

**Plot Treatment  
for  
Wing Commander V**

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## Wing Commander V: The Eye of Sivar

Lieutenant Christopher Blair tries to shut out the radio chatter as he guides his Saber fighter closer to the target. The cruiser's turrets rain fire towards him, but the attempt is feeble as he dodges the bolts effortlessly. His own cannons respond, raking the cruiser with particle blasts. The shots rake across the name emblazoned on its bow, TCS *Gettysburg*, shredding plastisteel like paper.

As the cruiser explodes, Blair can somehow hear the screams of four hundred crewmen as their bodies are consumed by fire and vented into the icyness of space. Humans this time. Not the cat-like aliens he has come to hate, but his own brothers and sisters.

A huge piece of burning hull tumbles burning from the conflagration, and Blair jinks of avoid it. But this time he is not fast enough. Instruments explode in the cockpit as the plastisteel breaks through shields and grinds into the fuselage. The Rapier spins uncontrollably, and now the screams of dying men are accompanied by a different sound: laughter, deep and rumbling, like the roar of a great beast.

Blair turns, and finds he is somehow not alone in the cockpit. A massive, shaggy shape hunkers behind his seat, the laughter roaring through its fangs. The jewelry affixed to his forehead identifies him: Prince Thrakhath, first in line to the throne of Kilrah. Blair's mortal enemy.

A strange, strident beeping can be heard in the cockpit as it fills with smoke, the stars pinwheeling by. The Lieutenant feels a jolt of pain, and looks down just as huge, clawed fingers break through his chest. Thrakhath laughs.

General Christopher Blair jolts awake to the sound of the communication console's strident chiming. The dream again. He shakes the cobwebs from his head and absent-mindedly rubs at his chest, then stumbles across the well-furnished bedroom to the console.

A Kilrathi face greets him, not Thrakhath this time, but Rohas, his executive assistant. The alien apologizes for waking him at so late an hour, but there has been another Sivarist bombing on the frontier, and he knew the General would want to know.

The General tells him it's all right, he wasn't getting much sleep anyway. He'll be in the council room in fifteen minutes, see that everyone who can joins him. The console goes dark, and Blair sighs. These days Terran Administrator of Occupied Kilrath gets little rest, for more reasons than one.

TCS *Eagle* is hardly the most spectacular vessel in the Confed fleet, and at barely the displacement of a cruiser, is certainly not the largest. But the patrol carrier is one of the newest, and at the pinnacle of human engineering, one of the most advanced. Highly automated, she effectively runs herself, requiring a crew half the size of what previously would have been necessary. And her speed, maneuverability, and new Swordbreaker integrated defensive turret system make her more as autonomous as any ship in the Confed fleet, free to operate without escort.

1st Lieutenant Connor White is less enthusiastic about his first training cruise than his squadron mates. While most can hardly wait to get behind the stick of the ship's Bearcat multi-role fighters and even more exciting, brand-new Wasp interceptors, he is one of the few who have actually seen combat before. And when you're sixteen, fighting against invading hordes simply to survive, your family and all you love already dead in the holocaust behind you, you never truly buy into the myth of glory in battle.

In fact, you don't buy into much. You certainly don't buy into the notion that there's value to be found in friends: they die far too easily. You buy into yourself, and you don't waste much time with other things. At first, that attitude interfered with his success at the academy. Administrators saw him as being too independent. His fellow students saw his introversion as an

affront, and mocked him for it. But once the combat training began, that attitude changed. They still didn't like him--if anything, the attempts to befriend him became less frequent. But when they saw the way he could bend a fighter through its envelope, their scorn was run through with respect. And when they saw the ruthless efficiency with which he could prosecute a kill, maybe they feared him. Either way, from then on the hushed whispers which used to call him insulting names stopped. Instead, when the spoke of him, they simply called him "Frosty."

The destination of this orientation cruise is Hralith, the new Kilrathi administrative seat, where *Eagle* will participate in a joint Confed/Kilrathi Defense Force counter-insurgency exercise. But first they will be visited by none other than General Christopher Blair, chief military counselor to the Kilrathi Federation and Heart of the Tiger, himself.

En route, though, there will be other exercises. White is familiar with the Bearcat, but the CAG, Colonel Hanssen has decreed that before anyone touches one of *her* fighters, they are going to re-qualify on the ship's sim where *she* can watch them. Hanssen is easily the most frighteningly serious woman he has ever encountered: speaking with her is like walking on eggs, and even the slightest breach in protocol can bring a searing reprimand.

So White goes through the sim program for the Bearcat, which takes him step-by-step through the operations of the ship's weapons systems over a series of missions. In the meantime, his hours are spent getting to know his new squadron mates.

It doesn't take long to develop some rivalry between himself and another recruit, a woman by the named Katya Popov. Katya is both beautiful and arrogant, but she's also reputed to be the best pilot on the ship. Still, her extraverted, competitive style is directly at odds with White's self-motivated introversion. How White handles his relationship with Katya can determine whether they become friends, or remain bitter rivals.

Another pilot is a bit of a problem. Like White, Greg Lipsky is a quiet introvert who's made it through the pressures of training. However, he suffers from not sharing White's confidence in the cockpit. He certainly flies well enough: he just doesn't know it. Worse, he seems to have gotten on Hanssen's worse side from the start: at least once, White's seen the Colonel tear Lipsky apart. If White can build his confidence up, the wing could have a great asset (of course, dressing him down could win White some points in Drake's eyes). But confidence building isn't White's style. How he handles Lipsky can make all the difference in the world.

