

STARFIGHERS

Defending Earth

Book I

Bruce Goldwell

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STARFIGHTERS ACADEMY

Founders Supporter Edition

This special edition of Starfighters Defending Earth is part of the limited Starfighters Academy Car Wrap Fundraiser Collection.

This book was produced to recognize the early supporters who helped launch the Starfighters Academy outreach mission and bring the vision of the Starfighters universe into the world.

By contributing to the crowdfunding campaign, the holder of this edition became part of the founding support team that helped promote the project and expand the reach of the Starfighters story.

This copy is designated as a Collector's Edition Supporter Copy and commemorates participation in the original campaign.

Thank you for helping fuel the mission.

Founder & Creator
Bruce Goldwell



This is more than a story.

Starfighters is where immersive simulation meets real-world skill.

Inside these pages, you'll follow Billy Bronson as he enters the TAVAT system...

but the experience doesn't end here.

You can explore the full trilogy, mission concepts, and deeper meaning behind the story here:

<https://starfightersacademy.com/books/starfighters/>

Continue your journey when you're ready.

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Chapter 1

Billy Bronson had grown up in a world that was far more connected than any previous generation had ever experienced, yet in many ways it was also far more isolating. Technology had woven itself so deeply into everyday life that it was almost impossible to separate the digital world from the physical one. Most people accepted this shift without question, particularly those who had been born into it, and Billy was certainly one of them. He had never known a time when information was not instantly available or when entertainment required patience. For him, technology was not an innovation; it was simply the environment in which life existed.

Among the many advancements that had reshaped society over the previous decade, none had captured the attention of young people quite as completely as immersive virtual reality. Early versions of virtual reality had existed for years, but they had always felt like crude approximations of real experience. The images were grainy, the controls were clumsy, and the illusion of truly being somewhere else had always been just slightly out of reach. That changed with the introduction of the TAVAT system.

The TAVAT system had not simply improved virtual reality; it had transformed it into something entirely new. The name itself stood for Total Augmented Virtual Adaptive Technology, though most people simply referred to it as TAVAT and rarely thought about what the acronym meant. What mattered was what it could do. Unlike earlier systems, which relied primarily on visual immersion, the TAVAT system integrated physical feedback, neural response monitoring, and environmental simulation into a single seamless experience. The result was a level of realism that was almost unsettling the first time someone tried it.

Players did not merely control characters within a game. They became those characters.

The system used lightweight haptic gloves and a sleek visor that monitored eye movement and subtle muscle responses. Tiny sensors measured changes in heart rate, breathing patterns, and even minute variations in skin temperature. These inputs allowed the software to respond dynamically, adjusting the experience in real time to create the illusion of complete presence within the virtual environment. The technology was so convincing that many users reported brief moments of disorientation when returning to the real world, as though they had stepped out of one reality and into another.

Naturally, such technology had found its most enthusiastic audience among gamers.

Over the years, countless developers had attempted to create the definitive immersive gaming experience, but it was a single title that ultimately rose above the rest. The game was called *Starfighters*, and within a remarkably short time it had grown from a popular release into a global phenomenon.

Starfighters was more than a game. It was a competitive ecosystem, a social network, and a cultural touchstone all at once. Players from every corner of the world logged in daily to compete in missions that ranged from small-scale reconnaissance flights to massive fleet engagements. Online forums were filled with detailed discussions about strategy, ship configurations, and optimal flight paths. Entire communities formed around the game, sharing tips and analyzing gameplay footage with the seriousness of professional sports commentators.

At the highest levels of play, *Starfighters* demanded extraordinary skill.

The game simulated the physics of spaceflight with an attention to detail that bordered on obsessive. Pilots had to account for inertia, momentum, and the absence of atmospheric drag. Maneuvers required careful planning and precise timing. Mistakes were punished quickly and often spectacularly. It was not a game that rewarded casual participation, and that was precisely what made success within it so prestigious.

Billy had first discovered Starfighters two years earlier, after watching a highlight video of a professional tournament online. He still remembered the sense of awe he had felt while watching the footage. The pilots moved through asteroid fields and enemy formations with a level of control that seemed almost impossible. Their ships danced through danger with grace and precision, weaving between obstacles at speeds that made Billy's palms sweat even as he watched from the safety of his bedroom.

From that moment on, he had been captivated.

What had begun as casual curiosity quickly turned into fascination, and fascination soon evolved into dedication. Billy spent countless hours practicing flight mechanics, studying mission replays, and reading strategy guides written by top-ranked players. He learned to analyze his own performance with a critical eye, identifying mistakes and searching for ways to improve. Each small success encouraged him to push further, to aim higher, and to believe that he might someday join the elite group of pilots whose names dominated the global leaderboards.

For Billy, Starfighters was not merely entertainment. It was a challenge, a goal, and in many ways an escape. The game offered a sense of accomplishment that was often difficult to find elsewhere, and it provided a world in which effort and skill translated directly into measurable progress. Within the virtual cockpit of a starfighter, the rules were clear, the objectives were defined, and success depended entirely on his own actions.

That clarity was comforting.

Billy's bedroom reflected this passion in subtle but unmistakable ways. The walls were decorated with posters depicting sleek spacecraft and distant galaxies, and his desk was cluttered with notes and sketches related to flight strategies and mission routes. A small shelf near his computer held a collection of model starfighters, each one carefully assembled and proudly displayed. To an outside observer, the room might have appeared ordinary, but to Billy it represented a personal command center.

At the center of this space stood the TAVAT console.

The device itself was surprisingly compact, consisting of a slim docking station connected to a visor and a pair of haptic gloves. When powered down, it appeared almost unremarkable. When activated, however, it became the gateway to a universe of endless possibilities.

Billy had saved for months to purchase the system. He had taken on extra chores, skipped unnecessary purchases, and carefully set aside every bit of money he could spare. The day the package finally arrived had felt like a personal holiday. Even now, months later, the excitement had not entirely faded.

That evening, the console glowed softly in the dim light of his room, awaiting activation.

Billy stood in front of it, flexing his fingers in anticipation as he prepared for another session. He had not planned to play for long. It had been a busy day, and he knew he should probably focus on schoolwork or get some rest. Yet the pull of Starfighters was difficult to resist, especially when he knew there was still room for improvement in his rankings.

He slipped on the haptic gloves and adjusted the visor over his eyes.

The familiar startup sequence appeared instantly, followed by the Starfighters main menu. The transition from bedroom to starfield was so seamless that it still managed to impress him every time. One moment he stood on carpet; the next he floated among distant stars.

Billy selected a mission without hesitation.

He had been preparing for this one all week.

The mission he selected was widely regarded as one of the most difficult challenges in the entire Starfighters mission library. It was a late-game scenario designed specifically to test a pilot's ability to react under pressure and maintain control in unpredictable conditions. Many players attempted it repeatedly

without ever achieving a successful completion, and the mission had developed a reputation as a kind of unofficial rite of passage among the game's most dedicated competitors.

The scenario was known among players as **The Storm Run**.

The objective itself sounded deceptively simple. Pilots were tasked with navigating a dense asteroid belt during a period of heightened electromagnetic instability. Once inside the belt, they were required to reach a designated extraction point before the storm reached full intensity. In practice, the mission demanded a level of precision and composure that few players possessed.

Asteroids within the belt moved in irregular patterns, colliding and fragmenting in ways that made safe routes difficult to predict. The electromagnetic storm added an additional layer of danger, disrupting navigation systems and occasionally disabling key ship functions without warning. Even experienced pilots often found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer number of variables involved.

Billy had attempted the mission many times before.

Each attempt had ended in failure.

Sometimes he lasted only a few seconds before colliding with debris. Other times he progressed deep into the belt before the storm intensified and overwhelmed his ship's systems. Every failure had been frustrating, but it had also been instructive. He had studied each attempt carefully, analyzing what had gone wrong and considering how he might approach the challenge differently the next time.

Tonight, he felt ready.

The loading sequence completed, and the virtual cockpit materialized around him with breathtaking clarity. The curved canopy stretched overhead, revealing a vast field of drifting asteroids illuminated by distant starlight. Instrument panels glowed softly, displaying navigation data and system diagnostics. The gentle hum of the engines vibrated through the haptic feedback system, creating the illusion that he truly sat

within a spacecraft suspended in the vacuum of space.

Billy wrapped his hands around the flight controls.

The sensation felt natural, almost instinctive. The TAVAT system translated subtle finger movements into precise adjustments, allowing him to guide the starfighter with remarkable accuracy. Over time, the interface had become so familiar that he no longer consciously thought about the mechanics of controlling the ship. The movements felt as natural as walking.

