

WING COMMANDER ACADEMY

SERIES BIBLE

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Wing Commander Academy

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INTRODUCTION

"Ten-hut!!"

Heels click as they come to attention, like a crackle of electricity running through the assembled cadets. All eyes are on the podium at the head of the parade ground and the insignia of the Terran Confederation affixed to it. The Commandant of the Confederation's Space Naval Academy on the planet Hilthros steps up to the podium. Beside him, looking over the cadets with probing, ice-blue eyes, stands Commodore Geoffrey Tolwyn.

"At ease, cadets."

The cadets move to parade rest, but there's no lessening of the tense excitement that flickers through them.

"You may have heard rumors about recent heavy losses in our front line fighter wings," the Commandant says, scowling. It's clear what he thinks about people who spread rumors -- and those who listen to them. "I will not dignify those rumors with either confirmation or denial -- and neither should you. However, I have today received orders that all senior cadets are to report to TCS Tiger's Claw immediately for an extended period of flight training. You will relieve the Claw's regular flight crews, who will be assigned to other duties more vital to the war effort. In addition to flight training and routine patrol duties, you will continue with regular classroom instruction, testing, and evaluation while aboard Tiger's Claw."

The Commandant steps away from the podium, and Commodore Tolwyn takes his place. For a moment, Tolwyn surveys the crowd with his cold, blue eyes, a gaze that seems to pierce to the heart of every cadet. Then Tolwyn speaks.

"The Tiger's Claw has been assigned to a quiet sector for your flight training. But if there is one thing I have learned from the Kilrathi in this war, it's to be prepared. Today's quiet sector is tomorrow's front line. I intend to drive you hard. You will learn to fly better than you ever thought possible -- you will have to. Some of you will wash out. And some of you won't come back. But one of you, the best of you, will finish this tour with the insignia of the Cadet Wing Commander. Wear those gold wings proudly -- I know I did when I won them twenty years ago. Good hunting, cadets!"

A cheer erupts from the cadets, a roar of youth, eagerness, adventurousness, and innocence. Hats are thrown into the air. Among the cheering cadets, Christopher Blair looks over at Todd Marshall. Marshall jabs a thumb at his own chest.

"Get used to it, Blair," he says. "Those wings are mine!"

The year is 2655. For a generation, the Terran Confederation has been engaged in a relentless war against the

forces of the Kilrathi Empire, an enemy who asks no quarter and gives none. At stake is the very existence of humanity in the galaxy, along with countless other sentient lifeforms who have sought protection by the Terran Confederation. Now the 201st Plebe class of the Confederation's Space Naval Academy is preparing to take its place in the fight. The cadets will learn more about themselves and their Kilrathi enemy than they bargained for....

THE TERRAN CONFEDERATION

By the 27th century, humanity has spread across a large portion of the galaxy, settling on hundreds of worlds. Many of these worlds are self-governing entities in their own right, while others are thinly settled outposts still professing allegiance to the worlds which settled them. But whatever their status, all Terran-occupied worlds have joined together in the Terran Confederation.

Like the United Nations of 20th and 21st century Earth, the Terran Confederation provides a framework for resolving differences and for working toward common goals. However, during the last quarter century of conflict with the Kilrathi, the central power of the Confederation has grown at the expense of the individual planets. This has caused some unrest as the leaders of the individual planets have found their powers being usurped by the Confederation because of the pressures of war. It remains to be seen if the Confederation in its present form can survive if the war with the Kilrathi is brought to a successful conclusion, or will the resentments which have been growing against the central power tear the Confederation apart once the external enemy is defeated?

The legislative body of the Confederation is the Terran Confederation Congress, composed of voting members from all the self-governing planets. A smaller Confederation Council is elected by the congress from among its own members, and serves as the cabinet for the Council President, who is the executive

officer of the Confederation. The congress meets on Terra Station, a city-sized space station/capital in orbit around Earth.

The single greatest unifying force in the Confederation is the Confederation Naval and Space Forces. In the past, the naval and marine forces acted as peacekeepers among the occasionally quarrelsome planets. Over the last quarter century, they have borne the brunt of the fight against the Kilrathi, willingly sacrificing themselves to protect the rest of humanity.

The best and the brightest of the Naval and Space Forces are the cadets of the Space Naval Academy, located on the planet Hilthros.

THE CADET WING

The Cadet Wing is made up of three squadrons, each with four fighter pilots. There are twelve pilots in the wing, but not all of them are regular characters in WING COMMANDER ACADEMY. Some of the twelve will be lost in action in the course of the series. Dramatic tension comes from the fact that the audience won't be sure who is destined to survive. As in war, death can strike anyone at any time, suddenly, in the midst of a climactic battle or in the course of a routine mission. As Commodore Tolwyn explains: "You don't just have to learn to trust your wingman. You also have to learn how to bury him."

During their combat training tour, all cadets hold the rank of 2nd Lieutenant, the lowest of all flight officer ranks. Each member of the wing in turn performs the duties and wears the golden wings insignia of the "Cadet Wing Commander." At the end of the tour, the outstanding cadet leader is designated as the "Wing Commander," and is awarded the insignia permanently. It's believed in the fleet that winning the golden wings is the first step to flag rank.

CHRISTOPHER BLAIR -- "MAVERICK"

Since the time of the American Civil War, the Blair family has maintained a tradition of wealth and influence combined with public service. Maverick's grandmother is a member of the Confederation Council, while his father is the chairman of StarPeace, an organization dedicated to promoting understanding

among the inhabited worlds of the galaxy. With his family's connections, Maverick easily could have avoided military service or won a staff position. But Maverick volunteered for fighter training. Like George Bush rushing to enlist after Pearl Harbor, Maverick was eager to do his patriotic duty.

Maverick is an old-fashioned man, a Jeffersonian gentleman motivated by a sense of personal and family honor, without snobbery, greed, or petty ambitions. He's highly competitive, but he competes with honesty and a sense of fair play. He's determined to win the golden insignia of the Wing Commander, but if one of his comrades should prove a better pilot and leader, he would sincerely congratulate the winner. Maverick is cheerful, innocent, and boyishly enthusiastic. But he's also serious, earnest, and conscientious. He studies hard, works hard, tries hard to be a good pilot and, more importantly, an effective member of the Cadet Wing "team." His model as wing commander is Eddie Rickenbacker (Maverick reads history avidly), America's leading World War I ace, who was more interested in leading his squadron well than in adding to his own score of "kills." "He never lost a pilot flying under his personal command," Maverick explains with admiration.