Yet another issue is Gordon Drake, who's not as handsome as he is level-headed and competent. He's also a smartass. Sometimes even more than Katya, he's a thorn in White's side. He's been around, and he's good at reading people. He sees through psychological walls as if they weren't even there, and White's don't impress him. Drake seems to be making it his mission to whittle away at his detachment, questioning who he is, and his jabs are getting old. White must find a way to deal with him; but while showing some cracks his armor might score points with Drake and win him over to White's side, such signs of weakness won't impress Katya, who's too macho in her own way for that. What can't win the loyalty of both. If Drake going to be his friend--let alone anything else--it's going to be because his actions have earned his respect.

In general, it becomes clear that there are two major "factions" amongst the pilots: a cocky, swaggering, hot-tempered "jock" group led by Popov, and a much more business-like, reasoned, but less aggressive group headed up by Drake. Which camp White falls into is determined solely by the character of his personal decisions.

It's finally time to fly some real training missions, and White is paired with various wingmen as they navigate asteroid fields, attack target drones, and mock dog-fight with one another. Attacks on *Eagle* are simulated, with pilots trading roles between defenders and attackers. Towards the end of the program, complex, multi-pilot simulator missions integrating multi-role strike packages in attacks on heavily defended targets are flown. The pilots also qualify in the simulator on the operation of the new Wasp interceptors and their specialized, bomber-killing weapons systems, and fly some orientation missions.

At one point, White is given a difficult choice. During a training mission, Lipsky, flying on White's wing, makes a crucial mistake which results in the destruction of his Bearcat. Lipsky is recovered, but Hanssen is infuriated. She promises that Lipsky will never see the inside of a cockpit again. White has the choice of remaining silent, and allowing Lipsky to be removed from

the squadron. Alternatively, he can assume responsibility for the mistake himself, saving Lipsky but bringing Hanssen's ire down on himself, forcing him to fly some of the less glamorous missions and positions for a while. Also, such an act does little to impress Drake, who thinks a Mama's boy like Lipsky doesn't deserve to fly. But it could have two good effects, as well: first, it keeps Lipsky around. Second, it raises him considerably in the judgmental eyes of Katya.

During the course of the training flights, Hanssen calls White to her office. She's found something in his personnel file which disturbs her a great deal. She did not know from his name that his father was Gregory Thompson, chief engineer of the TCS *Gettysburgh*: the treasonous starship half of whose mutinous crew was killed over a decade ago by now-General Christopher Blair. White explains that after his father's death, he took his mother's name. Hanssen is concerned that, with Blair coming on board, White is a security risk. It couldn't be he holds a grudge, could it?

He is a professional soldier, he snaps back. Blair was only doing his duty, and White does not feel there is a problem. But it is clear that something seethes just beneath the surface. Still, he convinces Hanssen to keep him on the flight line--but just barely.

Later (perhaps much later), he reveals to either Katya or Drake (depending on whose better side he's on at that juncture) that there is a reason he adopted his mother's name. His family was betrayed, all right: but not by Christopher Blair. Rather, it was by his treasonous father. While his mother and sister were butchered in their own home by advancing Kilrathi, leaving White to flee from system to system as an orphan, his father patrolled the far side of space in his cruiser. While White was forced to take the controls of a fighter as a teenager simply to keep himself and the isolated band of survivors who kept him fed alive, his father turned against Confed, the only force in the universe which could possibly save him. He doesn't resent Blair: in fact, he is of the opinion that his father actually deserved to die.

At last *Eagle* arrives in Kilrathi space, where it meets up with TCS *Krakatoa*, flagship of the Terran/Kilrathi Patrol Fleet. From it, General Blair transfers over to inspect the new *Eagle*--designed by his old friend, Admiral Eisen, to take over routine patrol jobs like those now needed in the conquered Kilrathi space.

Depending on White's mission performance up to this point, Blair will have been told by Hanssen that either White or Popov seems to be the hot pilot of the batch. Blair will give the appropriate pilot the congratulations he or she deserves, much to the chagrin of the other. Either way, White's reaction to his presence is uncomfortable. Even though he believes his father got what he deserved, it is still Blair who has driven his father's betrayal home and, in a way, made permanent his shame. If there will every be peace between them, it will be a delicate one.

As Blair leaves the receiving deck, he mentions to the ship's Captain that he would like access to a communication console: It seems there has been a recent rash of Sivarist terrorist bombings, and he wants to check in with home base to see if there have been any new developments.

The carrier group is now on its way to Hralith, where it's to be met by an escort of Kilrathi Self Defense Force light fighters and destroyers. White, Drake, Katya, and their fellow pilots are to fly in formation ahead of the battle group and meet the Kilrathi ships, then escort them back to the formation. It seems like a milk run.

But as they draw near, things aren't right. Blair has reached Hralith, but the transmission is broken. But the Kilrathi on the other end seems agitated. On the bridge of *Eagle*, General Blair peers through the window in consternation at the approaching Kilrathi. Something doesn't seem right; then it hits him. "Those aren't Defense Force ships!" he exclaims.

In space, all hell breaks loose. The Kilrathi ships aren't the destroyers they'd expected, but war-era heavy cruisers, and they are accompanied by Dralhti fighters, not the expected Darkets. Suddenly, White and his wingmen are fighting to stay alive.

The cruisers are driving aggressively towards *Krakatoa*. The pilots are told over com that they have to hold the fighters until the supercarrier can get its own birds into space. The scene is pandemonium, at best.

Bombers and space superiority fighters stream out of *Krakatoa*, but are too late. One cruiser is destroyed, but the supercarrier is annihilated in the combined onslaught.

Back on the bridge of *Eagle*, a transmission is received from the surviving cruiser. Blair can't believe his eyes. It is his old foe, Prince Thrakhath, taunting him from the opposing bridge. The old days are over, he says. He has returned, come to reclaim the Kilrah's glory for his people. He suggests his old rival prepare to die.