A countdown appeared in the center of the display.

Three.

Billy exhaled slowly, focusing his attention.

Two.

He adjusted the thruster controls, preparing for immediate acceleration.

One.

The engines roared to life.

The starfighter surged forward, accelerating smoothly as the asteroid field expanded to fill the canopy. Massive slabs of rock drifted in every direction, their surfaces scarred by countless collisions over the ages. Some rotated lazily, while others spun with alarming speed, creating unpredictable hazards that demanded constant attention.

Billy guided the ship into the field with careful precision.

At first, the navigation felt manageable. He steered around larger obstacles and adjusted his speed to maintain safe distances from drifting debris. His confidence grew with each successful maneuver, and for a brief moment he allowed himself to believe that this attempt might finally end differently.

Then the storm began.

A faint flicker of white light appeared ahead, leaping between

two distant asteroids like a spark of lightning. The phenomenon intensified rapidly, spreading across the field in jagged bursts that illuminated the darkness with sudden flashes. Static crackled through the cockpit speakers, interfering with navigation data and filling the air with a harsh, distorted hum.

Billy's grip tightened on the controls.

He knew from experience that this was the point at which most attempts began to unravel. The storm's unpredictable nature forced pilots to rely on instinct rather than planning, and even a single miscalculation could lead to disaster.

The first warning indicator blinked red.

"Navigation interference detected."

Billy adjusted his course, compensating for the disruption.

A second warning followed almost immediately.

"Shield integrity declining."

The mission had entered its most dangerous phase.

Billy pushed the thrusters slightly harder, increasing speed as he wove between increasingly dense clusters of debris. The asteroid field grew more chaotic with every passing second, forcing him to react quickly and decisively. There was no time for hesitation.

Lightning exploded again, closer this time.

A bolt struck an asteroid directly ahead, shattering it into a cloud of glowing fragments that drifted toward him like a swarm of fireflies. Billy swerved sharply, narrowly avoiding the debris as it scattered across his path.

His heart pounded in his chest.

He had reached this point before.

But never this cleanly.

Never this fast.

The realization sent a surge of adrenaline through him,

sharpening his focus and quickening his movements. Every decision felt immediate and urgent, yet strangely controlled. He was no longer thinking about the leaderboard or the difficulty of the mission. He was simply flying.

And for the first time, it felt like the ship was responding perfectly.

Then the alarms intensified.

Multiple warning lights flashed simultaneously across the console, their red glow reflecting off the cockpit glass in rapid pulses. Static surged through the speakers, drowning out the steady engine hum that had previously provided reassurance.

Billy's confidence faltered.

The storm had arrived earlier than expected.

And it was growing stronger by the second.

Ahead of him, two massive asteroids drifted slowly toward one another, their enormous silhouettes blocking the path forward. The gap between them narrowed with terrifying inevitability, leaving no room to maneuver above or below.

Billy's breath caught in his throat as he realized the truth.

He was running out of options.

Billy's breathing grew shallow as he studied the narrowing gap ahead of him. He had encountered this obstacle before during previous attempts, but never under conditions this unstable. The electromagnetic storm distorted his navigation readouts, causing minor delays in the ship's response time that made precise maneuvering far more difficult than usual. Under normal circumstances, he would have slowed the ship and searched for an alternate path.

There was no alternate path now.

The asteroid field had thickened behind him, and turning back would only force him deeper into the storm. Remaining where he was would guarantee that the closing asteroids crushed his ship

in seconds. The only viable option was forward.

Billy swallowed hard and pushed the thrusters further.

The engines responded with a rising mechanical whine as the starfighter surged toward the narrowing gap. The cockpit vibrated with increasing intensity, the haptic feedback system translating every strain on the ship's hull into physical sensation. Tiny tremors traveled through the controls and into Billy's hands, reminding him just how close he was to the limits of the ship's design.

Warning indicators multiplied across the console.

“Structural integrity declining.”

“Shield recharge delayed.”

“Navigation error margin increasing.”

Billy's mind raced as he searched for solutions. He mentally reviewed every strategy he had ever read about this mission, every forum discussion, every recorded playthrough he had studied. None of them accounted for a storm of this intensity appearing this early in the run.

The gap between the asteroids continued to shrink.

Billy's heartbeat thundered in his ears, matching the rhythm of the warning alarms that now filled the cockpit. His focus narrowed until the rest of the universe seemed to fade away, leaving only the ship, the obstacles ahead, and the rapidly diminishing window of time.

Then his eyes fell on the hyperdrive override.

The button sat beneath a small red safety cover on the control panel, glowing faintly in the dim cockpit light. It was a feature that existed primarily for emergency scenarios, and its use during unstable conditions was widely considered reckless. Entire discussions within the Starfighters community were dedicated to advising players never to activate it inside an asteroid field.

Billy had read those discussions many times.

He had agreed with them.

Until now.

The realization settled over him with sudden clarity. The mission's designers would not have included the override if they had not intended for players to consider using it. The warnings, the danger, the apparent impossibility of the situation—these were all part of the challenge.

The hyperdrive override was not a mistake.

It was a gamble.

Billy hesitated for only a fraction of a second before flipping open the safety cover. The motion felt strangely final, as though he had crossed an invisible line between caution and desperation.

His hand hovered above the control.

“This is a terrible idea,” he muttered to himself.

Then he pressed the button.

Sirens erupted instantly, their shrill tones cutting through the cockpit as the ship's systems protested the command. The engines roared beyond their normal limits, sending violent vibrations through the hull. The forward view blurred as the starfighter accelerated with sudden, overwhelming force.

The asteroids loomed ahead, filling the canopy as they drifted toward one another in slow, unstoppable motion.

Billy squeezed the controls tightly and held his breath.

The starfighter plunged forward.

For a single, terrifying instant, it seemed certain that the ship would collide with the closing barrier of rock. The distance vanished rapidly, the gap shrinking to nothing as the engines screamed in protest.

Then the universe shattered into light.

Space stretched into a tunnel of blinding white, swallowing the

asteroid field in an instant. The crushing force of acceleration pressed Billy back into his seat as the familiar stars vanished completely.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the motion stopped. Silence filled the cockpit.

Billy opened his eyes cautiously.

The asteroid field was gone.

A vast expanse of empty space stretched before him, calm and undisturbed as though the storm had never existed. The engine noise faded to a gentle hum, and the warning indicators slowly dimmed one by one.

For several long seconds, Billy did not move.

His hands remained locked around the controls while his mind struggled to process what had just happened. His heart continued to race, echoing loudly in his ears as the adrenaline of the moment slowly began to fade.

He had survived.

Not by luck alone.

He had completed the mission.

A glowing message appeared at the center of the cockpit display.

MISSION COMPLETE

Leaderboard Rank: #2

Billy stared at the words in disbelief.

Then he shouted in triumph.

“Yes!”

The cockpit dissolved around him as the virtual environment faded away, replaced by the familiar walls of his bedroom. The transition from starfighter cockpit to ordinary life felt abrupt and almost disorienting, as though he had stepped out of one reality and into another without warning.

Billy pulled the visor from his face, blinking as the soft light of his room came back into focus. His heart still raced from the adrenaline of the mission, and his hands trembled slightly as the excitement of the moment settled in.

He had just ranked second in the world.

A soft chime sounded from the TAVAT console beside his desk.

Billy turned toward the notification, still smiling from the victory he had not yet fully processed.

He had no way of knowing that the message waiting for him would change everything.

Chapter 2

Billy remained standing in the middle of his room for several seconds after removing the visor, allowing the familiar shapes of his everyday surroundings to slowly settle back into place. The sudden transition from the vast emptiness of space to the quiet stillness of his bedroom always felt slightly disorienting, but this time the sensation lingered longer than usual. His heart continued to beat faster than normal, and his hands still carried the faint tremor of adrenaline that had not yet fully faded.

The TAVAT console emitted another soft chime.

Billy turned toward the hovering notification display, curiosity beginning to replace the lingering excitement of his victory. Notifications were not uncommon after completing difficult missions. The system frequently delivered performance summaries, ranking updates, and occasional promotional messages from the developers. Normally, he would have opened the message immediately without giving it a second thought.

Tonight, however, something felt different.

The subject line alone was enough to capture his full attention.

STARFIGHTERS GLOBAL LEADERBOARD — OFFICIAL INVITATION.