Some of the other pilots dislike Maverick, doubting his sincerity, mistaking his eagerness to do a good job for a desire to curry favor with his superiors. His callsign was given to him by Maniac -- as a joke. When after months as the "perfect" cadet at the Academy, Blair actually bent a rule, Maniac sarcastically told him: "You're a real maverick, aren't you?" The name stuck.

But to Maniac's disgust, Maverick isn't annoyed: he enjoys a good-natured laugh, even at his own expense.

Despite his "innocence," Maverick is no believer in simple-minded heroics and glory. He sees war as a great test in which people can prove their worth by acting with courage and honor. But as time goes by, as he sees young lives wasted on both sides with no end in sight, as he grieves for lost comrades and feels the regret that comes even from killing an enemy, Maverick will grow bitter, grim, hard. He will become a tragic figure: driven by his sense of honor and duty to do a brutal job that he knows is slowly destroying him.

TODD MARSHALL -- "MANIAC"

Maniac started flying while he was still in the womb -- his mother is a pilot. He was at the controls of a light plane, daring the winds of his homeworld Leto, as soon as he was old enough for a pilot's license -- actually, before he was old enough. He applied for the Academy to get a chance to fly Confederation fighters, the "hottest kites" in the galaxy. For Maniac, the war against the Kilrathi is an opportunity to test his abilities to the utmost. As he puts it: "If there wasn't a war going on, I'd have to start one."

Maniac's abilities are prodigious: in raw, seat-of-the-pants flying, he may be the best cadet the Academy ever had. But that doesn't mean he'll make the best officer. Maniac is almost too good: because of his flying skill, he gets away with things in combat that would get an ordinary pilot killed. And unless he

learns to temper his dare-devil tactics with a little caution, someday the odds will catch up with him, too.

ROBIN PETERS -- "FLINT"

Flint is the exact opposite of Maniac. Flying for her isn't fun: it's a hard, dangerous job that has to be done and done well if the war against the Kilrathi is to be won. Flint is a good pilot -- bad pilots wash out of the Academy long before they make the Cadet Wing -- but what makes her deadly to the Kilrathi is her single-minded determination to do the job right. She studies tactics and strategy late into the night, spends her leisure time in a flight simulator, endlessly practicing the dogfight moves that come naturally to Maniac. Some pilots, like Maniac, consider Flint's by-the-book approach as excessively cautious, but Flint isn't afraid of combat. She's just determined not to make any mistakes.

Flint's devotion to duty is similar to Maverick's, but she lacks his easy-going nature and sympathy for the feelings of others. She's as unforgiving and critical of others as she is of herself.

HECTOR PAZ -- "GRUNT"

Grunt served in the Marines at the vicious, stalemated Battle of Repleetah until he was wounded and evacuated. When he got out of the hospital, he applied for the Academy. Asked why, he explains that in a fighter wing you can get a hot cup of coffee after a mission. But the real reason is that as a pilot

he can do more damage to the Kilrathi. The things he saw on Repleetah have left him with a cold, quiet, unexpressed longing for revenge. He's waiting for the day when he has a Kilrathi troop transport in his sights.

Grunt isn't as good a pilot as Maniac, Cobra, or Maverick, but he's stubborn and absolutely fearless -- he feels like he's living on borrowed time, anyway. He has an outstanding combat sense, an innate feeling for what his Kilrathi opponents are about to do. "I've been close enough to them to smell their breath," he explains. "They smell better when they're dead."

When he isn't flying, Grunt is determinedly unmilitary. He learned in the trenches of Repleetah to neglect his uniform, disdain the trappings of rank, and grouse about orders. Old habits are hard to break. The one thing he never complains about is his wound. It still hurts him, and occasionally causes momentary black-outs, but he's never told anyone about it, especially not a doctor, afraid that he'll be given a medical discharge if he does.

LAUREL BUCKLEY -- "COBRA"

Cobra was born on Enyo, but her family later moved to the Goddard Colony, where Cobra grew up. Restless and rebellious, Cobra left home as a teen-ager, taking a job on an ore freighter. Her phenomenal hand-eye coordination made her a natural pilot, and soon she was flying ore loaders and supply shuttles for the biggest mining company in the Confederation. Her skill came to the attention of the head of the company, who made Cobra the

pilot of his personal shuttle -- an interstellar "corporate jet" that was a civilian version of the jump-capable Longbow bomber.

Now a success on her own terms, Cobra was ready for a reconciliation with her family. She tried to get in touch with her parents, only to find that all radio contact with Goddard had been lost. The Kilrathi had launched a sneak attack. A quarter of a million colonists died on Goddard -- including Cobra's entire family.

Determined to get revenge, Cobra persuaded her powerful and influential boss to pull strings with Confederation officials and get her appointed as a fighter pilot. Without going through the regular Academy training curriculum -- what Cobra dismisses as that "an officer and a gentleman stuff" -- Cobra was assigned to the Cadet Wing.

Cobra is an outsider, a loner afraid to form attachments, afraid to care for anyone. Some of the other cadets resent the fact that she didn't go through the Academy: she responds with a hard shell of anger. It's the same way she protected herself emotionally when dealing with her family as a teen-ager. She's sensitive to any slight, always ready for a fight. She's prepared to fight physically as well: as a matter of self-preservation while working with the tough mining crews, she became an expert in martial arts.

Cobra's sole purpose in life is to destroy as many Kilrathi as she can. She earned her callsign by the way she strikes the enemy: quick and deadly, cold-blooded and merciless. But Cobra

also refers to her personality: as taut and dangerous as a coiled snake ready to strike out at anyone who touches her.

YULAN CHANG -- "HYENA"

Hyena is the comedian of the wing, a first-rate pilot and good officer who inspires a lack of confidence by his refusal to take anything, even the Kilrathi, seriously. He thinks flying is *fun*, with a dogfight the most exciting hologame of all. He insists that he never thinks about the stakes of the "game": "If I lose, my ship goes boom, and I won't be around to worry about it."

Life in general is a game for Hyena. He's eager to bet on anything: who will sight the first Kilrathi, what kind of ship it will be, who will get the first kill. (Of course, betting on military operations is a serious breach of regulations.) He's even been known to bet on what will be served in the mess hall, although with replicated food, it's sometimes hard to determine who won the bet.

When Hyena isn't flying or making a bet, he works off some of his non-stop energy in the ship's gym. An excellent gymnast, Hyena often thinks of his flight maneuvers in gymnastic terms: back flips, double axles, and dismounts. In action, it's hard to tell what he's doing: inspired chaos is his preferred approach to a dogfight. His wingmen complain that it's hard to stay with him, because even Hyena has no idea what he's going to do next. But his unpredictability also frustrates the Kilrathi pilots who are trying to engage him.

Hyena's older brother, Winston, is also a pilot with the Confederation fleet.

