

## 5. Pilot Error

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The ships fell from the cloudy night sky in a steady drizzle. One by one the crippled and emaciated ships of the Venusian Navy fell. The hulls of the larger cruisers gleamed bright orange from the superheating of the atmosphere; their armorclad plating falling away and scattering debris everywhere. With every ship that fell through the clouds, several Human ships followed, picking off any operable escape pods the Venusians might have used. Venusian fighter jets did their best to ward off the Human fighters, but they were just added to the tally of destroyed ships.

Airman First Class Andrew Ortega was one of the pilots whose job it was to pick off those escape pods and any residual aircraft that came down. This assignment was killing him on the inside, but if he did not comply he would be court martialed. He was a good soldier. He had to be in order to support his daughter back on Earth. He had spent the better part of 3 hours on this assignment. Ortega had shot down 5 Venusian fighters, which was a cakewalk for him. Venusians couldn't fly for shit.

He was piloting his A9 Kingpin, an agile attack aircraft, as part of the CECDEF assault on Venus. The assault was one for the record books. It began twenty seven hours earlier, with heavy resistance from the well organized Venusian military. But the overwhelming force and numbers that the Earth had on Venus was too much for the planet to resist, and now the hard part was over. Venusian forces had been, for the most part, wiped out and demoralized.

A call came over his earpiece, "Ortega from Bravos-Actual." It was Control, probably dispatching him to another assignment. Ortega was relieved.

"Go for Ortega."

"Ortega, skies are clear. Proceed to sector Delta 9. Mission is to take out any stragglers, military or otherwise. Bravos-Actual out."

Now Ortega had been assigned to wipe out those who had survived the initial assault; the ones who were left behind. *Great. More of the same.* He was disgusted with his assignment. All he wanted was to do was return to Bravos for debrief, and then sleep. Powerless to argue with his superiors about his orders, he flew his Kingpin in low toward the ground. Ortega used his own administrative discretion and decided that he would stay out for another twenty minutes before he would start to head back. He needed to refuel for his next assignment anyway. Sector Delta 9 was a heavily wooded area that had been mostly scorched and flattened by the fighting. Still, some trees managed to avoid the bombs and gunfire and stood tall among the ashes.

Ortega's Kingpin split the ash and smoke behind him, allowing for bits of the light from dusk to break through to the ground. It was a challenge for Ortega to see in front of him due to the residual smoke that the earlier bombings had left behind, so he was relying on his Kingpin's radar to steer clear of any obstacles, which he had been

advised against doing in training due to the more than likely possibility of ground interference. It was quiet on the ground in the area that he'd been scouting in. He wasn't really actively searching for targets. If the radar blipped with a heat signature, he would ignore it. These people had been through enough, and the adrenaline that Ortega had experienced in the first few hours of the assault, when there was a formidable opponent, had worn off. The Earth was beating a dead horse at this point, and Ortega wanted no part in it.

In his current state of mind, Ortega was not actively aware of his situation. The Kingpin was on autopilot and Ortega was zoning. A distant beeping noise finally snapped Ortega back into his remorseful reality. The beeping came from his radar. A blip had popped up. A few seconds later a second blip showed up. Then a third. He had three heat signatures directly in front of him. While Ortega no longer wished to do any killing of his own, he was still more than willing to defend himself, and these three heat signatures were too close for comfort. He slowed his Kingpin and brought it closer to the ground so he could get a better view with his naked eye. This was a horrible mistake. An alarm indicating that a missile had been fired from the surface sounded in the Kingpin's cabin. Ortega looked up, just in time to see the missile strike the front end of his Kingpin, shattering his windscreen and sending shards of glass into his face and neck. Sixty meters off the ground, his aircraft accelerated and began a nosedive towards the ashen landscape. He could not steady his craft. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Ortega, I am going down in sector...god dammit...sector 5, I think. I require immediate rescue and evac!"

The Kingpin struck the ground with great force, slamming Ortega against his control panel and fracturing his right arm and breaking his jaw. Once on the ground the Kingpin slid another thirty or so meters before colliding with a tree, stopping the crippled aircraft in its tracks and shoving a tree branch into Ortega's side. Ortega, barely conscious at this point, noticed the smell of fuel in the cockpit and could hear a liquid leaking from the rear of the craft.

*Not good*, he thought.

Smoke was filling the cabin as well, meaning that his Kingpin was set to blow. Ortega's left eye had been destroyed by glass shards, and a sharp pain darted from his chest to the rest of his body. His upper torso now rested on the control panel and his legs had become trapped under his dislodged seat. He knew that he would not be able to exit through the main hatch of the Kingpin. His best bet was now to pull himself through the ruptured windscreen of his aircraft. Bracing for unspeakable pain, Ortega wrapped his hands around the frame of the windscreen. The remaining shards of glass pierced through his bruised skin. He screamed. He then began to pull. His fractured arm did not help in this situation. He felt the bones in his arm become more and more disjointed with every centimeter that his body moved. In what felt like a lifetime, he had

freed his legs and was able to move them perfectly fine. Flames had erupted in the cabin. It would not be long before the carcass of the Kingpin would erupt in flames. Ortega knew his time was running out. A part of him just wanted to die right then and there. But he couldn't. Help would be there soon. Pushing the remainder of his lower body through the windscreen frame, he thrust himself on to the dry ground. Now severely disoriented, Ortega attempted to get up, only to fall back down. He was unable to coordinate himself, so he used his bloodied and crippled arms to begin a slow crawl from the Kingpin. He had only managed to set a distance of three meters between himself and the Kingpin when the oil ignited and flames engulfed the aircraft. Ortega's legs were closest the craft, and the protruding explosion of flames seared his torn pants and burned the skin underneath. Now completely incapacitated, Ortega prayed for a miracle. As his eyes grew heavy and his body began to shut down, he could make out two figures approaching him. Their silhouettes loomed as did the flames.

“Looks like he survived, if you could call this survival,” said one.

“Take him back to camp, we can use him,” said another.

Ortega passed out.