<u>**Marius**</u>

 *~ Rush to battle and honour, lest another takes your place.~*

**From Ripples from the past chapter 20 – We meet Marius, a Viking in all but name and equipped with state of the art technology**

**About 4,600 words**

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Marius wasn't unique, though pilots on Algaria who could fly imperial raptors were rare. As far as he knew, less than a dozen Algarians were going to be flying raptors that day. The Damned flew those in the attack wings, but most circling Tranquillity were autonomous, or being flown by Chlo.
"Happy hunting Marius."
He just nodded at the comment and carried on walking towards the raptor, which was to be his to use during the battle. Few of his fellow pilots had wished him luck; he'd never really been one of them. He'd served in the Menderan Militia for a good part of his life and even his name was an imperial version of his true name. He was used to Marius though, all his friends called him by that name. His fellow pilots could go to hell, that militia training had included a few hundred hours flying raptors. They were being kept back to defend the city, but he was going up there, high into orbit and then beyond, meeting the invaders in space. He stepped into the raptor and sat in the pilot's seat. There were two seats, but today he was flying alone.
"Marius AGS1497 Please initiate red run."
Colours, everything was by colours. A blue run was training; a green run was live weapon target practise. There were dozens of them, all the subtle shades included. Red was the best though, all weapons armed and everything under his control. He heard Chlo respond, recognising her voice from his training days on Mendera.
"Welcome Marius…. Rush to battle and honour, lest another takes your place."
"Thank you Chlo. I'll try to make you proud."
She'd spoken part of the famous quote, attributed to Yraag himself, used all over Algaria, to prepare warriors for battle. Marius wasn't sure if he believed in Yraag anymore, few modern Algarians had blind faith in their Gods these days. He was near to retirement age and looking forward to spending lazy hours with his wife and visiting their children. Death in the heat of battle had lost its appeal. Defence command were now issuing his orders.
"You are cleared for high orbit. Be careful, the sky is fairly busy over Tranquillity."
The raptor vibrated slightly and rose up to about twenty feet above the ground. Being more than a little scared of enclosed places, he knew the part that terrified him was about to happen. Raptors had inertial damping, but the pilot needed to be held securely for battle. The Damned might be able to survive the sudden acceleration and swerving turns at twenty gravities, but his body would be pulled apart. A section of the cockpit began to descend and cover him completely.
"Oh, I am not going to miss this." He muttered.
There would be two just about audible clicks as the section of cockpit covered him completely. The first click meant the soft material was all over him and beginning to harden slightly, to stop his internal organs from being destroyed by acceleration at thirty or forty gravities.

'Click.'

His eyes were already closed and nothing was going to get him to open them, until the second click. He'd once opened his eyes to find total darkness. He hadn't be able to move or hear anything either. He still remembered thinking he was about to die from that panic attack. He'd learned to think of the wonderful miracle the craft was performing. Linking up external sensors, moving the various interfaces, through which he'd view and hear the outside world. It was going to be beyond wonderful, he kept telling himself.

'Click.'

Just a few seconds was it had all taken, yet he could feel the sweat on his skin and his heart beating way too fast. Luckily his reactions had always been like that and Chlo had set them as his 'normal.' He should have been taken off the raptor course, but Chlo had seen something in him, above and beyond his morbid dread of small dark places.

"Take off when ready."

He opened his eyes and that miracle had happened again. The raptor had vanished, leaving him appearing to hover about thirty feet off the ground. Only the slight feeling of pressure on his ribs, told him he was still in the craft. Everything was invisible, apart from a minimal display right above his left eye. Even the controls were invisible to him, though his hands felt as though they were fixed to them.

"There are others younger and more savage Yraag." He muttered. "Keep their souls and allow me to return home."

Marius simply looked upward and moved his right hand slightly. The imperial raptor shot into the sky, accelerating out of the atmosphere in less than a minute.

<center>~           ~</center>

There was something magical about popping out of the atmosphere of Algaria and seeing space filled with tiny dots of light. Usually the transition from upper atmosphere to space was gradual, but for Marius it happened quickly, adding to the feeling of wonder. One moment he was accelerating hard enough to cause the outside of the raptor to glow red, as it hurtled through the atmosphere. The next moment he was away, out in space and bidding farewell to the pull of gravity from the planet below.