Billy stepped closer to the console, his earlier excitement returning in a rush. He reached out and opened the message, his eyes moving quickly across the text as he read.

Congratulations, Pilot.

You have been selected to attend the Starfighters Convention in Nevada to compete among the top players in the world.

Flight included. Hotel included. All expenses paid.

Billy felt a grin spreading across his face as he read the message again more carefully. A Starfighters convention had been rumored for months across online forums and community

channels, but official confirmation had been scarce. Many players believed it would eventually happen, yet few had expected invitations to appear so suddenly or so directly.

The idea of meeting other top-ranked players in person felt almost unreal.

For years, the Starfighters community had existed primarily in the digital world. Players recognized usernames and flight styles, but very few knew one another in real life. The possibility of stepping into a room filled with pilots he had only ever encountered through a screen sent a thrill of anticipation through him.

He continued reading.

The invitation described a week-long competitive event featuring advanced mission simulations, live tournaments, and opportunities to test experimental gameplay systems not yet available to the public. The tone of the message was enthusiastic and professional, suggesting an event designed to celebrate the most dedicated members of the Starfighters community.

Billy felt a surge of pride at the thought of being included.

Reaching the top of the global leaderboard had always felt like a distant goal, something to strive toward rather than something he truly expected to achieve. Now, with his recent ranking of second place, the possibility suddenly felt real.

He scrolled further down the message.

Travel arrangements have already been booked in your name.

Billy's smile faded slightly.

He read the line again, more slowly this time.

Travel arrangements have already been booked in your name.

A faint unease crept into the back of his mind. He had never submitted personal information through the game. Like many players, he had used a username and minimal account details when registering. The idea of the developers organizing travel

without requesting additional information felt unusual, though not immediately alarming.

He opened the attached document.

The plane ticket appeared instantly, floating in the air before him as a digital projection. Billy stared at it in stunned silence.

The ticket displayed his full legal name.

Billy Bronson.

The departure airport was listed as JFK International Airport. The destination was Las Vegas, Nevada. The departure date was exactly two weeks away.

Billy lowered his hand slowly, the earlier excitement now mixed with confusion and uncertainty.

He had not entered his full name anywhere in the system.

He had never provided his home address.

He had certainly never submitted travel details.

And yet the ticket existed.

For several long seconds, Billy simply stood there, staring at the floating display as his thoughts struggled to catch up with the situation. The invitation was everything he had imagined wanting, yet the way it had arrived felt strangely unsettling.

He tried to reassure himself that there was a reasonable explanation. Large companies collected data in ways most users never fully understood. It was entirely possible that the developers had access to information he had unknowingly provided through account registration or payment records.

Still, the certainty with which the travel arrangements had been made felt unusual.

Billy closed the document and leaned back slightly, exhaling a slow breath as he attempted to steady his thoughts. The excitement had not disappeared entirely, but it now shared space with a growing sense of curiosity and unease.

He glanced around his room, as though expecting the familiar surroundings to provide some sense of reassurance. The posters on the walls, the models on the shelf, and the cluttered desk all appeared exactly as they had moments earlier. Nothing in the physical world had changed.

And yet everything felt slightly different.

Billy read the message one more time.

A single question formed in his mind and refused to leave.

How did they know where he lived?

The console chimed softly again, as though waiting for his response.

Billy reached out and hovered his hand over the confirmation button.

After a brief hesitation, he pressed it.

The display flashed once before fading away, leaving the room quiet once more.

Billy did not yet realize that this simple action would set events in motion that he could never undo.

For several moments after confirming the invitation, Billy remained standing beside the console, staring at the empty space where the message had hovered only seconds earlier. The silence in his room felt heavier now, as though the air itself had grown slightly denser. It was not fear that he felt, at least not exactly. It was something closer to anticipation, mixed with the faint awareness that he had stepped into a situation larger than he fully understood.

He removed the haptic gloves slowly and placed them on his desk with more care than usual. The TAVAT visor followed, resting beside the gloves like a helmet set aside after battle. In many ways, that comparison felt appropriate. The Storm Run had not been an ordinary mission, and the invitation that followed it felt less like a reward and more like a summons.

Billy shook his head lightly at the thought.

He was getting carried away.

This was a gaming convention, not a military draft.

He crossed the room and dropped onto his bed, staring up at the ceiling as his mind replayed the events of the evening. The mission itself still lingered vividly in his memory. The narrowing asteroid gap. The moment of hesitation before pressing the hyperdrive override. The blinding white tunnel of acceleration. The surge of triumph when the completion message appeared.

He had always imagined that ranking near the top of the leaderboard would feel like a clear victory, a moment of unambiguous success. Instead, the achievement now felt like the beginning of something rather than the end.

Billy rolled onto his side and reached for his phone.

Within seconds, he had logged into one of the major Starfighters forums. The site was already buzzing with activity. Threads discussing the Storm Run mission had multiplied rapidly, and new posts appeared almost faster than he could read them. It did not take long for him to spot his own username mentioned repeatedly.

Several players were congratulating him on the second-place ranking. Others debated the likely strategy he had used to survive the asteroid collision point. A few expressed disbelief that anyone had managed to clear the mission under the early storm conditions.

Billy felt a flicker of pride as he scrolled through the comments.

Then he noticed something else.

Multiple users were reporting similar invitation emails.

The thread discussing the convention had already grown to dozens of pages. Players from different countries confirmed that they had received official travel documents, complete with flight details and hotel reservations. Some seemed thrilled. Others were

confused. A handful expressed the same concern Billy had felt only minutes earlier: none of them had submitted personal information beyond what was required to create a basic account.

Billy read post after post, searching for clarity.

One user claimed that the developers must have cross-referenced payment records from hardware purchases. Another suggested that the TAVAT system collected more data than people realized. A third speculated that the entire event might be an elaborate marketing stunt designed to generate publicity.

The more Billy read, the less certain he felt.

He placed the phone on his chest and stared at the wall again.

A week in Nevada.

All expenses paid.

Competing against the best players in the world.

It was everything he had dreamed about.

And yet he had not told his parents.

The thought landed heavily.

Billy's mother had always supported his interests, though she did not entirely understand them. She viewed Starfighters as a harmless hobby, something that kept him occupied and out of trouble. His father, on the other hand, had been less enthusiastic. He often referred to gaming as a distraction, something that pulled focus away from more "practical" pursuits.

Explaining that he intended to travel across the country for a video game competition would not be a simple conversation.

Billy sat up slowly, the reality of that challenge beginning to overshadow the excitement of the invitation. He had two weeks before departure. That left time for planning, for preparation, and for persuading his parents that this was an opportunity worth taking seriously.

He stood and crossed back to his desk, activating the console

once more.

The confirmation screen reappeared briefly, now displaying additional details about the event. A schedule outlined preliminary activities, including registration, orientation sessions, and multiple competitive brackets. The structure of the tournament suggested a carefully organized event rather than a spontaneous gathering.

Billy studied the information carefully.

The first day would include a welcome session for invited players, followed by a demonstration of experimental mission environments. Later in the week, teams would be formed for cooperative challenges. The description emphasized collaboration as much as competition, hinting that the developers intended to test new gameplay mechanics that required coordinated pilots.

Billy felt another spark of interest.

Starfighters had always been primarily a solo experience for him. He had competed against others indirectly through leaderboard rankings, but rarely had he flown alongside other players in coordinated missions. The idea of pairing up with someone equally skilled, of sharing control responsibilities within the cockpit, presented an entirely new dimension of challenge.

His thoughts drifted briefly back to the hyperdrive override.

The decision to press that button had been impulsive, even reckless. It had worked this time, but he knew that not every risk would end in success. A cooperative mission structure might demand a different approach—less reliance on instinct and more emphasis on communication.

Billy powered down the console and leaned back in his chair.

Two weeks.

He would need to maintain his ranking, perhaps even improve it if possible. He would need to prepare for missions he had never seen before. And he would need to convince his parents that this

invitation was legitimate.

The magnitude of the situation finally began to settle over him.

This was no longer just a game.

It felt like a doorway.

Billy glanced once more at the dormant TAVAT system.

He could not shake the lingering question that had surfaced earlier.

How had they known where he lived?

Outside his window, the night remained quiet and undisturbed. Cars passed occasionally along the distant street, their headlights sweeping briefly across the walls before disappearing again. Everything appeared normal.

Yet somewhere, far beyond the limits of his understanding, something had taken notice of him.

And in two weeks' time, he would be stepping directly toward it.