RHALGA NAR HHALLAS -- "HOBBS"

(NOTE: Initially a Kilrathi warrior, Hobbes will become a Terran Confederation pilot by the end of the first thirteen episodes).

Rhalga of the Hhallas clan began service with the Kilrathi fleet as soon as he completed his arduous initiation into adulthood. A crack fighter pilot, Rhalga was promoted to the command of a Kilrathi light destroyer, the *Ras'Nik'hra*. His abilities came to the attention of Prince Thrakhath, and he was about to be jumped several steps in rank and given command of a carrier, when something happened that put his whole career -- and his life -- in jeopardy. He asked a question.

As a youth, Rhalga was a typical Kilrathi, mindlessly obedient to his emperor, concerned only with bringing honor to himself and his clan. But as he watched his wingmen die, then after his promotion saw the *hrai* under his command killed, he began to wonder if all the sacrifice was worth it. The war against the Terrans had gone on for years, without victory. Rhalga filed a request for information with the High Command. He asked how many Kilrathi had died in the war.

Asking the number of Kilrathi casualties was defeatist at best, perhaps treasonable. Passed over for promotion, treated with suspicion by his superiors, Rhalga began to brood over the meaning of his life. A Terran officer in his situation might

simply have resigned and turned his back on the war. Such a course is too passive for a Kilrathi warrior. Rhalga decides that Prince Thrakhath has betrayed the Kilrathi and that the only honorable course is to fight him and all who support him.

Rhalga defects to the Terran side and requests to be allowed to serve in the Confederation fleet. Most of the High Command is adamantly opposed to the idea: they will never trust a Kilrathi. But in the end his request is granted, purely for the sake of propaganda: it's believed that having one of their own fighting against them will demoralize the Kilrathi.

Though he's a veteran pilot with years of service in Kilrathi fighters, Rhalga has much to learn about Terrans. It's decided that assigning him to a Cadet Wing will be the best way to bring him up to speed on Terran technology and tactics. Besides, Maverick is one of the few pilots willing to fly with him. Maverick gives Rhalga his callsign, Hobbes, which was the name of Grandmother Blair's butler. Maverick claims Rhalga looks just like him.

Hobbes' fellow pilots are understandably suspicious of him - it's a little unnerving to have one of the enemy flying as your wingman. Some hate him because of his race; others resent the fact that he's assigned to the Wing as a replacement for a popular cadet who's killed in action; others simply despise any "traitor." Hobbes is saddened by their attitudes, but unshaken in his determination to become a Confederation "warrior." As he tells Maverick: "My own people hate me even more."

Turning against Prince Thrakhath doesn't trouble Hobbes at all: he's as morally certain as an anti-Hitler German. Nor does fighting his own people bother him: it's a Kilrathi warrior tradition to settle disagreements by killing each other. But the ties of clan run deep. Hobbes is haunted by the knowledge that some of the Kilrathi he faces will be from his own Hhallas clan. He tells himself that his wingmen are now his "clan" -- but in his heart he doesn't entirely believe it. Though he's fiercely loyal to his wingmen and would gladly give up his life for his Terran comrades, "they are not Hhallas." Next to a loss of personal honor, being an outcast from the clan is the worst thing that can happen to a Kilrathi. Secretly Hobbes takes comfort in the knowledge that as a fighter pilot the odds are that he will not survive the war.

OTHER TIGER'S CLAW CREWMEMBERS

COMMODORE GEOFFREY TOLWYN

As captain of the *Tiger's Claw*, Tolwyn led one of the greatest exploits of the war: the *Claw's* pursuit and destruction of the Kilrathi dreadnought responsible for the attack on the Goddard Colony. He's a genuine hero -- but for Confederation High Command, a problematic one. Tolwyn is opinionated, argumentative, and critical of his superiors. His latitude in carrying out his orders borders on insubordination. His enemies would like to remove him from command; his champions would like

to jump him to admiral and give him command of a fleet. The refitting and repair of the *Claw* has given the High Command a chance to put Tolwyn on a shelf temporarily while evaluating his usefulness and the future course of his career.

Tolwyn is aware that the assignment of the *Tiger's Claw* to a quiet sector and its use as a training ship is a criticism of his leadership -- or, as he would put it, "a personal attack on my character." His restless energy won't allow him to bide his time and wait for the High Command to reach a decision. Instead, he throws himself into the task at hand, driving the cadet pilots harder than anyone ever has before, relentlessly probing and exploring his sector (and even beyond its boundaries), seeking to discover new resources and new races that might prove useful in the war against the Kilrathi. Like Caesar in Gaul, he attempts to turn a backwater command into a personal springboard to greater power and glory.

Despite his rancorous nature and his arrogance, Tolwyn is a shrewd judge of officers. He sees in Maverick a man of unlimited potential -- and a man with important connections. He adopts Maverick as his protege, a young man on the rise who may someday be a useful ally. But Maverick's loyalty is to duty, honor, and the service -- not to individuals. Maverick's determination to do what's right will eventually bring him into conflict with Tolwyn and turn his former mentor into a bitter enemy.

TECHNICAL SPECIALIST RACHEL CORIOLIS

Fresh out of training school, this is Rachel's first assignment as a "tech-spec." A wizard with anything electronic or mechanical, Rachel's self-confidence in her job borders on arrogance. She's constantly annoying the Tech Sergeants by doing her work faster and better than they can -- and then telling everyone about it. Fighter pilots often go behind the back of the *Claw's* Chief Tech to get Rachel to work on their ships.

Her amazing mechanical abilities aside, Rachel still has the personality of the mischievous and fun-loving teen-ager she was only a short time ago. She listens constantly to the latest techno-industrial music, loves to party, and flirts with any guy who reminds her of holovid heartthrob Clint Mason. She likes to play practical jokes, programming harmless but annoying "surprises" into the ship's computers. Some day she may come to appreciate the grim reality of the war, with devastating emotional consequences. As for now, the war is just a game that gives her the opportunity to tinker with the most powerful and destructive "toys" in the galaxy.

GUTHRIG ANDROPOLOS

Guthrig's father was Commander Jedora Andropolos, one of the first Terran casualties in the war. But Guthrig claims to feel no hatred of the Kilrathi. He says that he's analyzed his subconscious feelings of resentment and neutralized them. The pilots say he just didn't like his "old man."

The pilots can't stand Guthrig. A civilian analyst employed by the fleet, Guthrig is in charge of the psychological evaluation of the cadets. His reports are almost as important as success in the field for winning the golden wings of the Wing Commander. He's always asking the pilots how they feel, asking them what they think about their fellow pilots, about the loss of a comrade, about the war, about themselves. The pilots are reluctant to tell the truth, but afraid to lie.

