

## Smog Part II – Fire

*By Tanorath-drgn*

**Snr Captain Tano’rath**  
**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

I ended up forwarding the data we had on the planet’s pollution situation ahead to High Command as we got ready for the meeting. Apparently, Admiral Hector had taken an interest in the situation and had pulled in a few more experts to have it looked at.

While we waited, I had Quaren stick with ops, helping them to go through the data and put everything in graphs while Engineering prepared a shuttle. I sat down with Arktak after getting some medication from the Doctor to protect our bodies from the pollutants. In the background, we continued passive scans, having decided not to send actual probes down.

Of course, the invitation to the surface eventually came with the usual details. We found ourselves with a few hours to get ready. I had the ship cleaned up and prepared for inspection in case they asked for a tour while Arktak and I sat down to look through the data we had with Hector on a comms channel.

“You know, Captain, the Hall of Records has confirmed that this place holds a record for artificial particulate concentration,” Hector remarked once the usual pleasantries were done and over with, “they want a sample if you can get one.”

“What, to validate the claim?” I replied, raising an eyeridge.

Hector waved a hand and shook his head, “Nah, they want it sent for analysis to see how it got this bad. Anyway, what else do we have?”

“Sir, I put the data against our historical data from the post-Unification industrial boom,” Arktak remarked as he pulled up his graph on the shared screen, “As you’d know, there were already issues like acidic rain and some climatic shifts due to our activities back then...”

“Lieutenant, is there an error somewhere? Your data shows everything here being at least twice as worse,” Hector replied as he leaned in and fiddled with his screen, probably zooming in and such, “You know that this escalates this first contact to a I.C.\*, right?”

\*Intervention Case

“No sir, I had it checked and re-checked,” Arktak replied, shifting slightly in his seat under Hector’s gaze. “We’ve had to be issued medication by the Doctor for the First Contact.”

“I had our scientists take a look at it earlier, but honestly, sir, Arktak is probably less likely to make a mistake than them,” I added, chuckling, “He read the whole database in five minutes. Anyway, yes, I was going to recommend consideration for I.C.”

“I’ll have to speak to the others about this,” Hector replied, sighing, “If you can get us photos or samples of the wildlife and such and any supporting proof of this being artificial, it might help the case...though it seems pretty clear cut from what I’m seeing. What do you suggest?”

Before I could actually form my sentence, there was a knock on the door and I buzzed it open to have Talorath poke his head in, “Sorry, I know you’re in a meeting, but one of their continents is on fire.”

“One of their continents is *what*?” I retorted, whirling around in my seat to glare at Talorath.

“On fire, Captain, they’re having bushfires and we didn’t detect them earlier because they were on the other side of the planet, but the place is very much in flames,” Talorath walked in with his wings twitching, “Their emergency services are struggling and some of the blazes are encircling population centres. The government is scrambling resources and we’ve received a wide-band request for assistance. Orders?”

“I’ll let you know what happens, Captain,” Hector added as he got up on-screen, “Go do your duty.”

With that, the channel was closed and I got up.

“I’ll have fighters scrambled, Captain and evacuation shuttles on stand-by. I assume you want a vehicle prepped too?” Arktak remarked as he got up.

Talorath frowned for a moment, flicking his tail, “He hasn’t said anything yet, Arktak.”

“He read my file, remember? Yes. Do it. Inform dirt-side that we will assist. Ask them for co-ordinates,” I replied as I closed my laptop, “Tell them that we’ll have the meeting right after we’re out of trouble with that.”

“Aye, sir,” Talorath nodded as he raised an eyeridge at me and shot Arktak a sideways look. “Why would you want a vehicle?”

“In case there are people the shuttles can’t get to,” I replied flatly, “Prepare the three we have and have the drivers stand by. I’ll take one.”

“Captain, you can’t possibly-“ Arktak protested and I waved a hand.

“Duty first to species. They’re not one of ours but with that they’ve done to their home, they clearly don’t understand. We have to show them.” I replied flatly, “Those are my orders. Go.”

The pair looked at each other before leaving, with Arktak quietly asking Talorath if I was always like that, to which the answer is always yes.

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### **Cadet Quaren I.D.A.F. Command Training Program**

I was having lunch when my comms unit pinged, summoning me back to the bridge. I ended up stuffing what was left of my burger in my snout as I jogged onto the bridge, pausing only to duck into the washroom to wash my hands.

Everyone was there and the stragglers like me were just trickling in and taking their stations as Arktak leaned on the ostentatiously empty command chair. He gave me a slight wave as I went over to the ops station and took my post.

Arktak paused to look around, making sure everyone was here before he leaned over and tapped on the command terminal, bringing a close-up of one of the continents on the planet down below, with ominous red-orange spots and lines dotted around it, all billowing smoke. In some places, the power grids had either failed or been shut off and others, there were planes and helicopters making flybys, trying to dump as much water as possible to stop the advancing fire-lines. I couldn’t see the land vehicles, but they were most definitely there.

“Alright, we’re sending help down. I’m sure I don’t need to say why,” Arktak finally spoke after hesitating for a moment, “the Captain has decided to go down in a land vehicle to help evacuate those that the shuttles can’t get to.”

As usual, everyone nodded along and I brought up the status screen for the craft in the hangar, “All craft report ready to launch, just waiting on the last of the vehicles to be loaded. Supplies are being prepared and will be ready for the second wave.”

“Uh, good, Quaren. Have they sent over any safe drop zones?” He replied, rubbing the back of his head...again.

I tapped through the various messages that had been exchanged and Talorath flicked me the latest correspondence with the coordinates, which I marked on the map. “On-screen, sir.”

“Take Zone C.” Arktak replied almost instantly, “A and B won’t be safe if winds shift. Send the instructions to the pilots please.”