"Happy hunting Marius AGS1497." He heard from defence command.

On his own, able to pick his own targets at will. The dots of light were stars of course, or at least most of them were. Some were enemy craft, reflecting the sunlight off their hulls. A lot of the dots of light were chaff plates, or rubbish shot out of airlocks to confuse the Algarian planetary defences. An eye movement up to the far left of the screen and a slight squeeze of his left hand on the control paddle and all those annoying pieces of junk could be gone from his screen, made invisible by his onboard AI. Dangerous though, if you were flying an imperial raptor, which didn't have strong inertial damping. He'd seen one hit an old power loader, chucked out as a decoy by raiders near Phlot. Steel with titanium strengthening struts, that old loader must have weighed three or four tons. The raptor survived hitting it at speed, but the pilot had been pureed. Marius left everything on the screen and just used his eye movements and left hand to highlight known enemy craft. Just about all battle commands were by eye movements, confirmed with small hand gestures. Difficult to learn, but perfect in a fast moving battle.

"That is a lot of potential targets." He muttered.

The battle was only just beginning and he was still accelerating towards it. There was a little debris at the edges of the enemy fleet, which would get worse as the battle progressed. Marius knew what to do, he'd been well trained by instructors on Mendera.

"When faced with a multitude of targets, pick one and stick with it." He'd been told. "If another target appears right in front of you, ignore it. No matter how irresistible and important a target it looks, keep to your original choice."

Marius knew why, it was why large groups of flying creatures moved about in flocks. Not only was a hungry predator likely to decide another of your flock looked tastier than you, the sheer number of potential meals created its own confusion.

"A predator will switch targets again and again." The instructor had told him. "Sometimes ending up with no meal at all. Stick to the target you chose and keep attacking until it's gone, or you are."

He wasn't going to be tempted by all the small craft, Marius wanted to take apart something huge. He had an imperial raptor and knew how to fly it. There had to be something big out there among the enemy, a flagship of some kind, or a mile long refuelling and repair ship. He'd been ignoring background chatter, until something from defence control caught his interest.

"……. Ceramic hull. To repeat; the large craft that just dropped into normal space, is believed to be the Terak command ship. All the Terak craft appear to be using hardened ceramic hulls, so adjust your weapons accordingly. You will have to guide missiles in; they won't lock onto a ceramic hull."

Marius didn't need missile lock, raptors were designed to get in close and rip enemy craft apart, exposing their crew to the near vacuum of space.

"That is my target." He muttered. "My succulent meal, my catch that can't be allowed to escape."

No name on his screen, just an ident next to a half mile long Terak craft. Not that impressive looking for their command craft, but it was surrounded by small fighters. Marius selected the target and confirmed an engage command, only to have a yellow caution box appear.

"Oh no, not today….. No cautions today."

A lone raptor, not part of a swarm, he doubted if his AI system rated his chances that high. He didn't want to look at the caution before dismissing it, but his eyes felt drawn to it. Crap ! He was only given a fifteen percent probability of success. He was still accelerating towards the enemy fleet and another caution box was coming up on something much closer. He was only being given a twenty percent survival rate against a small mercenary needle craft, which was heading straight at him. His own AI was beginning to give lots of caution notes on the screen, all effectively telling him to run away or come back with a few friends.

"Fuck it !"

Marius, the guy close to retirement, who didn't really believe in Yraag the God of war, found himself turning off the caution system and preparing to fight to the death. There was something deep within him that he didn't understand, some distant race memory that was over riding his desire for self-preservation.

"We may meet today after all mighty Yraag."

There was a way to deal with small and annoying needle craft, if you had an imperial raptor to fly. It wasn't a method taught by any Menderan instructor, but Marius had listened to The Damned, as they'd talked of their past triumphs. He switched just about all of his craft's energy reserves to the forward defence screens and accelerated towards the enemy, before saying a short prayer to the Goddess Frey, who was a lot less demanding than Yraag.

"Please let the old stories not be all lies and bravado."

He ignored the Ion blaster fire from the needle craft, raptors were constructed well and had layers of imperial alloy armour. Plus Marius could see the front energy shields were absorbing most of the hits. It was a game of chicken in space craft and there wasn't time for anyone to blink first. The closing speed was so high, that he only just had time to close his eyes, wondering if he'd ever open them again.