Billy checked the time and was startled to see how late it had become. The clock on his desk glowed softly in the dim room, reminding him that the rest of the house had likely settled into the quiet routines of the night. He could hear faint movement downstairs—cupboards opening, the low murmur of the television, the familiar rhythms of a household winding down.

For a moment, he considered going downstairs and telling his parents immediately.

The idea faded almost as quickly as it appeared.

He needed time to think. Time to decide how to explain the invitation in a way that would sound reasonable and responsible. Blurting it out without preparation would only invite questions he was not yet ready to answer.

Instead, he returned to his bed and sat at the edge, elbows resting on his knees as he stared at the floor. The excitement of the evening had not disappeared, but it had settled into a quieter,

more thoughtful form. The reality of the trip felt both thrilling and intimidating. Traveling across the country alone was something he had never done before.

He imagined the airport crowds, the unfamiliar city, the massive convention hall filled with strangers who shared his obsession with the same game. The mental picture felt overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time.

Billy lay back again and closed his eyes.

Sleep did not come quickly.

His thoughts drifted in restless loops, replaying the mission, the email, the forum discussions, and the looming conversation with his parents. Every time he began to relax, a new question surfaced to replace the last. Eventually, exhaustion began to dull the edges of his thoughts, and the steady rhythm of the house lulled him toward sleep.

When morning arrived, it came with the abrupt intrusion of his alarm clock.

Billy groaned and rolled over, fumbling for the device until the sound finally stopped. The events of the previous night rushed back to him instantly, replacing the haze of sleep with a surge of renewed awareness.

The invitation was real.

The trip was real.

Everything was already in motion.

He sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes, allowing himself a moment to adjust before swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The routine of the morning felt strangely ordinary compared to the weight of the thoughts occupying his mind. He dressed quickly and headed downstairs, the familiar smells of breakfast greeting him as he entered the kitchen.

His mother stood at the counter, preparing coffee while the morning news played quietly in the background. She smiled

when she saw him.

“Morning, Billy. You’re up early.”

Billy returned the smile, though it felt slightly forced.

“Morning.”

He poured himself a glass of juice and sat at the table, listening to the low murmur of the television as he gathered the courage to speak. The words hovered in his mind, yet refused to form into a clear sentence.

His mother set a plate of toast in front of him and took a seat across the table.

“You look like you didn’t sleep much,” she said gently.

Billy hesitated, then shrugged. “Stayed up late gaming.”

It was not a lie, but it was far from the full truth.

His mother nodded, accustomed to this explanation. The topic of his gaming habits had become a familiar one over the years, usually ending in reminders about balance and responsibility. This morning, however, she did not continue the conversation. Instead, she returned her attention to the television.

Billy felt a small wave of relief.

He needed more time.

The school day passed slowly. Classes blurred together as his thoughts drifted repeatedly toward the upcoming trip. Every spare moment found him checking forums, reading new posts, and searching for additional information about the convention. The excitement among the Starfighters community continued to grow, with speculation and rumors spreading faster than official updates.

By the time he returned home that afternoon, his mind felt crowded with possibilities.

He headed straight to his room and powered on the TAVAT system once more.

The familiar hum filled the space as the visor activated, the room dissolving into the sleek interface of the Starfighters main hub. Ships glided silently across the vast digital hangar, their polished hulls reflecting distant stars. The environment felt comforting, a familiar place where the rules were clear and the challenges made sense.

Billy navigated to the mission board and scanned the available options.

Training missions. Competitive trials. Experimental simulations.

He selected a cooperative training module and paused for a moment before launching it. The description emphasized teamwork, communication, and synchronized control—skills he had rarely needed to practice before.

If the convention would involve cooperative flight, he needed to be ready.

The simulation loaded, surrounding him once again with the immersive cockpit of his starfighter. The controls responded instantly beneath his hands, the familiar weight and resistance grounding him in the virtual environment.

For the next hour, Billy practiced with renewed focus.

Every maneuver felt purposeful. Every mistake felt instructive. He pushed himself harder than usual, determined to refine skills he had previously taken for granted.

When he finally removed the visor, evening had fallen.

He sat quietly for a moment, breathing slowly as the room returned around him. The routine of training had steadied his thoughts, replacing uncertainty with determination.

The trip to Nevada no longer felt like a distant possibility.

It felt like an approaching deadline.

And soon, he would have to tell his parents the truth.

Dinner that evening passed with the usual rhythm of

conversation, the kind of easy, familiar exchanges that had filled the Bronson household for years. Billy listened more than he spoke, responding when necessary but keeping most of his thoughts to himself. His father talked about work, his mother mentioned errands and plans for the weekend, and the television murmured quietly in the background.

The normalcy of the moment made the secret feel heavier.

Billy pushed food around his plate as he waited for a natural pause in the conversation. Each time silence threatened to appear, someone filled it before he could speak. His heart beat faster with every passing minute, the opportunity slipping further away.

Finally, as the dishes were being cleared and the evening began to wind down, he forced himself to act.

“Mom... Dad... I need to tell you something.”

The words felt louder than he expected.

Both of his parents paused, turning toward him with mild curiosity. The shift in attention made his pulse quicken, but he pressed forward before he could lose his nerve.

“I got invited to a Starfighters event,” he said. “A big one. It’s in Nevada. They invite top players from around the world to compete.”

His mother blinked in surprise. His father leaned back slightly in his chair, studying him more closely.

Billy continued quickly, determined to explain everything before doubt could settle in.

“They cover everything—flight, hotel, all of it. It’s basically a tournament and convention combined. It lasts about a week.”

Silence followed.

Billy felt the seconds stretch as his parents processed the information.

His mother spoke first. “Nevada? You mean Las Vegas?”

Billy nodded. “Yeah.”

His father crossed his arms thoughtfully. “And they’re paying for this? Completely?”

Billy nodded again, suddenly aware of how strange the situation sounded when spoken aloud. “It’s a promotional event. They want top-ranked players there.”

His father remained quiet for a moment longer, then asked the question Billy had expected from the beginning.

“How did they get our address?”

Billy hesitated.

“I... don’t know exactly. But other players got the same invitations. It’s legit. There are forums and announcements and everything.”

His mother exchanged a glance with his father. Concern flickered briefly across her expression before she looked back at Billy.

“You’d be traveling alone.”

The words were gentle, but the weight behind them was unmistakable.

Billy nodded slowly. “Yeah. But there’ll be tons of other players there. And staff. It’s organized.”

His father exhaled quietly and rubbed his chin, a habit Billy recognized as a sign of deep thought. The room felt suddenly smaller, the air thicker with anticipation.

Finally, his father spoke.

“You’ve worked hard at this,” he said. “I know it matters to you.”

Billy felt a small spark of hope.

“But traveling across the country isn’t a small thing,” his father

continued. “We need to be sure this is safe. Legitimate. Real.”

Billy nodded quickly. “Of course.”

His mother reached across the table and squeezed his hand gently. “We’re not saying no,” she said. “We just need time to look into it.”

Relief washed over him so suddenly that he had to resist the urge to laugh. It was not a yes, but it was far from the rejection he had feared.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “That’s fair.”

The conversation shifted after that, the tension easing as the topic moved to other things. Yet the atmosphere felt subtly different, as though the future had entered the room and taken a seat at the table beside them.

Later that night, Billy returned to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

He stood for a moment in the quiet, listening to the familiar sounds of the house settling for the night. The conversation had gone better than expected, but the outcome remained uncertain. His parents would research the event. They would ask questions. They would want proof.

Billy powered on the TAVAT console again, the soft glow filling the room.

He did not launch a mission this time.

Instead, he opened the invitation message once more and read it slowly from beginning to end. The words felt different now, no longer just exciting but inevitable.

Two weeks.

Fourteen days until departure.

Billy closed the message and stared at the console as the faint hum filled the room.

For the first time, the countdown truly felt real.

Over the next few days, the invitation became the quiet center around which everything else seemed to orbit. Billy tried to keep his routine unchanged—school, homework, training sessions in the evenings—but every task now carried an undercurrent of anticipation. Time felt different, as though the days were moving both too quickly and not quickly enough.

His parents began their research almost immediately.

Billy often returned home to find one of them seated at the kitchen table with a laptop open, scrolling through websites or reading forum posts. At first, they asked simple questions: the name of the company behind Starfighters, the details of the TAVAT system, the location of the event. Billy answered as best he could, occasionally pulling up pages and videos to show them what he meant.

The more they learned, the less skeptical they appeared.

The Starfighters brand was well known. The TAVAT system had been featured in technology news segments and gaming publications for years. Promotional trailers for the convention had begun circulating online, confirming that the event was real and highly anticipated within the gaming community.