White receives word over his com that the cruiser must be stopped. There are four Devastator torpedo bombers from *Krakatoa* still armed and in space, and he and his wingmen must help them reach the cruiser. The dead carrier's space superiority fighters will cover the bombers from the few Dralthis still in the air, but White's Bearcats must fly ahead and suppress the enemy turrets so the bombers can get into firing range.

If White fails, *Eagle* and all in the area will die. If he succeeds, one torpedo succeeds in striking the cruiser, badly damaging it. Thrakhath announces over the com that Blair has proven hard to kill once again, but the war has only just begun. As his ship retreats at flank, the surviving pilots are ordered to return to base.

*Eagle's* flight deck is pandemonium as it recovers not only the carrier's own survivors, but the many survivors from *Krakatoa* in their various heavier fighter types. As White climbs out of the cockpit, he's told that Colonel Hanssen wants to see both him and Katya (the de fact leaders of the young pilots) immediately on the bridge.

They get there just as the communications officer burns through the jamming keeping them out of touch with Hralith. A Kilrathi High Council member speaks with Blair on a com screen. There is fighting in the streets and skies of the Capital, he says. He doesn't know where these rebels were hiding, but it seems they were well-equipped and well-prepared, apparently having received help from the inside in order to sneak considerable quantities of war-era weapons out of storage facilities where they were mothballed. Worse, raids two days ago seized several industrial facilities, power stations, and probably--for reason unknown--the Neutron Star research station. The battle is far too young to predict its outcome it certainly seems Thrakhath, wherever and however he came to be here, has brilliantly used surprise to seize the initiative. The Kilrathi Worlds are at civil war.

Blair's reaction seems unbalanced. He doesn't understand precisely what is happening, he says, but whoever is out there, it is *not* Thrakhath. He killed Thrakhath himself, and the suggestion that he is still alive is insane. It is not a balanced reaction: he obviously has a great deal of emotion invested in the proposition. He goes on to assure the council member that *Eagle* has already radioed back to Confed space for help, and that they will be back in contact soon.

Hanssen tells White and Katya that *Eagle* is now the only Confed carrier within a week's time of Kilrathi space, and that they will be making for Hralith at full speed. It will be up to the new pilots and the handful of *Krakatoa* survivors to do the fighting until reinforcements arrive. Hanssen wants these two to assume the roles of leaders amongst the younger pilots.

Blair says that while they've recovered about twelve a piece of *Krakatoa's* Vampire space superiority fighters and Devastator torpedo bombers, and all are being restored to operational capacity, they're going to need more crews capable of flying them to keep them available around-the-clock. He suggests that the trainees begin immediate simulator instruction in the operation of space superiority fighters, which will be those most sorely needed in the short term.

Over the course of the brief training regiment, White engages in a conversation with Drake, Popov, and several other pilots. Transmissions have been received from Hralith, showing Thrakhath presiding over the brutal execution of human prisoners, replete with polemic on the human infestation, and the need to purge them from the Empire of Kilrah. There is debate amongst the pilots as to whether or not this can truly be Thrakhath. Katya and White were present when Blair voiced his opinion that it cannot. While many remain unsure, Katya believes Blair is wrong; he has slipped over the edge, and is simply in denial.

White must voice his own opinion. There are two choices--that Blair is right, or that Blair is wrong--but there are four potential outcomes. By this stage White's decisions have painted him as either a level-headed professional in the camp of Drake, or a cocky fighter-jock type in Katya's image. The four potential outcomes are: A) White is conservative, and trusts Blair's estimation that Thrakhath is dead. This wins him the respect of some more conservative pilots, like Drake, but leads Katya and some of the more reactionary types to accuse him of kissing up

to the General (which enrages White). B) White is conservative, but agrees that Blair seems to be in denial. This makes Katya--on this track his adversary--feel she's scored a moral victory, which demoralizes some of the other pilots who now doubt Blair's stability, as well as Drake, who simply feels White bears the general a grudge. C) White has stayed cold and detached, and become a friendly rival to Katya. But he agrees that it's unlikely Thrakhath could have survived his encounter with Blair. This causes Katya to accuse him of kissing ass, and makes him lose respect in the eyes of the cockier pilots. But it encourages the others, whose faith in the General has been bolstered. D) White is cocky, and agrees with Katya that Blair is off his rocker. This has the greatest positive morale effect on Katya and the "jock" pilots, but the greatest negative effect on Drake, who now perceives White as almost hopelessly bitter.

Whatever the response, Blair, on a tour to meet the troops before the battle, enters and hears the tail end of the conversation. He responds in one of four different ways, depending on White's disposition. He berates either White or Katya, insisting ardently that Thrakhath is dead: that he pumped fire into the Bloodfang and watched it explode himself, and there was no ejection--besides, even if the Prince *had* ejected, he couldn't possibly have survived the explosion of Kilrah itself. He expects to hear no more discussion on the issue, and that is not a request. Again, those sensitive to such issues might feel that his response is not entirely balanced.

From this point on, White is either on Blair's good side or his bad side. If he is on Blair's good side, on those missions Blair personally briefs the general tends to offer choices that the young pilot would otherwise not be allowed to make (such as which role in an integrated strike he'd like to play). Additionally, Hanssen, who is coming to see Blair as a rival for control of the pilots, believes White's relationship with the General is undermining her authority, and does not show favoritism to him during the decision-making portion of briefings she delivers. Conversely, if White is on Blair's bad side, Blair does not favor him during briefings, but Hanssen, who sees White as a team player, does.

*Eagle* arrives at Hralith, and the battle for the fate of Hralith ensues. The first portion of that battle involves the fight for space supremacy around the capital world itself, as Confed Bearcats, Wasps, Vampires, and Devastators--along with Loyalist KSDF forces--battle rebel Kilrathi ships throughout the system. Blair, Hanssen, and all other involved are surprised by the strength of the rebels: it seems many of the outlying Kilrathi garrisons seem to have sided with Thrakhath (though everyone is quite careful to never say that name around Blair).