"I'm too old for this………….."

And it looked like he'd be continuing to get older, at least for the time being. The raptor was unharmed, all system working, yet his rear screen showed him an expanding cloud of debris, that had until recently been an enemy needle ship. So, ramming them did work, though his front screens were down to only forty percent efficiency. There should have been a little flaring at the edge of his screen, a small automated conformation of his kill. It seemed that turning off the cautions turned off everything, even the 'well done' notifications. It seemed so unfair.

"If I survive, I'm going to complain to the Menderan tech people."

He was much closer to the Terak command vessel now, close enough to attract the attention of its small defence craft. Marius felt more confident, he had just won in a fight that even his AI thought was unwinnable.

"Enemy reinforcements, dropping into normal space at coordinates……."

His own command talking and Marius realised he'd been ignoring everything apart from his own battle with the needle craft. That was good though, that was how the Menderan instructor had told him all the best raptor pilots behaved. He took a second to look at the screen, the entire screen.

"Crap, there must be thousands of dead………….." He muttered.

Debris was everywhere and a lot of the craft were now being flagged up as damaged, assumed destroyed. The notifications kept changing, switching operational vessels from both sides, over to showing no life signs, to assumed dead and derelict. No sounds in space, just the steady flash of plasma and Ion weaponry. Marius should have been terrified, but something made him carry on chasing after the Terak command vessel.

"Ceramic hulls are lighter than metal alloys." His instructor had once told him. "That tends to mean better acceleration and manoeuvrability, but at the cost of lost strength."

That had been then though and the newer ceramic hulls were as tough as imperial alloy, maybe tougher. There was no question of ramming a half mile long vessel, not if you hoped to be going home after the battle. He was going to rely on an insanely high closing speed and the rotating Ion blaster turret on the bottom of the raptor.

"The Spirit of Yraag has been destroyed…….Vengeance warriors of Algaria, we need vengeance. Rush to death, rush to meet the enemy, lest someone takes your place."

No, he wasn't going to be depressed that the flagship of the Algarian fleet, was now being flagged as a lifeless derelict. He'd known people among the crew and now they were gone. Nothing was going to change that, certainly not changing course to attack the craft that had destroyed The Spirit of Yraag.

"Don't be the predator that misses his target." He muttered.

He activated the turret and that would be it, his one and only action in its running. The target had been selected and acquired. The onboard AI knew how to use the Ion blasters in the turret, far better than he did and with far greater accuracy. His job was simply to avoid the defending fighters and defence blasters of the Terak command ship. At that moment, Marius knew the AI had been right about his chances, he was going to die. He was going to take a lot of the enemy with him

though. As the enemy vessel grew larger, filling his entire screen, he muttered the famous litany to Yraag, or at least the one bit he knew by heart.

"Great and mighty Yraag. Let me not know the damnation of dying from old age. I rush to my death in your honour, hoping for a place at your table………………"

<center>~          ~</center>

Marius didn't want to disturb the weapon turret, which was committed to firing everything it had at the Terak command vessel. Imperial raptors were fitted with two Ion cannons though, right at the end of each of its stubby wings. They could only fire forward and could only be moved around a few degrees, but Marius activated the hand control and aimed at one of the enemy fighters approaching at speed. He moved his hand ever so slightly and fired, both Ion cannons together.

"Crap ! Maybe Yraag is with me today."

The fighter had blown apart, its own fire missing Marius completely. He'd never been that good with the Ion blasters, few were. They tended to be ignored in favour of the weapon turret. Marius had managed to destroy an enemy fighter, with weapons he'd rarely used. It had to be an omen of some kind.

"Be with me today, let me be your strong right arm mighty Yraag."

He wanted to add a promise to build a shrine to Yraag outside his house if he survived. That sounded like blackmail though and blackmailing the Algarian God of War, seemed a bit risky. When the second fighter was destroyed by fire from his Ion cannons, Marius became convinced he'd been chosen to bring vengeance to their enemies.

"I will soar in the wind. I will bring death to our enemies."

He'd never read that many of the holy texts since becoming an adult, but he knew the words had come from somewhere in the teachings of Yraag, even if they were jumbled up a bit. As Marius easily destroyed another four enemy fighters, he was convinced that the deities of Algaria were protecting him. His own craft was still perfect, no damage at all. He'd seen the screens flare a few times, but there wasn't a single warning coming up on his screen. It was impossible, a miracle. A proximity warning briefly flashed, as he dipped under the huge enemy command craft.