One evening, Billy walked into the living room to find his father watching a short documentary segment about immersive gaming technology. The program showed footage of players using TAVAT systems, their movements mirrored by sleek spacecraft navigating virtual starfields.

His father glanced over as Billy entered the room.

“That’s what you use?” he asked.

Billy nodded. “Yeah.”

His father watched the screen for a moment longer before turning the television off. “It’s more advanced than I realized.”

The statement was simple, yet Billy recognized the subtle shift behind it. His father’s skepticism had not vanished entirely, but it had softened into curiosity.

The countdown continued.

Billy trained every evening, focusing increasingly on cooperative mission simulations. At first, the unfamiliar mechanics frustrated him. Coordinating maneuvers with an artificial partner required patience and communication, skills that felt different from the instinctive reactions he relied on during solo missions. Gradually, however, the process became more natural.

He learned to anticipate shared control transitions. He practiced balancing aggression with caution. He experimented with new strategies that relied on teamwork rather than individual reflexes.

Each session left him feeling more prepared than the last.

Meanwhile, the online community buzzed with growing excitement. Players shared travel plans, speculated about tournament formats, and debated which missions might appear at the convention. Billy found himself checking the forums constantly, drawn into the collective anticipation of hundreds of players preparing for the same journey.

Then, one week before departure, his parents called him into the living room.

Billy sat on the edge of the couch as they faced him, their expressions serious but calm. He felt a familiar tension settle in his chest, the quiet understanding that a decision was about to be delivered.

His mother spoke first.

“We’ve looked into everything we could find.”

Billy nodded, waiting.

His father continued. “The event appears legitimate. The company checks out. The arrangements are real.”

Billy felt his breath catch slightly.

His mother smiled. “We think this is an incredible opportunity for you.”

Relief surged through him like a wave.

“You mean—”

“You can go,” his father said.

For a moment, Billy could not speak. The words felt unreal, as though he had misheard them. When the reality finally settled in, excitement burst through him with renewed intensity.

“Thank you,” he said quickly. “I won’t mess this up. I promise.”

His father chuckled softly. “We know.”

The remaining days passed in a blur of preparation. Billy packed carefully, double-checking everything multiple times. Clothes, charger cables, travel documents—each item placed into his suitcase felt like a step closer to departure.

The night before his flight, he stood in his room once more, looking around at the familiar space that had shaped so much of his life. The posters, the desk, the TAVAT system—it all felt slightly different now, as though the room itself understood that change was coming.

He switched off the light and lay down, staring into the darkness.

Sleep came more easily this time.

Morning arrived sooner than he expected.

And with it, the beginning of the journey.

The morning of the flight began before sunrise.

Billy stood in the quiet kitchen with a cup of coffee he didn’t really want, watching the pale blue light of early morning creep through the windows. The house felt unusually still, as though the day itself had not fully awakened yet. His suitcase waited by the front door, zipped and ready, a silent reminder that everything he had imagined for weeks was finally happening.

His mother moved quietly around the kitchen, double-checking things that had already been checked. Travel documents sat neatly stacked on the counter. His phone charger had been

placed beside them. Even a small envelope of emergency cash rested on top, something she insisted he carry “just in case.”

Billy watched her for a moment, recognizing the familiar mixture of excitement and worry that parents tried to hide.

“You’ve got everything?” she asked.

Billy nodded. “Yeah.”

His father entered the kitchen a moment later, car keys in hand. He gave Billy a short nod that carried more meaning than words. It was the kind of gesture that said everything important had already been said the night before.

The drive to the airport passed in comfortable silence.

The roads were mostly empty, the city still shaking off the quiet of early morning. Billy watched the buildings slide past the car window, realizing that this was the first time he had ever left home on his own. The thought was both thrilling and slightly surreal.

When the airport finally came into view, the sense of reality deepened.

The terminal bustled with travelers, the early morning calm replaced by the familiar chaos of departures and arrivals. Rolling suitcases clicked across the polished floor. Overhead announcements echoed through the vast space. The energy of movement surrounded him on all sides.

Billy checked in, passed through security, and followed the signs toward his gate.

When he finally turned back, his parents were still standing a few steps behind him.

His mother pulled him into a quick hug. “Call when you land.”

“I will,” Billy promised.

His father extended a hand, then pulled him into a brief hug as well. “Have fun,” he said. “And be smart.”

Continue the Mission

You've just experienced the opening sequence of Starfighters.

Billy's journey is only beginning—and the deeper story unfolds across the full trilogy.

Explore all books, missions, and concepts here:

<https://starfightersacademy.com/books/starfighters/>

Then return and continue reading.

Billy nodded.

Then he turned and walked toward the gate.

The plane lifted off into the brightening sky, carrying him west across the country. Billy pressed his forehead lightly against the window as the city shrank beneath the clouds. For the first time since receiving the invitation, the scale of the journey truly settled in.

He was leaving home.

Hours later, the plane descended toward Nevada.

The desert stretched endlessly beneath the wings, a vast expanse of muted colors broken only by distant highways and scattered buildings. The landscape felt alien compared to the green suburbs he had grown up with. Even the sunlight looked different—brighter, harsher, more intense.

When the plane touched down, Billy felt a small surge of excitement ripple through him.

He had arrived.

The airport felt familiar in its unfamiliarity. Signs directed passengers through baggage claim and toward ground transportation. Billy followed the flow of travelers, clutching his suitcase handle as he searched for the pickup instructions from the invitation email.

The message had been clear.

Proceed to the designated pickup area outside Terminal C.

Billy stepped through the sliding doors and into the warm desert air.

The early morning quiet surprised him. He had expected neon lights and crowds, but the world outside the airport felt calm and still. The sky was just beginning to brighten, casting soft shadows across the pavement.

He scanned the pickup area.

At first, nothing stood out.

Then he saw it.

A sleek, elongated bus waited near the curb, its polished surface reflecting the rising sun. A familiar insignia stretched across its side: the unmistakable emblem of Starfighters.

Billy felt a grin spread across his face.

The journey had officially begun.

A small group of teenagers had already gathered near the bus stop, their suitcases clustered around their feet like scattered markers of shared purpose. Billy slowed his steps as he approached, recognizing the subtle signs that marked them as fellow players. Starfighters stickers clung to luggage handles. A few wore jackets or hats featuring the familiar logo. Snatches of conversation drifted through the air—mission names, leaderboard rankings, strategies spoken in the shorthand language of players who understood the same world.

He felt a strange mixture of excitement and nervousness as he moved closer.

For years, these people had existed only as usernames and avatars. Now they stood a few feet away, real and unmistakably human, their voices replacing the silent competition of the leaderboard.

Billy stopped near the edge of the group, unsure how to introduce himself. He listened quietly as the others spoke, absorbing the rhythm of their conversations. They talked about travel delays, favorite missions, and speculation about what the convention might involve. Laughter rose and faded in short bursts as stories overlapped.

A bright red suitcase with a large Starfighters sticker rested near the curb, marking the center of the group like a flag. Billy recognized the symbol instantly and felt a quiet reassurance settle over him. He was in the right place.

The bus door opened with a smooth mechanical hiss.

A man stepped out.

He was tall, dressed in a sharply tailored suit that seemed almost too formal for the setting. Dark hair framed a calm, confident expression. When he smiled, his teeth gleamed in the morning light, and his bright blue eyes swept across the group with practiced ease.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice carrying clearly over the quiet hum of the airport. “I hope you all had pleasant journeys. Please board when ready. We have a short drive ahead.”

Something about his voice struck Billy as familiar, though he could not place why.

One by one, the players began to board the bus.

Billy followed near the back of the line, gripping the handle of his suitcase as anticipation surged through him once more. The door lifted upward rather than swinging outward, revealing a sleek interior that looked more like the inside of a luxury aircraft than a traditional bus.

Soft lighting traced the ceiling. Wide seats lined the cabin in smooth rows. A faint hum vibrated through the floor, suggesting power far beyond that of an ordinary vehicle.

Billy found a seat near the rear and settled in, his eyes moving quickly across the interior as the last passengers boarded. Conversations resumed almost immediately, voices rising in excitement as introductions began.

Within minutes, the bus pulled away from the curb.

The city faded behind them.

Billy glanced out the window as the skyline slipped past, replaced gradually by open desert. The early morning sun climbed higher, painting the landscape in shades of gold and amber.