Once Hralith's space is secure, the *Eagle* pilots must escort into system another Confed carrier, a Marine orbital assault ship, and a fighter conveyor carrying atmospheric assault fighters for *Eagle* and its pilots, who must train in their operation to support the friendly troops battling for control of the ground. And, of course, at times hostile naval forces must still be engaged in space.

These Hralith missions are the core of the war. Here is where the success or failure of the missions determines the course of the war, and where friends live or die. The *Eagle* pilots train in the use of the atmospheric attack craft, and fly CAS and other surface strike missions in support of Confed Marines and Loyalist Kilrathi on the ground. In addition, there is the perpetual need for fighter and bomber work in space, as the Rebels continue to press for superiority of the skies over the planet.

If White sided with Blair on the issue of Thrakhath's veracity, on several occasions Blair takes him into his confidence, often asking his advice as to which missions he and his crew should fly. Hanssen isn't thrilled about this, perceiving it as end-running, and at times takes it out on White by giving him the bad end of wingman assignments, or not letting make some mission choices she otherwise might have. If White lost Blair's favor, he is presented with several opportunities to win it back (coincidentally losing some from Hanssen), or let things remain the same.

At another point, White is paired with Drake for a simple fighter patrol in an asteroid belt. They encounter a few rebel fighters, but nothing extraordinary. Then, near the mission's most distant waypoint, something appears. It is an extremely fast, extremely maneuverable ship, its glossy black surface broken by regions of brightly glowing green. Targeting systems seem

unable to lock onto it, and if flickers on and off the radar screen. Communications with *Eagle* seem to be cut off. The flies rings around the Confed fighters, and shrugs off what few shots the pilots can get off. Then, finally, there is a brilliant green flash. White finds himself suddenly drifting in space: apparently, time has passed. Drake is nowhere to be seen.

Back at the carrier, White has some explaining to do. Hanssen wants to know what happened to his wingman. White tries to explain, but somehow his flight recorder is blank: there is no corroborating evidence. Still, Blair seems highly interested in his story. He seems to take particular interest in White's description of the black-and-grey ship. Later, he calls White aside and instructs the pilot that he is to discuss this incident with nobody (either by informing him that it is a sensitive subject, or bluntly ordering him to keep silent).

The campaign has been running for two weeks, and at last heavy Confed reinforcements are to arrive in Kilrathi space: an event much talked about aboard *Eagle*. However, the day of the armada's scheduled arrival, there is a nasty surprise. A new class of Kilrathi fighter appears, far more potent than those they have faced thus far, accompanied by a new, extremely lethal variety of destroyer. These are not remnants from the War, but something extraordinary. They ships possess extremely powerful shields and weapon systems: it takes truly inspired fighting to overcome them. Word comes that a wolfpack of similar vessels ambushed the Confed reinforcement group, damaging many ships and sending them retreating back to Confed space to regroup. It may take weeks. For now, the battle remains up to them alone.

Where these ships came from is a mystery. It's known that the rebel Kilrathi had seized some industrial worlds on the frontier, but where they could have developed the designs for such sophisticated warships is unknown. The speculation is interrupted, however, by another, more pleasant surprise: Drake's fighter, now several days missing, appears and requests a landing.

Drake only remembers waking up in his cockpit and picking up *Eagle's* homing beacon. He doesn't remember what happened to him, or even the black-and-green ship. But he feels fine, and after a brief medical work-up he's returned to the flight roster.

Meanwhile, the battle for Hralith is turning ugly. The Kilrathi super-ships are appearing in greater and greater numbers, and the war on the ground is turning ugly. It is believed that the rebels are using some sort of cloaked transport ship to smuggle improved ground weapons past the Confed blockade in space--unfortunately, they have no way to detect them.

However, another surprise awaits. White is passing through the flight control, when he sees the chief tech and one of his assistants in an animated discussion over something on the loadout monitor. When White investigates, the chief tech ecstatically indicates what looks like a fighter radar diagram--but there seem to be some modifications. The tech explains that these are plans for some software and hardware mods that might enable the receiver to pick up subtle gravity waves, then triangulate back to their source and maintain a weapon's lock. That should mean tracking and targeting cloaked ships.

White is flabbergasted: since the middle of the War, when the Kilrathi Strakha first appeared, Confed's best scientists had been trying to develop such a system, with no success. Now the chief has not only cooked one up, but one that is nothing more than a simple mod to the existing sensor array?

But the chief explains that's the strange thing. When he came in, the plans were just there in the system. Even stranger, their origination codes are blanked: there's no way to tell where or who they came from. His best guess would be that someone on the ship hacked into the computer, then found a way to bypass the security tracking protocols and insert the plans without origination codes. The only mysteries are how, and why? It's the damndest thing he's ever seen.

Blair is concerned about the development, but is glad that for once the surprises are actually favoring them. He puts the ship's Computer officers on the job of locating the security breach, and also puts the chief to work upgrading some Vampire and Devastator radars with the new system. White flies with some veteran pilots in a raid on the suspected Kilrathi cloaked supply line, and the sensors work like a charm. Cloaked freighter after cloaked freighter are blasted into shrapnel.

This victory puts the rebels on the surface back on the defensive. However, several missions later, it is becoming clear that the Kilrathi superfighters in space are pushing *Eagle's* ability to control traffic in the area to the breaking point. This is the sort of job the supercarriers were built for: it's a miracle a mere patrol ship like *Eagle* has even held out this long. Blair foresees withdrawal to the armada's regrouping position as all-but imminent--which means days in which friendly forces on the planet will fight under skies controlled solely by the rebels.