"Whatever happens now, the children will be proud of you." He muttered.

Who knows, the Tranquillity high council might even name a public building after him, maybe several if he actually destroyed his target. The fighters dropped away as he went along the underside of the half mile long enemy vessel. Raptors weren't that large and by staying close to the hull of the Terak craft, he was safe from fighter fire and the weapon turrets that might have given him problems.

"Is this really happening ?" He mumbled.

Strangely a lot of people in the multiverse, tenuously linked together, had asked much the same question that day. It was too good to be true, but he was travelling fast, his weapon turret blasting huge holes in the ceramic hull of the Terak craft. Too close to the enemy really, only his speed was saving his raptor from being pulverised by the flying debris he was creating.

"So many souls for you this day, mighty Yraag."

It was all there on the rear screen, vast pieces of the enemy craft's hull and interior, being ripped apart and thrown into space. Small bundles of clothing too, with people in them, all dying fairly quickly once they were in space. Creatures designed to live on the ground, safely beneath an atmosphere with just the right amount of oxygen. Leaving that thin covering of gases was always a throw of the dice and today their enemy had thrown snake eyes. All too quickly he was out from

under the enemy vessel and hurtling away, while trying to zig zag, to avoid enemy fire. There was none.

"I actually……………. Fucking did it!"

Craft that size rarely blow apart. A lot of small explosions and debris being thrown out by the internal air pressure. A spacecraft half a mile long creates its own mass attraction, its own small amount of gravity. Debris hung around, gradually being pulled back towards what was left of the once mighty Terak command craft. It was dying though, the crew and troops onboard dying with it. How many souls had he taken for Yraag ? Fifty thousand, maybe a hundred ? More if the vessel had been carrying soldiers meant to be invading Algaria. Now they were all dead, their blood boiling in their veins, turning them into freeze dried horrors, which might orbit the planet forever.

"I have no pity, they came to invade, to kill, to take what wasn't theirs."

The battle was still going on, but Algaria had won. His screens were showing far fewer vessels from his own side than there had been, but the invaders had almost vanished from the space above Tranquillity. His screen flickered, yet there hadn't been a single warning about any damage to his raptor. A chilling thought refused to go away…. How much of the warning system had he turned off ? Marius headed for home and turned on the caution notification and wished he hadn't.

"Just get me home." He muttered at the raptor.

Everything had major damage, including the life support systems. Either he'd turned off too much, or the designers had really messed up the whole caution system. Crap ! Not wanting to be bothered every few seconds, didn't mean he didn't want to know that the heat sink for the raptor's drives was about to disintegrate. Life support, weapons, the three independent drives, all showing an imminent risk of failure.

"Oh…. If only I'd known."

Maybe not knowing had been a good thing. Throughout the battle he'd been certain his craft was being protected by a beneficent deity. If he'd know it was falling apart ? Just maybe, the real gift from the Gods, had been in hiding the truth from him. Marius didn't accelerate, his craft might not survive the sudden jolt and the drives might decide to pick that moment to fall apart. He aimed his raptor with small directional thrusters and drifted towards the atmosphere. Marius was going to live to see his wife again and he'd done his duty.

"I'm going home."

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Using the main drive to slow down, probably ran the same risk of ripping the raptor apart, as hitting the atmosphere at speed. Marius stopped looking at the warning notices on the screen. He knew his raptor was damaged beyond economic repair. No doubt the empire would salvage the wreck, recycling the alloy hull. There wasn't going to be a gentle landing, just a controlled crash. Ironic in the extreme if he was to die during re-entry, after destroying the Terak command vessel. Life wasn't fair though, nor were the Gods. Once again he chose to offer up a prayer to the Goddess Frey, who was supposed to be far gentler than Yraag and less demanding.

"Mighty Frey, I have done my duty. Please return me to the love of my family."

His craft hit the atmosphere and began to vibrate. There was the procedure to eject the pilot and his life support pod. That meant drifting to the ground in complete darkness though. Maybe as much as half an hour completely cut off from the outside world, until the pod hit the ground. It made sense to eject now, he was well aware of that. Half an hour swinging below parachutes, in complete and utter darkness. No….A good part of him would rather die than go through that.

