing the engine position enough to throw it off course. Multiple missiles were launched, heading for the Xenofonte ally.

“That ship must hold. Charge shields to maximum and execute short jump to intercept”

“Aye, sir.”