When Blair returns to his quarters, he finds a transmission waiting for him. It indicates the location of an installation on an uninhabited world one jump-point distant, which appears to be a secret rebel staging area, at which the super-fighters are refueling on their way into Hralith's space. Eliminating it means stopping the flow of the machines into the Hralith system for at least several days. The origination codes of the transmission are blank.

Blair is concerned that the map is a trick, but sees it worth the risk to send a handful of jump-capable fighters and bombers to investigate the region and, if possible, destroy the base.

White and his fellow pilots find that the base is real, and stand a chance of destroying it. Failing to do so means completing the war on Hralith under heavy opposition from the Kilrathi fighters; success means freeing up *Eagle's* personnel to concentrate on rolling back the ground assault.

With time running out, the Confed forces make a final push to break the stalemate on Hralith. The next few battles determine the fate of the war. Hralith is either won or lost depending on the skill with which White and his teammates fly.

Victory seems imminent, the rebels having retreated to a final stronghold to make their last stand. But just prior to the mission, Blair and Hanssen, accompanied by a security detachment, call White aside. They've managed to trace the two mystery messages back to their source, and Blair (if White is on his good side) or Hanssen (if White is on Blair's bad side) would like White to be present when they confront him.

They make their way through the corridors to Drake's quarters. White has noticed the man hasn't quite been himself since his mysterious disappearance, somewhat quieter and less opinionated than he had been, but he had suspected nothing like this.

Drake doesn't seem surprised to see them, but he isn't offering many explanations, either. One thing is certain: his demeanor is not that of the man White knew. He is calm, collected, confident; not at all the boisterous jock he had been. He says he was lucky that his subterfuge lasted as long as it did. Blair asks him what the "Steltek" had to do with this: did they give him that information? White has no idea what the general is talking about, and Drake does not elaborate. He only mentions that it is fortunate he was allowed to as much as he did, and, as he is being hauled off to the brig, he offers one further piece of advice: Things in this part of space are more complicated than they can possibly imagine. If they truly wish to end this war, above all else, it is imperative that their final attack kill Thrakhath.

The raid goes off as planned, and the rebel stronghold is destroyed despite intense defenses (if it isn't, rebel reinforcements arrive, forcing *Eagle* to retreat). But just as White's flight closes in on the position where Thrakhath's command post is believed to be, a huge, unrecognizable starship lifts from the ground and launches itself into orbit with enormous acceleration. From its bridge, Thrakhath mocks the humans.

In the aftermath of the battle, Marines scour the wreckage of the stronghold. Detailed information on the Sivarist rebel's organization and structure are found, and with it there is little doubt that their operations elsewhere in Kilrathi space can be crushed. And as feared, Thrakhath's remains are nowhere to be found.

In a quest for more answers, Blair has Drake hauled up to the bridge and plays for him gun camera footage of the strange starship which seems to have facilitated Thrakhath's escape. Drake appears unsettled. Blair is tired of playing games: he demands to know what the hell that ship was, and how the Steltek tie into this. What do they want with Thrakhath?

Hanssen points out that this is the second time that Blair has mentioned the word "Steltek." What does it mean?

Blair explains that the Steltek are aliens. Confed has known about them since an incident on the frontier several years ago, but has kept their existence a secret. They are



advanced, far beyond any race they've ever encountered. Confed considers them a security threat, but has had no further contact with them--until now. The black-and-green ship captured on White's gun camera footage seems to exhibit the technology and configuration of the few Steltek vessels that were encountered. And he suspects the sensor upgrades that turned up are based on Steltek knowledge. He wants to know why the Steltek have suddenly turned up, and why they are helping.

Drake says that while it is the way of his people to limit their involvement in the affairs of others, perhaps now there is no choice but to tell the truth. The Steltek are indeed involved, and did indeed feed them bits of information to help in their battle against Thrakhath. When asked how he bypassed the origination codes, Drake explains that it was child's play for one such as him. For he is not truly Drake at all, but a Steltek.

White's response can again follow four possible branches. If he has won Blair's trust, Blair will tend to believe that Drake is Steltek, and White must agree with him or disagree. If he is on Blair's worse side, the embattled Blair will be skeptical, and again White must agree or disagree. The various combinations of responses will have differing effects on how Blair regards the Lieutenant. It can win his trust or lose it, and it can also affect the opinions Katya and the other pilots hold of him.

The Steltek are indeed advanced, Drake explains: enough so that the fabric of genetics and consciousness fell under their mastery millennia ago. It is a simple matter for them to construct shells for their awarenesses. With the proper fabrications, they may take any shape they desire. Such it was that they seized the true Drake, to duplicate his form and plant a mole on *Eagle*. For it was necessary, the leadership of his people deemed, that the Kilrathi insurrection be stopped at any cost.

Blair asks why. The Steltek have declined contact with any other species for years. Why this sudden interest in the Kilrathi, and Thrakhath?

The Steltek simply repeats: His people may take any shape they desire.

Finally it clicks for Blair: he was right all along. Thrakhath is dead. The leader of the insurrection wasn't him at all, but a Steltek! It certainly explains a lot. An infusion of Steltek design and technology would explain the Kilrathi superfighters, plus the mysterious starship on Hralith. But why? Why would a Steltek seek to spark an insurrection amongst the Kilrathi? Why this charade?

Drake explains. Five thousand years ago, when the Steltek race were nearing the peak of their ascension, they experienced a savage civil war between factions which wished to disassociate themselves from the affairs of lesser races, lest they upset the evolutionary balance of the Universe, and those who saw it as their divine right to do what they would with such insects. The latter were known to the Steltek simply as the Nezari, or "Enemy." The war lasted for centuries, and ended in victory for the isolationists. Most of the Nezari were slain. A handful were captured and imprisoned. And yet another handful, ten it is said, managed to escape. It is believed they used their combined resources to open an artificial jump point to a neighboring galaxy, through which they fled. Centuries of searching by the Steltek have failed to find precisely where they went, and they have not since been heard from...until now.