Guthrig is cold and unemotional, but subject to a variety of phobias that sometimes keep him confined to his quarters, paralyzed with fear. He suffers from a hypersensitivity to light and wears a reflective visor in normal ship's light. The pilots can't decide which is worse: talking to Guthrig in the dark, or seeing your own anxious reflection in his visor as he probes your most secret thoughts.

KILRAH AND THE KILRATHI

The homeworld of the Kilrathi is the planet Kilrah, a semi-arid world of rolling savannas pierced by the smoldering cones of giant volcanos. Huge rift valleys, reminders of the even more active seismic past of the planet, form the "continental" boundaries of the planet. There are no oceans, but almost all of the rift valleys contain long and relatively narrow brackish lakes, which help define the perimeters of the ancient clan homelands. The largest of these lakes is Lake Ke'oth, some 780 kilometers long, but only 93 kilometers wide at its widest point. Ke'oth Tal, the Kilrathi imperial capital and ancestral seat of the Kiranka clan, is located on the rim of the rift valley overlooking Lake Ke'oth.

The Kilrathi are a feline race, descendants of the predators that roamed the savannas of Kilrah in the distant past. They have lost nothing of the cunning and aggressiveness that marked their ancient ancestors. The whole of Kilrathi history is an extended chronicle of civil wars so brutal that they make those in human history pale by comparison. They remain to this day a predatory species, only now operating on a galactic level. They aggressively claim what they find in the reaches of space and take by force what does not bow to their claim. Their entire culture is based on war and aggression, elevated to religious levels.

Kilrathi warriors bear some similarity to the old Imperial Army of Japan. They have a three-tiered code of honor --

personal honor, the honor of their clan, and the honor of the Emperor. This code of honor is more important to the Kilrathi warrior than his own life. It is not uncommon for disgraced crew members of a Kilrathi starship to commit *Zu'kara* (ritual throat-slashing suicide) for something as simple as unintentionally insulting their superiors.

Kilrathi society is rigidly structured. A Kilrathi's future, both as a warrior and as a clan member, is determined by his or her social status at birth. Although there are numerous clans, every Kilrathi also swears allegiance to one of eight noble clans, each with a unique social status. Minor clans usually have historic, traditional ties with one of the eight noble clans. Every clan member swears loyalty to the current clan leader and to the Emperor. Imperial bloodlines themselves are subdivided into clans of sorts. The Emperor holds absolute power, and can casually order executions and banishments. Despite swearing allegiance to the Emperor, each of the eight noble clans feels that its leader holds a valid claim to the imperial throne. Coups and assassinations are commonplace political maneuvers. The throne of Kilrah is currently held by Prince Thrakhath of the Kiranka clan, with clan members holding chief positions in the loyalist troops and in government.

Kilrathi technological and aesthetic ideals reflect their cultural focus on aggression. Their starships are designed to resemble ornate cutting weapons, with sharp, blade-like wings swept forward to lethal-looking points. Engines and weaponry are always placed on conspicuous display. Each ship's external

markings indicate the clan responsible for its construction. All ships are asymmetrical in design.

Asymmetry is also evident in Kilrathi architecture. Creatures of a strong, if cruel, tradition, the Kilrathi favor natural stone in building and construct labyrinthine fortress/palaces bristling with turrets, towers, and odd mesa-like projections. The asymmetry expresses more than an aesthetic ideal -- it also serves a functional purpose. The twisting passages and unexpected arrangement of rooms makes every Kilrathi building easier to defend against penetration by a lone assassin, a rival clan, or Terran soldiers. It is impossible to predict by the external appearance of a Kilrathi structure where the most important rooms are located or even which passages might lead to them.

In every Kilrathi city, each clan maintains a fortress/palace under the direction of a local elder which serves as the focus of clan political, social, and religious activity within the city. Like the *palazzos* of Renaissance Italian cities on Earth, these fortress/palaces are the centers of intense clan rivalries, heavily guarded and constructed with an eye toward defense.

The interior of a Kilrathi fortress/palace is a combination of the functional and the barbaric. Exposed machinery is common, and ceilings are rarely enclosed, leaving cables and ductwork exposed. Lighting is usually dark and murky, and the high temperatures and near-zero humidity favored by the Kilrathi often result in decidedly dusty atmospheric effects. As with clothing,

trophies of war play a prominent role in interior decoration -- skulls of victims or blasted hull fragments of conquered starships are often placed on garish display.

Females control all religious factions on Kilrah and direct all offerings and religious ceremonies. The Kilrathi are polytheistic, with the war-god Sivar being the most important deity.

PROMINENT KILRATHI WARRIORS

PRINCE THRAXHATH NAR KIRANKA

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown -- and unhappy too. Prince Thrakhath clawed, connived, and murdered his way to the imperial throne, only to find his triumph turn to bitter ashes. He lives in constant fear of assassination, fear of the powerful females of the Kiranka clan, fear of defeat in battle that might lead the clans to rise and depose him. When the pressure becomes unbearable, he flies into a monumental rage, tearing the furniture -- and unwary bystanders -- to pieces with his claws. These cathartic rages allow him to vent his emotions and intimidate those around him at the same time.

The dangers of the Kilrathi throne would crush a weakling. There's nothing weak about Prince Thrakhath. He's forceful, charismatic, courageous in battle, devious, coldly calculating, quietly paranoid, never forgetting or forgiving anyone who is less than totally obedient. He wages a constant war against his personal enemies, a war designed to preserve his life and his

power at any cost. Central to his strategy is the war against the Terran Confederation. Thrakhath knows that as long as the war continues, as long as they have hope of victory, the Kilrathi will follow him. He's willing to sacrifice the lives of every Kilrathi: "If they kill us all, I will be the last to die."

KRAMM NAR CAXKI -- "DEATHFANG"

Deathfang is the quintessential Kilrathi pilot: absolutely fearless, recklessly aggressive, fiercely determined to gain honor in the traditional Kilrathi way by first taunting and then destroying his enemy. What sets Deathfang apart from other Kilrathi pilots is his flying skill. For many Kilrathi, their eagerness to score kills and their willingness to die leads to carelessness, sloppy flying, and mistakes. (They're like the over-eager quarterback who forces a pass and gets intercepted, the running back so intent on getting another yard that he fumbles the ball.) Deathfang is a natural pilot, so good that he can be reckless and still not make a fatal mistake.

Deathfang is like a Kilrathi version of Maniac. The difference is that Maniac is showing off his ability to fly. Deathfang is reveling in his ability to kill.