The excitement inside the bus grew louder, but Billy remained quiet, watching the unfamiliar scenery drift by. The reality of the

moment pressed in around him, filling the space between excitement and uncertainty.

He was surrounded by strangers.

He was far from home.

And he was heading somewhere he had never been before.

For the first time since stepping onto the plane, the magnitude of the journey settled fully into his chest.

This was really happening.

The conversation around him grew louder as the bus moved farther from the airport, the initial awkwardness between strangers dissolving into the easy camaraderie of shared obsession. Names were exchanged. Leaderboard rankings were compared. Laughter surfaced in quick bursts as players realized they had competed against one another countless times without ever knowing it.

Billy listened quietly at first, absorbing the rhythm of the conversations around him. The familiar language of missions, strategies, and flight mechanics filled the air like a second atmosphere. It was strangely comforting to hear it spoken aloud instead of typed across a screen.

The desert outside stretched endlessly in every direction.

The city skyline faded behind them until only distant silhouettes remained. The road cut a long, straight path through the sand, shimmering slightly beneath the growing heat of the morning sun.

Billy leaned back in his seat and allowed himself to relax.

For the first time since receiving the invitation, the anxiety he had carried began to loosen its grip. Surrounded by people who shared the same passion, the trip finally felt real in a reassuring way.

He was not alone.

A voice beside him broke his thoughts.

“So... what did you place?”

Billy turned to see a boy about his age leaning slightly into the aisle, curiosity written plainly across his face.

“Second,” Billy replied.

The boy’s eyebrows shot upward. “Seriously?”

Billy nodded.

A grin spread across the boy’s face. “I’m Raj. First place.”

Billy blinked in surprise, then laughed softly. “Of course you are.”

They shook hands, the introduction simple and immediate. Within moments, the conversation expanded to include the players seated nearby. Stories of near-failures and last-second victories filled the air, each tale more animated than the last.

Billy found himself smiling more easily than he had expected.

Time passed quickly as the bus continued its journey.

The road eventually curved away from the main highway, leading them toward a cluster of distant buildings rising from the desert. At first, the structures appeared small and indistinct, but as they drew closer, the scale of the destination became clear.

A massive white complex emerged on the horizon.

Billy leaned forward slightly, his attention captured instantly. The building’s surface gleamed in the sunlight, its geometric patterns reflecting the sky in sharp angles and smooth curves. The structure looked less like a hotel and more like something pulled directly from the futuristic environments of the game.

A murmur of excitement spread through the bus.

“Whoa.”

“That can’t be real.”

“Is that where we’re staying?”

The bus slowed as it approached the entrance, the building growing larger with every passing second. The exterior panels shimmered faintly, their seamless surfaces giving the impression of a structure carved from a single piece of polished metal.

Billy felt his pulse quicken.

The destination no longer felt like a convention.

It felt like an arrival.

The bus glided through the entrance and came to a smooth, silent stop.

The door lifted open.

And the next chapter of the journey began.

For a moment, no one moved.

The players remained seated, staring through the windows as the scale of the building settled over them. Up close, the structure appeared even more surreal. Its white exterior curved upward in layered segments, rising toward the sky in a pattern that reminded Billy of interlocking honeycomb cells. The surface reflected the morning light in soft, shifting gradients that made the entire complex look almost alive.

Billy realized he was holding his breath.

A soft chime sounded overhead.

“Welcome,” the familiar voice from the airport said. “Please gather your belongings and exit the vehicle.”

The spell broke instantly.

Seatbelts clicked open. Suitcases were pulled from overhead compartments. Conversations resumed with renewed energy as everyone stood and began moving toward the door.

Billy joined the line and stepped down onto the pavement.

The desert heat wrapped around him immediately, dry and warm

against his skin. He squinted slightly in the sunlight as he looked up at the towering structure, trying to take in its full height. The building stretched far above him, its upper levels disappearing into the brightness of the sky.

He felt small in a way he had never experienced before.

A man approached from the entrance, walking with calm confidence toward the group. Unlike the sharply dressed driver, this man wore simple professional attire, his posture relaxed and welcoming.

“Greetings,” he said, smiling warmly. “My name is Harvey. I’ll be assisting you during your stay. If you need anything at all, please let me know.”

The group murmured polite greetings, though most of their attention remained fixed on the building behind him.

Harvey gestured toward the entrance.

“Please follow me. We’ll get you settled in.”

Billy picked up his suitcase and followed the others toward the doors.

They slid open silently as the group approached, revealing a wide, brightly lit interior that felt immediately cooler than the desert air outside. The transition from heat to climate-controlled comfort was almost shocking.

Billy stepped inside and stopped.

The lobby stretched before him in a vast open space filled with soft light and clean lines. Smooth white surfaces curved seamlessly into the walls and ceiling, creating an environment that felt both futuristic and strangely calming.

It looked exactly like something from Starfighters.

Excited whispers rippled through the group as they moved deeper into the building. Billy found himself turning slowly, trying to absorb every detail at once. The floor reflected the light in soft patterns. Subtle displays embedded in the walls flickered

with information and graphics he did not yet understand.

Everything felt deliberate.

Everything felt designed.

Harvey led them toward a bank of elevators that opened automatically as they approached.

“Your rooms have already been assigned,” he explained. “You’ll receive your access details shortly.”

Billy stepped into the elevator with the others, his suitcase rolling quietly behind him. The doors closed with a soft hiss, and the car began to rise smoothly upward.

No one spoke.

The shared silence carried a sense of collective awe.

When the doors opened again, a long corridor stretched before them, lined with identical doors that gleamed faintly under the overhead lights.

Harvey handed each of them a small card.

“Touch the panel beside your door,” he said. “It will register your biometric signature.”

Billy walked down the hallway until he found the number on his card. He hesitated briefly, then placed his palm against the glowing panel.

A soft flash of light spread beneath his hand.

A quiet chime sounded.

The door slid open.

Billy stepped inside and stopped once more.

The room beyond was far larger than he had expected.

A living space extended before him, complete with a sleek seating area and a compact kitchen. A hallway branched off to one side, leading toward additional rooms hidden from view.

Everything shared the same smooth, futuristic design as the lobby below.

Billy dropped his suitcase and slowly turned in a full circle.

This was not a hotel room.

This was something else entirely.

And for the first time since leaving home, a new realization settled quietly into his thoughts.

This place was built for them.

Billy stepped farther into the room, the door sliding shut behind him with a soft, airtight whisper that made him turn instinctively to look at it again. The sound had not resembled the mechanical click of a hotel door or the hollow thud of a bedroom door at home. It had sounded sealed. Final.

For a moment, he stood completely still, suitcase handle still in his hand, absorbing the silence of the space around him.

The air felt perfectly temperature-controlled, neither warm nor cold. A faint hum vibrated through the floor, almost too subtle to notice unless he stood without moving. The walls gleamed faintly under hidden lighting, their smooth surfaces unbroken by seams or visible fixtures.

Everything looked new. Untouched.

Designed.

Billy set his suitcase down slowly and walked into the living area, running his fingers lightly across the back of a chair as he passed. The material felt unfamiliar—soft, yet firm, with a texture that did not quite resemble leather or fabric. It was like touching something engineered rather than manufactured.

He moved toward the hallway and glanced down its length.

Three doors.

Bathroom. Bedroom. Maybe storage.

The layout felt less like a hotel suite and more like an apartment prepared for long-term living.

Billy let out a slow breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"This is insane," he murmured to himself.

He opened the first door.

The bathroom looked more like a spa than anything he had ever seen in real life. Dark glossy floors reflected soft overhead lighting. Green plants grew along the walls in carefully arranged vertical gardens, their leaves vivid against the otherwise minimal design. A large glass shower stood at the far end, its surface completely transparent until a faint shimmer rippled across it, turning the glass opaque for privacy.

Billy stepped back into the hallway and opened the next door.

The bedroom beyond stopped him in place.

A circular bed dominated the center of the room, surrounded by tall windows draped in soft curtains that filtered the bright desert sunlight into a gentle glow. Everything was white and silver, clean and simple, like the interior of a spacecraft designed for comfort rather than survival.

Something blue rested neatly folded at the foot of the bed.

Billy stepped closer, curiosity pulling him forward.

He lifted the fabric slowly.

A jacket unfolded in his hands—deep blue, soft, and unmistakable.

The Starfighters emblem gleamed on the chest.

Below it, embroidered in clean silver lettering, were the words:

Star Knight.

Billy stared at the jacket in silence.

For years, he had seen this uniform in the game—on promotional art, on cinematic trailers, on the avatars of top-ranked players. It

had always been symbolic, a fictional badge of honor worn by the best pilots in the galaxy.