"Marius AGS1497 to base. Are you picking up my Ident ?"

Nothing, he'd already tried several times. A broken comms system was one thing, but if his Ident wasn't broadcasting, they might think he was an enemy vessel. If any were left ? He hadn't seen an operational enemy craft on his screen in quite a while. Something broke away as the heat outside built up. There wasn't much attached to the outside of an imperial raptor. All essential though, not a single thing on a raptor was there simply for decoration.

'Pilot ejection recommended.'

Came up in flashing red letters on his screen. Marius decided to ignore it, hoping he wasn't about to die as a ball of flame in the sky above Tranquillity. The longer he could put it off, the less time he'd have to spend trapped in the dark. As if by magic the flames vanished, showing him the surface of Algaria, the best part of fifty miles below. No details yet, though he could see the plain between mountain ranges, where Tranquillity had been built.

'Pilot ejection recommended.'

"Yes, I know, stop pestering me."

Silly to argue with an automated system, especially as the audio controls had stopped working some time ago. They were one of the yellow warning boxed on his screen. His raptor was dropping like a stone and beginning to tumble. A few gentle thruster blasts and it was in a stable position, but still dropping far too fast.

'Automatic jettison of the pilot in….. 5….4.'

Marius had been outwitted by the AI system, which wasn't even working at a quarter of its full potential. There was probably a way to turn off the auto-eject, he just hadn't been taught it. No time to find it by digging through option screens, as he was plunged into total darkness.

'1…. Ejecting pilot.'

The screen vanished, as extra pieces of shielding moved around him, forming a silent dark cocoon. Acceleration as small rockets took him away from the main body of the raptor, with its AI system and external audio-visual devices. He was now alone in the dark silence and knew he might go insane before the escape pod opened. All sensation of movement stopped, as parachutes deployed to cushion his fall. Marius tried to will himself into unconsciousness and failed.

"If I live and I'm sane, I will never get in one of these things again." He muttered.

He thought of his wife, actually filling his head with the memories of nights full of memorable sex, when they'd both been fit, young and full of hormones. No good, he still drifted back to the feelings of being trapped and isolated.

"Do you trust me ?"

He was going mad, the voice seemed to be coming from someone near him and that was impossible.

"Who is that ?"

"You called upon me….. Do you trust me ?"

Had Frey come to torment him ? Marius still wasn't sure if he totally believed in the Gods, but he was ready to be convinced. Besides, if it was just a voice in his head, what harm was there in playing along with his own insanity ?

"I trust you Mighty Frey."

"Then sleep."

He must have instantly gone into a deep sleep, which lasted for some time. He awoke to find the pod open, daylight entering the doorway. There was a red light pulsating right in front of him, the homing beacon had begun to transmit his position. Training had prepared him for landing in an escape pod and he fell into the correct routine without thinking about it.

"No pain from broken limbs, no blood oozing from anywhere."

He looked good to go, so he stood up and walked out of the pod. He was about five miles south of Tranquillity, right in the centre of a famously wet and muddy marshland. If the ground anywhere near had been firm, he might have bent down and kissed it.

"I'm home and safe." He muttered "A walk through the mud will do me good."

The city of Tranquillity had three obvious fires, judging by the places smoke was rising up into the sky. Debris was guaranteed to have hit the city, hulls made of alloys and ceramics designed to survive the heat of hitting the atmosphere at speed. Only a mile from him, a wrecked hull had driven itself into the ground, creating a small crater. It towered at least three hundred feet into the air, so burned out that it might have once been an Algarian craft or an enemy.

"It might have been so much worse."

And it looked like he wasn't walking home, a military shuttle was some way off, but it was heading straight for him. Marius still wasn't quite a believer, but he raised his arms up, stretching, pointing his fingers up to the sky.

"Mighty Frey, hear my oath. I will build a shrine in your honour, outside my house."

Crap ! What harm could it do ? He'd heard someone, even if it had been a psychotic episode, brought on by panic. Still…. The voice had been very clear and he had slept when told he would. At that moment, his head was full of wondering how he'd be rewarded and if there might be a promotion on the way.

"Maybe even more money." He mumbled.

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~ The End ~

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