MARJAKH NAR KUR'U'TAK -- "STALKER"

Stalker is so scary that even other Kilrathi are afraid of him. He's the Kilrathi equivalent of a psychopath. He doesn't fight for honor, isn't interested in taunting his enemies. He just wants to destroy them, as quickly and emotionlessly as

stepping on a bug. Afterwards, he doesn't boast about his success or tell stories of his exploits as other Kilrathi pilots do. Instead, he presents himself with a trophy inscribed with the date and the type of Terran ship he destroyed. Stalker has a row of these grisly trophies in his quarters, the only hint of decoration or personality.

Stalker flies a Strakha stealth fighter, the perfect weapon for his style of warfare. Stalker is the equivalent of a sniper, who goes out alone on the battlefield, picks his own ground, and exterminates the enemy, one by one, without glory or fanfare.

BHUK NAR HHALLAS -- "BLOODMIST"

Bloodmist has a personal grudge against Hobbes. All Kilrathi consider Hobbes a traitor to his people. Bloodmist hates him for betraying the Hhallas clan.

In combat, Bloodmist is colder and more calculating than the typical Kilrathi pilot. He isn't ready to die -- not until he's avenged the honor of the clan by destroying Hobbes. Bloodmist will accept failure in a mission, even sacrifice other Kilrathi pilots, if by doing so he gets a chance at Hobbes. For Bloodmist, as for most Kilrathi, loyalty to the clan comes first.

Bloodmist favors the heavily-armed Paktahn bomber. Its heavy armor allows him to absorb hits from Terran fighters while searching for his real target -- Hobbes.

ZUKARA NUR KIRANKA -- "BLADE-KISS"

Though Kilrathi females are just as fierce as the males and dominate many aspects of society, they do not normally become fighter pilots. But as a member of the dominant Kiranka clan and a half-sister of Prince Thrakhath, Zukara can do what she wants. In fact, such is the power of the females within the Kiranka clan that even Prince Thrakhath, who has liquidated several of his close relatives, fears to harm or anger her. He's warned the pilots who fly with Zukara that they had better not come back from a mission without her. Kilrathi pilots scramble to protect Zukara in action -- which allows Zukara to concentrate totally on her target, without concern about attacks on her, which makes her a very dangerous adversary. She's one of the leading Kilrathi aces -- and her fighter wing has the highest casualty rate in the Kilrathi fleet. Kilrathi pilots assigned to her wing grimly joke about her name: *zu'kara* is the ritual throat-cutting suicide of the dishonored Kilrathi warrior, the Kilrathi equivalent of Japanese *seppuku*.

Zukara has been initiated as a priestess of the Kilrathi war-god Sivar. She became a fighter pilot as an offering to Sivar, viewing her "kills" as sacrifices to the war-god. But Zukara is far from what we would think of as religious. She's haughty, proud, ambitious, and cruel. If Prince Thrakhath should offend her, Zukara wouldn't hesitate to turn against him. Though a female cannot serve as emperor, Zukara is perfectly willing to be the power behind the throne, elevating another Kiranka male in her half-brother's place.

OTHER WORLDS, OTHER LIFEFORMS

Along with the Terrans and the Kilrathi, there are numerous other sentient lifeforms which inhabit the galaxy. Some of these exist within the sphere of the Terran Confederation. It has been a long-standing rule within the Confederation to by-pass planets with their own indigenous sentient lifeforms as humanity spread outward across the galaxy. Though not members of the Confederation, these planets are closely allied with it, some even providing auxiliary ships for the Confederation Navy. The brunt of the fighting, however, is borne by the Terrans.

Other sentient lifeforms exist on the fringes of the Confederation and the Kilrathi Empire. Terran relations with these lifeforms is problematic. Some wish to ally themselves with the Confederation, seeking protection from the Kilrathi menace. Others try to maintain a strict neutrality, hoping the war will pass them by, only to fall victim sooner or later to Kilrathi aggression. Still others are openly hostile to both Terrans and Kilrathi.

The Kilrathi have an easier time managing their xeno relations -- they don't have them. There is no word for "diplomat" in the Kilrathi language. They have no allies. They do not make treaties. They do not engage in trade relationships. What the Kilrathi want, they take. The Kilrathi look upon the galaxy and the lifeforms in it as theirs to plunder.

THE FIREKKANS. During the first season of **WING COMMANDER ACADEMY**, the most important of these other lifeforms will be the

Firekkans, an avian species from the planet Firekka, beyond the borders of the Terran Confederation. A birdlike species, the Firekkans build their cities among the rocky pinnacles of their planet. Animistic in their religion, they revere the forces of nature, particularly the wind, which sustains them in their flight.

The Firekkans hope to maintain their neutrality in the war, but when a Kilrathi covert operations team is discovered arming and advising a dissident faction, the Firekkans apply to the Terran Confederation for protection. The Kilrathi have other, more lethal plans for their future....

JUMP NODES

Travel across the immense distances of the galaxy is possible through the use of jump nodes. Often referred to as wormholes, jump nodes are naturally occurring phenomena where the ordinary laws of both Newtonian and Einsteinian physics no longer apply. In Newtonian gravity one object exerts a force on another. In Einstein's general relativity, on the other hand, one object distorts the fabric of space/time and therefore causes changes in the motion of other objects.

It was Sumner's blending of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics with quantum theory in the late 22nd century which led to the discovery of jump nodes and at last made interstellar flight feasible. The "jump" phenomenon is an effect that involves both the interaction of elementary particles and the warping of space/time by matter -- i.e., it is a hybrid of quantum mechanics and general relativity. Sumner predicted, and later research verified, the existence of dipolar gravitational nodes along the axis of the magnetic fields of all stars. Within the field of gravitational collapse in these nodes, space-time has been folded and compressed, in essence forming a new, nodular universe similar in construct to the late 20th century concept of "baby universes" put forth by Hawking, though never subsumed into a general theory until Sumner's breakthrough.

All stars generate nodes (or wormholes) at the edge of their coronas above their rotational poles. A craft equipped with the proper heat and magnetic shielding can enter these nodes and be

transported from the star of origin to the nearest stars at supra-light speed (as it would appear to an outside observer in so-called normal space). A journey of a hundred light-years can be made in just a few days by taking this "short-cut" through folded space. The angle and speed of the craft as it crosses the event horizon of the node determines the exact destination.

Because of internal fluctuations within each node, all regularly traveled nodes are monitored by jump buoys, which feed the telemetry to approaching spacecraft. Nodes unequipped with jump buoys can be used for travel, but any spacecraft making the attempt would have to pause to take readings of the gravitational density and calculate its angle of attack and speed at the event horizon with extreme care. Some spacecraft have entered jump nodes never to be seen again, presumably lost in the alternate universe of folded space.

All stars generate nodes which can be used to travel to the nearest stars, but some stars generate super-nodes -- veritable "super-highways" across immense distances in the galaxy.