His people believe Thrakhath is one of the Nezari, known to the Steltek as Shul-Azoth. He was one of the most brutal criminals of the Steltek war: at least one sentient species has been rendered extinct by his actions. His appearance in local space is disturbing indeed.

The Steltek expect that the Nezari would not have spent their years in exile passively. They would have used the time to rebuild their strength, preparing to finally subjugate the Steltek, along with the remainder of the Milky Way. With a galaxy full of species to tamper with and subjugate, there is no telling how large an empire they may have forged. Shul-Azoth's gambit to seize control of the Kilrathi could be an attempt to provide a bridgehead for an intergalactic invasion, a region of space into which the Nezari forces could transit and stage unopposed.

Blair has heard enough: he agrees that Thrakhath/Azoth must be stopped. He asks how far away the Confed carrier force is, and is told they will reach Hralith in 36 hours. He thinks the loyalist forces on the ground have the situation well enough in hand to go without carrier cover until then. He orders that a course to pursue the Nezari starship be laid in.

Hanssen, however, questions his decision. She's had her doubts about Blair's rationality regarding Thrakhath, and now is concerned that Blair's buying into this all too easily. Thrakhath has shown a talent for using spies and deep cover agents in the past. What if this really *is* Drake, captured by Thrakhath and brainwashed into telling this story as part of a plan to lure the carrier away from Hralith?

At this point, the decisions White has made in his dealings with others has brought him into the favor of either Blair or Hanssen, but not both. He must side with one or the other now, and the two possible contexts for the decision results in four possible outcomes. If he is on Blair's good side, and agrees with him, the course is set for Nhar-Korin. If he is on Blair's good side and disagrees, he loses Blair's favor and gains Hanssen's, but Blair orders the foray to Nhar-Korin regardless. If he is on Hanssen's good side and agrees with Blair he finally wins Blair's favor, but loses Hanssen's, and the course is set for Nhar-Korin. If he is on Hanssen's good side and disagrees, Blair is dissuaded and the foray is delayed until the arrival of the armada.

If the latter happens, the Drake doppelganger expresses its disappointment, and is ordered returned to its cell. However, before it can be apprehended, a brilliant, tiny jump-point inexplicably opens near him, and he steps through to vanish entirely. The real Drake never resurfaces, and weeks later, when *Eagle* is back to its regular patrols, word comes from Kilrathi space that there are aliens they've never encountered before appearing from nowhere, overrunning friendly defenses as if they did not exist. It is a dark, foreboding epilogue to what had seemed a miraculous victory.

If White sides with Blair, Drake is returned to his cell and the pursuit begins. The documents captured on Hralith show there is a rebel stronghold at a factory world on the frontier, where they are presumably manufacturing their weapons. This seems a likely destination for the Nezari. White now must fly support missions against surviving rebels on the way to the installation. The closer they draw, the more spirited the opposition becomes.

A raid is flown on the manufacturing plant, putting an end to the Sivarist ambition for power altogether. But there is still no sign of the Nezari. Drake is summoned to the bridge, and they confer. It appears they were wrong: the alien has escaped.

But just as he is about to admit defeat, there is a flash, and they turn to see a huge, imposing form standing on the bridge. It is Thrakhath--or, rather, Shul-Azoth. There is an iciness to his dark eyes which transcends anything Blair had ever seen in the real Thrakhath: a focused, humorless hatred beyond anything merely mortal.

Blair and his pilots have been a thorn in his side, Azoth explains. It had been his personal promise to his brothers that he would deliver the Kilrathi into the Nezari fold. It seemed easy enough, but somehow Blair found the means to thwart him. For that, they all shall pay.

Drake vows that that will never happen, and calls Azoth "outcast" with hatred in his voice. Azoth raises a Kilrathi hand, and a distortion races through the air, slamming the Stelte against a bulkhead. He slumps to the floor, dead.

What fragile bodies, Azoth comments. Do they really think insects like them can stand against warriors of the kind his people have cultivated over the course of five millenia? They are about to find out. They are about to see what war against the Nezari is truly about. He chuckles, and the unmistakable swirl of a tiny jump-gate opens to consume him. Then he is gone.

As those on the bridge attempt to regain their composure, the sensor operator shouts that there is a jump gate opening to starboard. That's impossible, the Captain argues: there is no jump point there. Nevertheless, a gate is opening. And it is big.

Space tears open, and a ship emerges. It is like nothing they have ever seen before, large as a Kilrathi Dreadnought, yet dark, reptilian, adorned with mysterious nodules and blisters. Huge portions of it are in constant motion, rotating and reconfiguring themselves as the great vessel turns its mass and bears in on the tiny *Eagle*.

Doors in the starship's sides open, disgorging huge, ominous fighters covered in alien script and aggressive markings. On board *Eagle*, general quarters is sounded and all available pilots scramble for the flight deck.

White leaps into a space superiority fighter, and flies forth to meet the new foe. The alien fighters are unbelievable. They blast the Confed pilots from space with weapons like nothing they've seen before: great scything beams which are unstoppable by shields and energy fields which seem to sap a fighter's power. Their guns hit with impacts like comet strikes. Even though the Steltek-modified Vampires, Wasps, and Bearcats are performing as no human fighter has ever performed before, it is nearly impossible to stem the tide.

Several of a second type of ship emerge from the starship, larger and blockier than the fighters, and streak towards *Eagle*. At least one arrives, and, shrugging off fire from the Swordbreaker system, grasps its spine.