Now it rested in his hands.

Real. Tangible. Tailored perfectly to his size.

Billy slipped the jacket on slowly, almost reverently.

It fit perfectly.

He walked to the mirror near the wall and stopped in front of it, studying his reflection with quiet disbelief. The deep blue fabric contrasted sharply against the bright room, the silver emblem catching the light as he moved.

He barely recognized the person staring back.

The image felt less like a gamer and more like the beginning of something else.

A soft tone sounded overhead.

Billy jumped slightly, startled by the sudden noise.

“Greetings,” Harvey’s voice echoed gently through the room. “Dinner will be served in one hour. The dining hall is located on the main floor at the center of the building. Follow the illuminated guides in the corridor. You can’t miss it.”

The intercom clicked off.

Billy remained standing in front of the mirror for several seconds longer.

One hour.

He glanced around the room again, the reality of the situation settling deeper with every passing moment.

He had left home that morning.

Now he stood in a place that felt pulled from the world of the game itself.

And this was only the first day.

Billy removed his backpack and set it carefully beside the bed, still studying his reflection as though the image might change if he looked away too quickly. The jacket felt lighter than he expected, yet it carried a weight he could not easily explain. It represented years of late nights, countless missions, and hours spent chasing rankings that had once seemed unreachable.

Now it felt like a uniform.

A quiet knock sounded at the door.

Billy turned, surprised, and crossed the living area to open it. The door slid aside smoothly, revealing Raj standing in the hallway, his own blue jacket already zipped halfway up.

“Have you seen this place?” Raj asked, eyes wide with excitement.

Billy laughed softly. “Yeah. It’s... not what I expected.”

Raj leaned slightly into the room, glancing around in amazement. “My room looks exactly the same. I keep thinking someone’s going to tell us it’s a joke.”

Billy stepped aside, gesturing for him to enter.

Raj walked slowly through the living space, touching the back of a chair and running his fingers along the smooth surface of the wall. His expression mirrored Billy’s earlier disbelief.

“This is way bigger than any hotel I’ve ever stayed in,” Raj said.

Billy nodded. “Same.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the shared experience making the unfamiliar environment feel slightly more grounded.

“You ready for dinner?” Raj asked finally.

Billy smiled. “Definitely.”

They stepped into the hallway together.

The corridor buzzed with quiet energy as other players emerged from their rooms, each wearing the same blue jacket.

Conversations overlapped as small groups formed naturally, laughter echoing softly off the curved walls.

Billy followed the glowing strips of light embedded in the floor. Arrows pulsed gently in the direction of the dining hall, guiding them through the building like a silent current.

The design felt playful, almost theatrical, yet undeniably effective.

When they reached the main floor, the hallway opened into a vast dining space that immediately reminded Billy of the Federation mess hall from the game. Long tables stretched across the room, their surfaces gleaming under soft overhead lighting.

At the center of each table stood a tall cylindrical column, its transparent surface displaying rotating menus of food options. Steam rose gently from nearby plates, carrying the warm scent of freshly prepared meals through the air.

Billy stared at the columns in fascination.

“Is that... what I think it is?” Raj asked quietly.

Billy nodded slowly. “Looks like it.”

Players gathered around the columns, tapping glowing panels to select meals. Moments later, dishes emerged from hidden compartments with soft mechanical precision, perfectly plated and steaming hot.

It felt unreal.

Billy stepped closer, scrolling through the options displayed on the screen. The menu stretched endlessly—dishes from every cuisine he could imagine, each customizable down to the smallest detail.

He selected a meal almost at random, too overwhelmed to think carefully.

Within seconds, a plate appeared before him.

He laughed in disbelief and carried it to the nearest open seat.

Raj joined him moments later, equally impressed by the system.

Around them, conversations filled the hall as players introduced themselves and compared travel stories. The room hummed with excitement, the shared anticipation building with every passing minute.

Billy took a bite of his meal and leaned back slightly, absorbing the atmosphere.

The journey had truly begun.

And somewhere deep inside, a quiet certainty began to form.

This was only the beginning.

Billy had barely taken a second bite when a sudden shift in the room pulled his attention away from the table.

The lights dimmed.

At first, the change was subtle—barely noticeable beneath the glow of the dining columns. Then the brightness lowered further, soft shadows stretching across the long tables as the conversations gradually faded into curious silence.

A low hum vibrated through the floor.

Billy exchanged a quick glance with Raj, who raised his eyebrows in silent question.

At the far end of the hall, a section of the wall that Billy had assumed was decorative began to separate along invisible seams. Panels slid aside with a smooth mechanical whisper, revealing a stage that had not been visible only moments before.

A figure stepped forward into the light.

The person wore a sleek, dark suit that shimmered faintly beneath the overhead illumination. Their posture was confident, their expression calm, as though addressing a room full of teenagers was the most natural thing in the world.

“Good evening,” the speaker said, voice carrying easily through the hall. “And welcome.”

A ripple of applause moved through the room, hesitant at first, then growing stronger as players set down their forks and turned their full attention toward the stage.

Billy leaned forward slightly, drawn in despite himself.

“We’re honored to have each of you here,” the speaker continued. “Over the past several years, Starfighters has grown into a global community of extraordinary pilots. Tonight marks the beginning of a week designed to celebrate your skill, your dedication, and your imagination.”

The words sounded polished, rehearsed, and exactly what Billy expected from a corporate welcome speech.

Yet something about the tone felt different.

Less promotional. More... deliberate.

“You are here because you represent the very best our community has to offer,” the speaker said. “Over the coming days, you will participate in advanced simulations, collaborative missions, and competitive trials unlike anything you have experienced before.”

Billy felt a thrill of anticipation rise in his chest.

This was it. The real beginning.

“You will also be working in pairs,” the speaker continued. “Many of the upcoming challenges require coordination between pilot and copilot. You will be matched with the player whose call sign most closely aligns with your own.”

Billy paused mid-breath.

Across the table, Raj looked up from his plate, suddenly alert.

“Call signs?” someone whispered nearby.

The speaker smiled slightly, as though anticipating the confusion.

“Each of you received an automated pilot designation upon ranking. You will find your copilot by locating the player with

the matching designation prefix. We encourage you to introduce yourselves tonight and begin building rapport immediately.”

Billy’s thoughts raced.

His call sign.

Red Eagle Alpha 07.

He glanced instinctively around the room.

Somewhere in this hall was the person he would be flying with.

The lights brightened slightly as the speaker concluded the announcement.

“Enjoy your evening,” they said. “Training begins tomorrow morning at nine.”

The stage panels slid closed once more, leaving the room buzzing with renewed conversation.

Billy leaned back in his chair, the excitement returning stronger than ever.

Tomorrow, the real competition would begin.

And he would not be flying alone.

Billy pushed his chair back slightly and let the noise of the dining hall wash over him. Conversations erupted in every direction as players compared call signs and searched the room for matching prefixes. Laughter and excited voices filled the space, bouncing off the bright walls and high ceiling.

Raj leaned closer. “So... Red Eagle Alpha, huh?”

Billy nodded. “Yeah. Seven.”

Raj grinned. “Whoever Alpha Nine is, they’re probably panicking right now trying to find you.”

Billy smiled faintly, but his eyes were already scanning the room.

Across the hall, players stood from their tables, weaving through

the crowd in search of their partners. Jackets flashed blue beneath the lights as names were called and introductions began. The room felt alive with possibility.

Billy's gaze moved slowly from table to table.

Then he saw her.

The girl with dark hair from the airport sat a few tables away, studying the glowing panel in front of her. She looked up at the exact moment Billy's eyes landed on her, as if she had felt the attention before seeing it.

For a brief second, neither of them moved.

Then she lifted her wrist and checked the small display attached to her jacket sleeve.

Billy felt his heartbeat quicken as he looked down at his own sleeve.

Red Eagle Alpha 07.

When he looked up again, she was already walking toward him.

Billy realized two things at the same time.

Tomorrow, he would be flying with a copilot.

And somehow, without understanding why, he knew this was the moment everything was about to change.

Chapter 3

The girl stopped a few steps from Billy's table, studying him with a calm expression that felt both measured and confident. Up close, he could see that her jacket matched his exactly, the same deep blue fabric and silver insignia catching the light as she moved. The embroidered lettering on her chest read Star Knight, just like his, but the call sign stitched beneath it made his pulse quicken.

Red Eagle Alpha 09.

She glanced down at his sleeve briefly, confirming what she had already suspected.