After a supernova explosion, all that remains is the collapsed core, known as a neutron star, with density far higher than even that of a white dwarf. Neutron stars rotate very rapidly, emitting beams of light and radio waves which, if they sweep past an observer, appear like light from a cosmic lighthouse. The resultant blinking has led astronomers to call these pulsars (from "pulsating stars") although this blinking is too rapid to be seen by the human eye. The fastest pulsars rotate at almost one thousand times per second. The

gravitational density and rotational velocity of the pulsar generates a super-node with a unique nodular frequency.

Since all stars, even the most ordinary, produce their own frequencies of radio wave emissions, the super-node "dials up" another pulsar with a matching frequency within its range of effect. Some super-nodes have a range of effect of up to 3000 light-years. Once the destination pulsar has been reached, the effect can be reproduced in reverse, returning to the pulsar of origin. By varying angle and speed of entry into the node, the super-nodes of pulsars can be used like ordinary nodes to reach nearby stars.

SUMMARY OF JUMP NODES. All stars generate jump nodes, wormholes used for interstellar travel. Ordinary jump nodes reach only the nearest stars from the star of origin. The traveler moves from star to star to star, leapfrogging across the galaxy to his destination. Because of patterns of planetary settlement, there are recognized stellar trails across the galaxy, routes that are most commonly used. Nodes along these trails are equipped with jump buoys, which feed telemetry to travelers.

Pulsars generate super-nodes, specific frequency nodes which send the traveler across immense distances of up to 3000 light-years to specific pulsars with matching emission frequencies. One can travel between nearby common nodes and super-nodes. The true value of super-nodes lies in their strategic uses. If the proper super-node can be found, a sudden, surprise fleet movement can be made deep behind the enemy's lines.

TIMELINE OF THE TERRAN-KILRATHI WAR

2629 - Starship *Iason*, commanded by Jedora Andropolos, is destroyed by a spacecraft of unknown origin. The captain and the crew are lost. The spacecraft is believed to have come from a previously unexplored planet, soon to be known by its native name, Kilrah.

2630-2634 - The Terran Confederation receives reports of Kilrathi aggression from unaligned worlds and Confederation border planets. The Kilrathi High Command rejects the attempts of the Terran Confederation to engage in diplomatic discussions. The Terran Confederation Congress votes unanimously to initiate a policy of containment toward the Kilrathi. The leaders of Kilrah are warned that their next transgression could lead to military reprisals.

2634 - The *Anna Magdalena*, a refitted transport ship ferrying orphans to their new homes on the planet Dieno, is openly attacked by a pair of Kilrathi fighters. No one survives. The Terran Confederation declares war on the Empire of Kilrah.

2634 - First Battle of McAullife. TCN cryptographer Ches M. Penney intercepts and decodes a Kilrathi message implying that a strike will soon be launched against the planet McAuliffe and its orbiting space station, Alexandria. Confederation High Command orders a counteroffensive twice the size of the anticipated enemy

fleet, hoping to reach McAuliffe first and ambush the attackers. However, the Kilrathi fleet is much larger than expected. Several days of fierce fighting all but obliterate the Terran defenders. Kilrathi occupation forces land on McAuliffe and hold a quarter million Terrans hostage, reinforced by orbital guns.

2635-2638 - Kilrathi raids decimate the Confederation border planets. Only determined resistance by the Terran space forces keep the Kilrathi from breaking through into the heart of the Confederation.

2639 - Second Battle of McAuliffe. Captain Geoffrey Tolwyn leads a force of Raptor-class heavy fighters against the Kilrathi on McAuliffe. Porcupine mines around the jump nodes of McAuliffe's sun prevent the arrival of Kilrathi reinforcements. In Phase Two of the operation, Tolwyn detonates the mines, allowing a Terran fleet to arrive. The Kilrathi orbital guns around McAuliffe are destroyed and the surviving Terran hostages freed. The Kilrathi are forced to retreat from McAuliffe.

2640-2643 - Inconclusive fighting among the borders worlds. Some planets change hands as many as five times. Both sides seem to be stalemated.

2644 - Battle of Custer's Carnival. Terran marines launch an attack on a fortified Kilrathi colony on the border planet of Tanasi, only to be routed by unexpected Kilrathi fighter support.

As Terran forces withdraw, they are pursued by the Kilrathi fighters. TCS *Tiger's Claw*, under the command of Captain Geoffrey Tolwyn, intercepts the pursuing Kilrathi fighters in a delaying action. Despite sustaining severe damage, Tolwyn and the crew of the *Claw* hold off the Kilrathi and allow the Terran forces to escape.

2645-2553 - Abandoning their effort to penetrate the Terran front lines in the central sectors of the border worlds, the Kilrathi switch the focus of their attack to the Pleiades Sector. After initial Kilrathi success, Terran defense forces hold. This front, too, settles down to a stalemate.

2654 - Battle of Repleetah begins. A sneak biological attack destroys the Terran research facilities on the small planet of Repleetah. Terran marines reinforce the planet. Kilrathi ground forces are sent in. Both sides settle in for what will become the most sustained land-based fighting of the entire war. In trench warfare reminiscent of Earth's ancient World War I, each side fights with dogged determination and in full bio-resistant suits. The battle will continue for eleven years.

2654 - Shortly after TCN Intelligence reports that Kilrathi engineers have developed a new super-weapon to use against inhabited planets, all contact is lost with the Goddard Colony. Fighter wings from the *Tiger's Claw*, commanded by Commodore Geoffrey Tolwyn, rush to Goddard and discover that the colony has

been destroyed by the Kilrathi. Fighters from the *Tiger's Claw* pursue the Kilrathi strike force into enemy territory, where they are ambushed by a captured Confederation *Exeter*-class ship. Meanwhile, reconnaissance craft from the *Tiger's Claw* locate the Kilrathi dreadnought carrying the prototype super-weapon. The *Claw* follows and, in a stunning display of deep space logistics and fighting skill, destroys the *Sivar*-class dreadnought. The *Tiger's Claw* sustains heavy damage.

2655 - Because of recent heavy losses in battle against the Kilrathi, the 201st Plebe class of the Confederation's Space Naval Academy replaces the regular flight crew aboard the refurbished *Tiger's Claw*, Commodore Geoffrey Tolwyn commanding. The cadets are supposed to complete their course of instruction while performing routine patrols and flight training. But, in war, anything can happen....

FIRST SEASON STORY ARC

A ferocious dogfight rages in outer space, Terran fighters against a swarm of Kilrathi ships. One by one the ships piloted by the cadets are destroyed, until only Maverick and Maniac are left. Then they too are killed, first Maverick, then Maniac. Debris floats in space -- but suddenly space itself disappears. We've been watching a holographic training simulator, the last simulator exercise in the Academy classroom course.