Within, airlocks are blown open and huge, armored shapes burst into *Eagle's* halls. They are tall, covered with blue-black reptilian scales. Long arms covered in battle armor swing massive rifles which blast the scurrying humans into pieces. The alien's voices are piercing shrieks, and they pass through mouths ringed by layers of teeth like needles. Security personnel run forward to meet them, and a firefight rages through the halls of the carrier.

In the cockpit, White receives word that the aliens have begun to board. White must try to forget about the Nezari fighters and focus on the assault ships. If any more make it on board, the com officer explains, they're not sure they can hold them.

If White succeeds in shooting down the oncoming assault ships, *Eagle* will survive. If not it will be conquered by the reptilian invaders, and all will be lost.

At last the stream of alien fighters seems to be slowing, and the invaders have been contained on *Eagle*. The ship is going to launch some Devastators, lead by Hanssen herself. Blair and the few surviving pilots must defend them as they close on the alien starship, and do what they can to suppress the alien ship's defenses. If the torpedo bombers don't get through, it will be all over.

White must fly like he's never flown before, assigning wingmen to strike turrets and fighters alike in a mad attempt to let the Devastators get through. If they don't, the starship enters range and blasts *Eagle* to pieces. If they do, torpedos sink into its hide and its great form is wracked with explosions. It turns to flee, but too late: a chain reaction has begun. The starship's detonation is staggering: apparently, its power source was greater than anything humanity has dreamed of. The blast tosses both *Eagle* and her fighters about space like leaves on the wind. When it is done, there is nothing left of the ship at all.

White and the handful of survivors make their way into *Eagle's* scorched recovery bay. Of her original complement of pilots, plus the 20-odd survivors from *Krakatoa*, only thirty survive. Among the dead are Lipsky.

The pilots in the bay are dazed. White spots the body of one of the invaders lying lifeless on the deck, and is filled with a sense of foreboding. Even dead, it is terrifying. Azoth was right. If that's what the Nezari are about, humanity is truly not ready for them. Yet.

There is a flash in the far corner, the swirl of a jump gate, and something drops to the floor. It looks like Drake. White and Katya rush over and help him to his feet. This time it looks and sounds like it might truly be him, dazed but certainly Drake. He has no recollection of where he was or with whom, but he remembers someone telling him it was time to go home, and handing him a data cube for General Blair. White assures him they'll get it to the General as soon as possible, and help him off the flight deck.

The scorched and battered shape of *Eagle* has returned to Hralith, and reinforcements have finally arrived. Order is being restored on the capital, and what little rebel resistance remained elsewhere in Kilrathi space is being rapidly mopped up.

Blair bids farewell to White and the pilots, either with grudging respect, if White is on his bad side, or with genuine appreciation for the young man's talents. Either way, he is impressed by the Lieutenant's skill.

White and several others watch from an observation lounge as Blair's shuttle descends to the surface. Depending on his character, White has been established as a person as detached as he initially seemed, or someone possessing more depth--though also more weakness. The difference is reflected most clearly in the attitude of Drake, who sees hope for

him or doesn't, and Katya, who in either case has found great respect for his courage and fighting skills.

As they look out past Hralith and on into the vastness of space, White can't help but wonder what's out there. And when, if ever, it will come.

General Christopher Blair sits once again before the computer console in his quarters on Hralith. He slips the data cube given him by Lieutenant Drake into the computer, and watches as diagrams and data begin to flash across the screen. Weapon plans. Gifts from the Steltek, no doubt intended to help humanity fight their war for them when and if the Nezari come in force.

There is a flash behind him, and this time he is only marginally surprised to see his old foe, Thrakhath, standing in the room with him. But of course, he now knows it isn't Thrakhath. The Nezari named Shul-Azoth spreads a great, Kilrathi smile. Blair has done well, he says. He did not think anyone in this part of space could stand long against the Goryai. But Blair not only survived, he destroyed one of their battlecruisers in the process. Impressive. Still, there are more where that one came from. And of all the weapons at their disposal, all the species the Nezari have won over to their cause, the Goryai are far from the most terrifying. Blair might have dealt Azoth a personal setback, but he can resist fate no more than a grain of sand can resist the tide. His life as he knows it is over. For the Nezari have returned, and they will have their vengeance. And someday even Blair will call him "Master."

Shul-Azoth chuckles, and the jump gate swirls open to envelop him again.

Blair slumps back in his chair. It seems things have only just begun.

## Notes on the Nezari

It's not clear in this outline precisely what's up with the Nezari. They won't appear in force until WC6, but this is how I envision their empire:

Arriving in exile, the ten Nezari set about building their strength immediately. They had limited resources themselves, limited largely to their starships and their sophisticated jump-engines. But their new galactic home was ripe with civilizations whose wealth they could plunder. As such, they initiated a plan to infiltrate and subjugate the governments of one species a piece, and mold them (over five millenia) to serve their purposes.

This was not an easy task. Several of the species hadn't even achieved space flight. Almost all were bound up in internal wars and bickerings, if not interstellar wars between one another. Further, the Nezari were well aware that no species would react favorably to the notion of control from an alien source, and the ten exiles were far some powerful enough to take the worlds by physical conquest. So they set about centuries-long projects of deception and manipulation with the objectives of unifying the individual species under one rule when necessary, advancing their technology where necessary, and ultimately placing themselves in the seats of power.

They used their quasi-shapeshifting ability to craft bodies to achieve these goals, infiltrating the governments of the various species, turning them gradually totalitarian, and, ultimately, crafting an alliance between them. The result was a military juggernaut which, working in unison, subjugated all of surrounding space and adopted a militaristic, manifest destiny of someday conquering all life in the universe.