"Alpha Seven?" she asked.

Billy nodded. "Yeah."

A faint smile crossed her face, not overly excited, not nervous—just certain. "Then I guess we're flying together."

The simplicity of her statement made the situation feel more real than the entire evening had up to that point. Around them, players were still weaving between tables, calling out prefixes and comparing numbers, but the noise faded slightly in Billy's ears as he focused on the person now standing directly in front of him.

"I'm Billy," he said, standing quickly, almost knocking his chair backward in the process.

She extended her hand without hesitation. "Devon."

Her handshake was firm, steady, and direct. It was not the uncertain grip of someone overwhelmed by the environment. If anything, she appeared far more composed than he felt.

Raj leaned back in his chair, grinning. "Well, looks like I'm not your copilot."

Billy laughed softly. “Guess not.”

Devon glanced briefly at Raj, nodding politely, then returned her attention to Billy. “Have you done much cooperative training?”

“A little,” Billy admitted. “Mostly solo missions.”

She nodded again, as though that confirmed something she had already assumed. “Same.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The magnitude of what lay ahead hovered quietly between them.

Tomorrow morning at nine.

Advanced simulations.

Paired missions.

Billy felt the weight of expectation settle on his shoulders, not in a crushing way, but in a focused one. He had worked alone for so long that the idea of sharing a cockpit—even virtually—felt both foreign and exhilarating.

“You ranked second on Storm Run,” Devon said casually, as if commenting on the weather.

Billy blinked. “You saw that?”

She raised an eyebrow slightly. “Everyone saw that.”

A faint warmth crept up Billy’s neck. “You?”

“Third.”

He stared at her for a second, then laughed quietly. “Of course you were.”

The conversation felt natural after that. They spoke about the hyperdrive decision point in the mission, about the early storm instability, about the narrow asteroid corridor that had eliminated so many attempts. Their words moved easily from one technical detail to the next, as if they had flown together for years instead of minutes.

Around them, the energy in the dining hall slowly shifted from

chaotic introductions to smaller, more focused conversations. Players who had found their partners settled into seats, leaning closer as they began discussing strategy.

Billy became increasingly aware that this was not just a casual pairing.

The announcement had been deliberate.

Call signs that “most closely align.”

That phrasing lingered in his thoughts.

“Do you think they matched us randomly?” he asked quietly.

Devon tilted her head slightly. “You don’t?”

Billy hesitated. “Second and third place. Same prefix. Consecutive numbers.”

She held his gaze for a moment longer than expected. “Doesn’t feel random.”

The thought sent a subtle chill through him.

Before he could respond, the lights brightened slightly once more, signaling the end of the formal dinner session. Players began rising from their seats, plates clearing automatically as they stepped away from the tables.

Devon glanced toward the exit. “We should probably rest. If training starts at nine, I’m guessing they won’t go easy on us.”

Billy nodded. “Yeah.”

They walked toward the elevators together, the crowd gradually thinning as players dispersed to their assigned floors. The hallway felt quieter now, the earlier excitement replaced by focused anticipation.

Inside the elevator, the silence felt different than before. Not awkward. Intentional.

Billy studied the reflection in the mirrored wall. Two Star Knights stood side by side, identical uniforms, matching

prefixes.

Tomorrow they would sit in the same virtual cockpit.

He felt the familiar stir of adrenaline begin to rise again—not from danger this time, but from possibility.

When the elevator doors opened onto their floor, they stepped out together.

“Well,” Devon said as they reached the corridor that would separate them, “see you at nine, Alpha Seven.”

Billy smiled. “Try to keep up, Alpha Nine.”

She smirked slightly at that, then turned toward her room.

Billy watched her for a second longer before walking to his own door. He pressed his palm to the biometric panel, and the door slid open with its quiet mechanical whisper.

Inside, the room felt unchanged, but he did not.

He removed the jacket slowly and placed it carefully over the back of a chair, then moved toward the window. The desert stretched endlessly beyond the glass, illuminated faintly by the distant glow of the city.

Somewhere beneath that vast sky, something larger was unfolding.

Billy did not know why the thought came to him, but it settled in his mind with quiet certainty.

This week was not going to be what they thought it was.

He turned away from the window and lay down on the circular bed, staring up at the smooth white ceiling.

Tomorrow at nine.

And for the first time since pressing the hyperdrive override, he felt the same instinctive awareness stirring again.

The next decision he made would matter.

That night, Billy did not know what time it was when the movement began.

At first, he thought he was dreaming.

A low vibration hummed beneath the floor, subtle enough that it could have been dismissed as the building's ventilation system cycling on. The circular bed trembled faintly beneath him, just enough to pull him halfway out of sleep.

He opened his eyes.

The ceiling above him was still.

The room was dark.

The vibration deepened.

It rolled through the walls in a slow, distant wave, followed by a faint metallic groan that seemed to come from somewhere far below the structure.

Billy pushed himself upright.

“What...” he muttered.

The window glass shivered softly.

Another vibration followed — stronger this time. Not violent, but heavy. Like something enormous shifting weight.

From somewhere down the hall, a muffled thud echoed.

Then silence.

Billy swung his legs off the bed and crossed to the window.

The desert beyond lay quiet and unchanged beneath the stars.

No flashing lights.

No alarms.

No sirens.

He frowned.

The floor trembled one last time — a slow, rising sensation that made his stomach flip slightly, like the beginning of an elevator

ride.

Then it stopped.

Completely.

Billy waited.

Nothing.

After several long seconds, he exhaled.

“Earthquake,” he murmured to himself. Nevada had them sometimes. Minor tremors. Nothing serious.

The building felt solid again.

Stable.

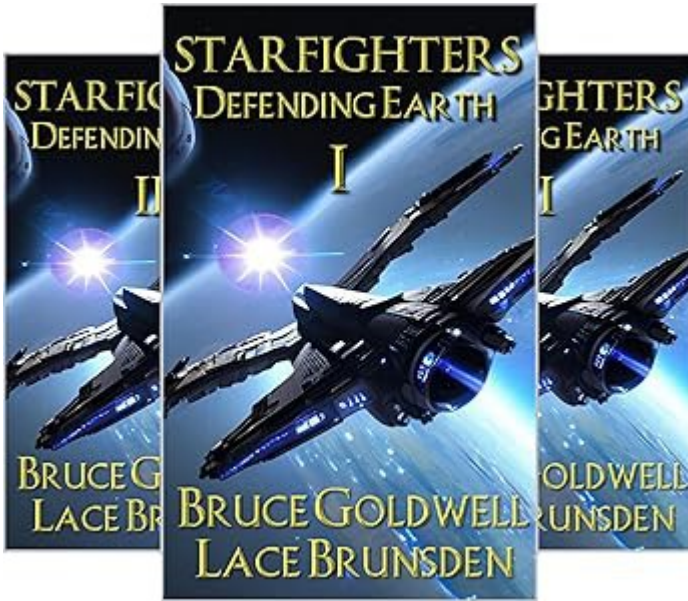
He glanced at the door, half expecting someone to knock or an announcement to sound.

Nothing happened.

Eventually, he returned to the bed.

Within minutes, exhaustion pulled him back under.

And by morning, the event already felt less certain — like something half remembered from a dream.



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About The Author

Bruce Goldwell is a self-help/motivational author and creator of two captivating fantasy adventures, “Dragon Keepers” a six book series and “Starfighters Defending Earth” a three book series. He is an inspiring figure who has overcome significant challenges in his life. As a Vietnam veteran, he experienced homelessness for over ten years. During these difficult times, Bruce developed a compassionate heart and strong desire to uplift others. While living on the streets, he immersed himself in motivational literature at local bookstores, where he found solace in the works of renowned authors such as the creators of Chicken Soup for the Soul, Bob Proctor, and David Stanley, Elvis Presley's brother.

Inspired by the transformative impact of the film "The Secret," Goldwell penned his first book, "Mastery of Abundant Living: The Keys to Mastering the Law of Attraction." He had the honor of personally presenting the first autographed copy to Bob Proctor. Recognizing that young readers may not typically engage with self-help material, Goldwell brilliantly crafted a fantastical adventure series for teens. Within these enchanting stories, he weaves principles of success and powerful life lessons to ignite hope and encourage personal growth in younger audiences.

Driven by an unwavering belief in the power of his books to change lives, Bruce Goldwell's moving journey from homeless veteran to impactful author has resonated with thousands around the globe. His triumphant quest to help others is a testament to resilience, determination, and the transformative power of words.

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