Maverick and his comrades are commissioned as 2nd lieutenants and assigned to a Cadet Wing. They're excited to discover that their wing has been assigned to the most famous carrier in the fleet, the *Tiger's Claw*...

Commodore Tolwyn, the commander of the *Claw*, is anything but excited. His ship is being sent to a quiet backwater of the galaxy, a sector where nothing ever happens. Confederation high command considers it the perfect place to rest, refit and repair, and train new pilots. Tolwyn feels as if he's been banished. His speech of "welcome" to the cadet pilots makes it clear that he's going to take his anger and frustration out on them.

The *Tiger's Claw* jumps from star to star in the sector, sending out the cadet pilots to investigate and patrol each new solar system. They do recon flights over uninhabited planets, probe asteroid belts, check for Kilrathi ships hiding in the shadows of moons -- the tedious, unglamorous work that pilots call "turning over rocks." The cadets begin to grumble about the endless hours in the cockpit, with only a brief turn-around time

for rest. But the complaints end when in a previously unexplored system the cadets discover jump-capable Kilrathi scout ships. A cat and mouse battle results, and the cadets get their first taste of real action. Competing to prove their flying skills, they score their first "kills" -- and take their first casualties. The rivalry between Maverick and Maniac becomes even stronger now that they're flying "for keeps."

Seeking to discover the reason the Kilrathi were interested in the system, Tolwyn orders a surface examination of every planetary body in the system. The cadets discover a planet inhabited by a bird-like race called the Firekkans. They also discover a Kilrathi covert operations team that is secretly arming and advising a war-like faction among the Firrekans. Using their ships as fighter planes within the planet's atmosphere, the cadets destroy the secret Kilrathi base and defeat a bloody coup mounted by the dissident faction against the leaders of the Firekkans. (Grunt distinguishes himself in the fight on the planet, his Marine training and combat experience giving him an edge over the other pilots.) The Firekkans apply to the Terran Confederation for protection against the Kilrathi.

Science officers aboard the *Tiger's Claw* detect a pulsar only a few jumps away from the Firekkan system. Leaving a liaison team with the Firekkans, Tolwyn takes the *Claw* to investigate the pulsar and determine if the Kilrathi have used its jump node to enter the sector. In a system along the way, the *Tiger's Claw* detects the radiation trail from an artificial power source -- a ship. The cadets track the ship into an

asteroid field and eagerly close in on what they think may be a Kilrathi scout ship. Instead, they find the hideout of a band of space pirates. The cadets take on and destroy the pirates in a wild melee in the heart of the asteroid field.

The *Tiger's Claw* continues on to the pulsar, where the cadets locate and destroy a Kilrathi jump buoy. Determined to discover what the Kilrathi are up to but unwilling to risk the *Claw*, Tolwyn decides to risk a jump-recon. Maniac volunteers, but Tolwyn sends Maverick through the jump point, with Cobra as his wingman, in jump-capable *Longbow* bombers. Maverick and Cobra emerge from a jump node deep in Kilrathi space -- with a huge Kilrathi fleet massing, including Prince Thrakhath's Imperial Guard, ready to jump through to the *Claw's* sector. After a quick recon, Maverick orders Cobra to jump back to the *Tiger's Claw*. But Cobra can't resist the opportunity to use the *Longbow's* firepower against a Kilrathi capital ship. Her first target evades her missiles, thanks to the alertness of its captain, Rhalga nar Hhallas, but a nearby Kilrathi ship is hit and destroyed. Rhalga's ship counterattacks and destroys Cobra's *Longbow*. Cobra manages to eject, and Maverick picks her up. Maverick reaches the jump node with a swarm of Kilrathi fighters right behind him.

Several *Vaktoth* heavy fighters follow Maverick through the node, but the other cadets scramble and destroy them. The *Tiger's Claw* retreats deeper into the pulsar system.

The other pilots are jealous of Cobra's success: a "kill" against a Kilrathi capital ship! But Maverick threatens to bring

Cobra up on charges for refusing to withdraw when he ordered her to. Attacking the Kilrathi endangered their mission: if both their ships had been destroyed, Tolwyn would have no warning about the size of the Kilrathi fleet. But when Cobra tells Maverick how the Kilrathi wiped out her family, Maverick relents and gives her a second chance. He even erases his ship's flight recorder to hide the evidence of her insubordination, claiming that it was damaged in the fight.

The Kilrathi fleet jumps through into the pulsar system, then jumps on to the next star system, leaving a task force behind to guard the jump node. Tolwyn uses a cadet fighter to lure several Kilrathi ships away from the task force, then gives the Cadet Wing its most challenging assignment yet: capture a Kilrathi pilot alive. Tolwyn hopes to learn why the Kilrathi have invaded this seemingly unimportant sector. Despite a well-executed plan, the cadets fail: the Kilrathi destroy themselves rather than surrender. All the cadets get for their troubles is a damaged Kilrathi fighter.

Tolwyn has sent an intelligence report about the Kilrathi fleet to Confederation command. The prudent course would be to wait until reinforcements arrive before taking action. But the Kilrathi may have completed their plans by then -- whatever those plans are. Tolwyn decides to act independently.

The *Tiger's Claw* fights its way past the task force and jumps out of the pulsar system to a neighboring star. Following a circuitous route to avoid the Kilrathi, the carrier reaches the

Firekkan system. The cadets locate the Kilrathi fleet in orbit around Firekka.

Though her superiors have declared it impossible, tech-spec Rachel Coriolis gets the captured Kilrathi fighter operative again. Tolwyn sends Maverick to contact the leaders of Firekka. With Rachel along to keep the damaged flight systems on-line, Maverick pilots the Kilrathi fighter past the fleet and down to the planet's surface. Maverick becomes aware of Rachel as more than just a skilled flight technician, but he suppresses his feelings, afraid that they might distract him from duty and interfere with the mission.

From Firekkans hiding out in the planet's rugged highlands, Maverick learns that the Kilrathi are rounding up the entire population. Huge labor camps have been created, and an enormous temple is being constructed, dedicated to the Kilrathi war god, Sivar.

Maverick joins the fugitive Firekkans in a raid on one of the camps, hoping to free the leaders imprisoned there and learn more about the Kilrathi's ultimate intentions. The raid fails, and while bravely covering the retreat of his Firekkan companions, Maverick is captured by Rhalga nar Hhallas. To Maverick's surprise, Rhalga keeps his capture a secret from the other Kilrathi.