However, due to the methods employed, none of the nine core species to this day (with the possible exception of a few inner-circle types high in their governments) are even aware that the Nezari exist, let alone that they are the ones truly pulling the strings behind their actions. The Nezari infiltration is a perfect conspiracy, leaving the aliens completely enthralled, yet entirely oblivious to their entanglement (think of the Illuminati).

These activities fit perfectly into the Nezari belief that, amongst all the other, less evolved species of the universe, they are essentially Gods (this is largely why I named the one Shul-Azoth; it's a name whose sound reminds me of the evil Old Gods of H.P. Lovecraft's work: Cthulu, Shub-Niggurath, Yog-Soggoth, Nyarlathotep, etc).

The Nezari are far from one big, happy family, however. Each is a megalomaniac in his or her own right. Each has a distinct personality which shapes their strategies. Some are calculating and ruthlessly efficient, some are cruel, some are extremely pragmatic. Few of them would get along at all if circumstances did not dictate their working together. They are united by the common cause of conquering the Stelteck, but each would like to see themselves at the top of the pile when the fracas is over. As such, there is a lot of maneuvering going on between them, and even hostilities felt between some of the "allied" races they control.

Only one of the ten Nezari never took control of a species at all: Shul-Azoth. He was a bit less stable than his companions, a bit less patient, and certainly more violent (though he has his own strange sense of chivalry). He's as close to a bonafide psychopath that the Stelteck species has produced. Still, he serves his purposes, proving a devious and capable advance scout, capable of doing the dirty work when needed. Probably his greatest weakness is his need to dominate his rivals, not merely defeat them: to kill someone may be effective, but to have them bow down before you, beaten at their own game and powerless to resist, is exquisite. His objective in WC5 was to infiltrate the Kilrathi government and seduce them to the Nezari side, turning Kilrathi space into a forward staging area for the forthcoming Nezari invasion forces. But his failure to deliver on this promise has won him little sympathy from his peers (In fact, I think it could be most interesting if this failure left him an outcast from both the Nezari and Stelteck communities, leaving him a violent and unaligned free agent interfering in the affairs of *both* sides of the war).

The Nezari Empire itself is a conglomeration of many races with many different abilities. We've already seen a few of the fast and brutal, reptillian Goryai. One may be a mammalian race with massive, slow, but extremely powerful fighters and starships. Another may be a race of wispy, jellyfish-like hydrogen-breathers with nearly transparent, fragile spacecraft that exhibit extraordinary engine and shield technology. Yet another race of sentient insects fly tiny, disproportionately powerful ships which have their power "beamed" to them from a central generator or "node" ship, which must be destroyed if they are to be overcome. Some of these aliens might possess strange weapons: gravity-generating fields that sling enemies around, missile-like drones that chase them and sap energy from shields, etc. There's an endless number of ideas we could pursue.

Precisely what else comprises the Empire is a mystery, but one thing is certain: When the invasion finally erupts through a wormhole that (I think) should be opened at the beginning of Wing Commander VI, one will never know precisely what threats humanity will face next--particularly on the rare occasion when a Nezari himself enters the fray.

## Notes on the StelteK

To some extent I think it's important that who the StelteK are remain a mystery (at least for a long while, although hints might be dropped on occasion over the course of many games), but I have a few ideas to throw out, anyway.

For one, it has to be clear that StelteK society is extremely laissez-faire in its attitude to other species. The entire basis for the war that broke out between them and the Nezari revolved around the question of whether other species should be allowed to evolve freely, or be consciously manipulated and controlled by the StelteK as if they were Gods. It could be that the only reason the StelteK are involving themselves now at all is that they see little choice, and even then there is great debate amongst them as to how deeply they should interfere. Enough say not at all that there's factionalization again, such that the pro-interference elements (like the StelteK who masqueraded as Drake) have to do so in very subtle ways.

An idea I'm starting to like even more is that the StelteK *have* to let humanity bear the brunt of the battle, for there are only a handful of them left in the galaxy. Maybe the majority of their civilization migrated passed the event horizon of a supergiant black hole at galactic center in some quasi-religious attempt to commune more closely with the cosmos, leaving only a handful of rear guardsmen behind to both protect the lesser species of the galaxy from discovering and abusing the many artifacts they've left behind (like the derelect starship in *Privateer*), and also guard against the return of the Nezari. It could be that these remaining StelteK (maybe numbering as few as five) simply lack the power to become directly involved, and can only share their knowledge and act as guardian angels for humanity.

Another possibility I like is that even before their inward exodus, a secret sect amongst the StelteK may actually have violated their "prime directive," and have been subtly shaping humanity for the express purpose of fighting this war for thousands of years. Or maybe this was simply something done by the "rear guard" who stayed behind when the rest left, because they saw no other option. Similarly, the Kilrathi themselves may have been "uplifted" by the Nezari prior to their defeat in the great war, for the specific purpose of serving as their vanguard when they returned. It could be that the entire Terran/Kilrathi war was a symptom of the greater StelteK/Nezari conflict all along.

Precisely what the StelteK are as a species, I'm not sure. One possibility is that they actually have bodies, and a definite shape which they can someone "project" themselves out of. What I'm tending to favor at the moment, though, is that they evolved beyond their physical bodies long ago, casting them aside to instead encoded their very consciousness into the quantum fabric of space-time itself. As such, a StelteK might really be nothing but a rippling distortion in space, a fuzzy area like a bubbling lensing effect in the air. These sentient spacetime distortions can control bodies by simply moving into their brains, and directly manipulating the firings of the neurons therein (which raises the possibility that maybe they can do more than fabricate bodies and use them, but possess someone directly, and even interfere with computer systems directly--hence Drake's ability to circumvent *Eagle's* security protocols).

At any rate, of all the things in the story I'm suggesting this seems one of the most wide-open issues, and worthy of a lot of discussion.