Rhalga tells Maverick that Prince Thrakhath has personally brought this fleet to Firekka to renew the war against the Terran Confederation. The Kilrathi warriors will take an oath in the temple of Sivar never to make peace with the Terrans, an oath

sealed with the mass sacrifice of the entire population of Firekka. Rhalga says that he's realized that Prince Thrakhath is waging war not for the sake of victory or honor, but as a cynical way of guaranteeing that the Kilrathi will remain united behind him. The only course of honor open to him is to become the enemy of Prince Thrakhath. Rhalga says that he wants to join the Confederation in its fight against the Kilrathi. As proof of his intentions, he arranges to hand over his own ship to the *Tiger's Claw*.

Rhalga helps Maverick and Rachel escape from Firekka and return to the *Tiger's Claw*. Commodore Tolwyn refuses to honor Maverick's arrangement with Rhalga: he's convinced that Rhalga's defection is a trick, that Maverick was released so that he could lure the *Claw* into a trap. Despite Maverick's near-insubordinate objections, Tolwyn orders a sortie by fighters and a *Longbow* bomber to destroy Rhalga's ship.

As the time for the mission approaches, Maverick apologizes to Tolwyn and says that he was wrong to question his commander's experience and judgement. He asks to be allowed to command the mission, saying he wants to get even for the way Rhalga tricked him. Hoping to patch things up with Maverick, Tolwyn agrees.

Maverick leads the mission -- but he orders Cobra, flying the *Longbow*, not to fire. Cobra reluctantly obeys. Rhalga drops his shields, powers down, and surrenders his ship.

Tolwyn is furious when Maverick returns with the Kilrathi ship. Maverick claims that he exercised his individual initiative in line with standing Confederation orders to take

Kilrathi prisoners whenever they are willing to surrender. But Tolwyn knows that Maverick's apology was a lie, that he always intended to disobey his orders and give Rhalga the chance to surrender. Tolwyn feels betrayed by the young man he had taken under his wing as his protege. He places Maverick under arrest for disobeying orders.

While Tolwyn is contemplating his next move, Confederation reinforcements jump into the Firekkan system, Marine troopships and their escorts diverted to Firekka on their way to Repleetah. The ships are attacked by Kilrathi fighters, but cadet fighters from the *Tiger's Claw*, led by Maniac, arrive in time to save them.

Tolwyn's force is no match for the huge Kilrathi fleet orbiting Firekka. But Maverick and Rhalga, in adjacent cells in the *Claw's* brig, come up with a daring plan. Using Rhalga's ship to get them into the heart of the fleet, a squadron of Terran fighters can launch a diversionary attack on Prince Thrakhath's flagship. As the fleet rushes to defend him, the Marines will land on the other side of Firekka, supported by the main force of the *Claw's* fighters, destroy the temple, and free the captive Firekkans in the labor camps. Rhalga is certain that if the temple is destroyed, Prince Thrakhath will abandon the Firekkan system. To attempt to punish the Firekkans after his defeat would only bring more dishonor on Thrakhath in the eyes of the Kilrathi. Tolwyn agrees that the plan has a chance to succeed, but he considers the diversionary attack on the flagship a suicide mission. He orders Maverick to lead it.

As they leave for the attack, Maverick gives Rhalga a callsign -- Hobbes. Because of her ability to adapt to Kilrathi technology, Rachel Coriolis is assigned to the makeshift Terran crew of Hobbes' ship. Flint is given command of the cadet fighters assigned to support the Marines.

The attack begins. Maverick's fighters are towed into the midst of the Kilrathi fleet by Hobbes' ship, their presence masked by the larger ship's sensor shadow. When the Kilrathi detect the Terran fighters visually, the fighters power up and sortie against Prince Thrakhath's flagship.

Flying a *Longbow* bomber, Cobra gets a clear shot at the flagship, only to see her missiles knocked out by its defenses. Cobra's ship is hit by counterfire, and she ejects. Her ejection module is re-entry capable, and she safely lands on the surface of Firekka.

Hobbes' ship is taken out by Kilrathi fighters and tumbles, without power, into the atmosphere of Firekka. As the ship breaks up, Hobbes, Rachel, and some of the crew manage to escape in a shuttle.

The other cadet fighters are destroyed, until only Maverick and Maniac are left. Still determined to prove he's a better pilot than Maverick, Maniac flies through the flagship's hangar deck, blasting the unshielded interior of the ship. The giant ship is destroyed, but Prince Thrakhath escapes. As Maniac emerges from the exploding flagship, his fighter is hit. He ejects moments before it explodes. Maverick fights his way back through the Kilrathi, blasts a Kilrathi fighter about to destroy

Maniac's ejection module, and takes Maniac in tow. Together they fly down to the surface of Firekka, with Kilrathi fighters right behind them.

Maverick drops Maniac's ejection module and in a dogfight amid the towering rock formations of Firekka destroys the Kilrathi fighters pursuing him.

Meanwhile, the Marines land on Firekka, with Flint and the cadet fighters under her command providing air support. Maverick joins them, and they destroy the Kilrathi temple and free the Firekkans imprisoned in the labor camps. A Kilrathi counterattack fails when the Firekkans join the battle.

Prince Thrakhath vindictively plans to destroy the entire planet of Firekka. But the priestesses of Sivar insist that the war-god himself has spoken through the Kilrathi defeat, and they demand that Thrakhath order the fleet to return to Kilrah. Even Prince Thrakhath can't defy the priestesses. The fleet retreats.

In recognition for the victory at Firekka, Tolwyn is promoted to admiral. Maverick wins the golden wings of the Cadet Wing Commander as the outstanding cadet in his class. But the honor brings him no satisfaction: now that he's seen the real face of the war, such personal ambitions and rivalries seem trivial.

Knowing that Maverick is responsible for the victory, and still nursing a grudge against him, Tolwyn gets him out of the way by recommending that Maverick be given permanent command of a cadet training wing assigned to an obsolete carrier, and that the carrier be sent on a training cruise through a remote sector of

the galaxy far from the war front. Maverick's cadet comrades are assigned to this "floating Wing Commander Academy" as "upperclassmen" -- their experience will help season the new cadets who join the Wing. Hobbes is assigned to the Wing as a cadet pilot to learn the fine points of handling Terran fighters.

Maverick chafes at the assignment: he feels that he's earned a post at the center of the action. And Maniac, Flint, Cobra, and the other pilots blame Maverick and his feud with Tolwyn for keeping them "out of the war." What none of them realize is that their "training cruise" is a voyage of discovery that will bring them and their young comrades into contact with new, exciting, dangerous worlds inhabited by strange creatures and alien civilizations. Their voyage will lead them to a vast source of power that could ultimately be the key to victory against the Kilrathi. And it will give Prince Thrakhath the opportunity for revenge...