“Should we inform the authorities about A and B?” Talorath interjected, looking over from his console.

Arktak nodded, still leaning on the chair. Why doesn’t he just sit in the damn thing? That’s what it’s for! “Do it.”

Talorath nodded and started talking into his headset as I marked out the blazes of concern on the continent. Arktak looked at them, then at the data before nodding along. He marked a few more out and seemed to want to do a little more about them. Talorath, being the more experienced officer, saw this of course, and nudged Arktak again to inform the authorities.

Surprisingly, the planetary government actually listened to us and issued additional warnings but not much else could be done. Everything was spread pretty thin and their nearest help was hours away. We were literally the closest thing that could help and they grudgingly gave us free reign of their skies and reservoirs, asking us to use the water sparingly as the continent was experiencing a massive drought too – which was what probably contributed to this fiery situation in the first place.

Once the fighters were ready, Arktak had them launched, having them grab water from nearby freshwater bodies and dumping them on and ahead of the flames while the shuttles helped to evacuate any towns and hamlets in the line of fire. There were a few reports here and there of the shuttles lingering too as our utes were driven out to pick up stragglers or people who were trapped.

Obviously, the local media jumped on this, with our troops and medics splashed all over their online newsreels and such, with some having taken photos with stranded news crews and locals. Of course, everyone had to take medication to ease the effects that the pollution would have on us, but well, smiling for the camera does no harm.

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**Snr Captain Tano'rath**  
**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

“Are you sure, Captain? I can drive, you know,” The pilot protested as I jumped into the cab of the ute.

I couldn't help but snort as I closed the door. “This is how you make a statement. Besides, I need to hear what their people have to say and press conferences are always curated.”

“But sir-“ The pilot continued to protest, but I fired up the engine and it drowned him out.

I wound the window down and poked my head out, “Look, I know how the rules are but politics will solve nothing. I have a tracker on me, keep a lock on it.”

“Is that an order?” He retorted, glaring at me.

“I rather it not be,” I replied, winding the window back up, “Besides, I'm fireproof, unlike you, seaweed-eater!”

The pilot chuckled a little but still made a rude sign at me as I threw the ute into gear and accelerated down the ramp and out of the shuttle. The uplink with the ship's sensor grid gave me a map of the area and a countdown – if it reached zero, the little cottage that I was going to would be gone. Just a quick glance at it told me that I was already late, but I'm not turning back now that I've started driving.

Dirt tracks most of the way, but at least I had four-wheel drive and I locked the vehicle into that the moment the tyres hit the dirt. Of course, you're supposed to put it into neutral when doing that and I did so...while I was shifting between first and second, sending gravel flying everywhere.

It wasn't a special ute, just a pretty standard hybrid affair with a V-6 in the front. The engine can drive the thing pretty well on its own, but so can the hybrid system. That being said, though, I didn't expect the batteries to fare too well with the heat and locked it into full hybrid mode.

With the engine roaring, I careened and sometimes skidded around the various corners, coming closer than I would have liked to kissing a few trees and turning the ute into a banana. While the HUD told me how much time I had exactly, the ominous tower of smoke from the forest fire, the dark clouds of the generated storm and the stark orange-red of the sky around reminded me that we could be wrong. I

had the cabin set to recirculate air but yet, the smell of ash and fire persisted and bits of burnt leaves and other debris would land on the ute or fly past as I kept my foot down.

“Captain, we’re reading a fire-generated storm up ahead,” Quaren remarked over the radio, “The winds are making the fire worse, your time is now reduced. Can you still make it?”

I glanced up at the revised countdown and grunted. “Barely.”

“Perhaps you should turn back?” Arktak chimed in, probably having walked over.

I snorted, “Arktak, you’ve been under my command long enough to know the answer to that.”

“We’ll have evac standing by.” Arktak replied with a sigh. He seemed to want to say more too, but bit it back.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Save it, Arktak. Your fault for ending up on my ship.”

“That would be the Alliance, but I don’t regret it, Captain. May your vehicle remain reliable,” Arktak replied, and I could have sworn that I could hear his grin.

“I bloody well hope so!” I snarled as I skidded it around another bend, throwing up a cloud of dust and debris. I noted that more embers were starting to show – not far now. “I’ll see you later. Tano’rath out.”

I ended up driving as fast as I dared, skidding to a halt in front of the little cottage and beeping the horn several times. There was a bit of a pause, but I could see torches being turned on and I heard movement...

Meanwhile, off to my left flank, the sky was pitch black, despite it being mid-afternoon. Everything was grey or black with a massive orange-red glow just over the next ridge, accompanied with the crack of thunder and lightning. Embers, glowing orange and red were carried by the wind and landing everywhere, with a few landing on the black bonnet of the ute. Two of the hedges in the front yard caught fire and I had to jump out with a few bottles of water to put them out.

“Hey! Get in the car!” I hollered as I hammered on the door, “The fire-front is closing! You have to evacuate now!”

As I spoke, the door was pulled open and I nearly hit the person in the snout with my spirited knocking. While I was half expecting a reptilian of some kind, I found myself facing down a marsupial family of three, with the female holding her joey and eyeing me warily. The male was the one who had opened the door and he had strange yellow and white markings on his blue fur. “Look, they said that we were too close-“

“You will be if you keep talking!” I snapped, “We’ll get you out, sir, but we have to go now.”

The male paused and looked at what was undoubtedly his partner or relative of some sort before sizing me up, “You’re one of those aliens, aren’t you? Haven’t I seen you before?”

“We can discuss my snout in the car.” I snapped, offering him my hand, “Lets go.”

He looked to his companion and nodded. “What about my house?”

“I can’t take your house with you. Take your ID’s and lets go.” I replied flatly, “I can’t wait much longer.”

He looked at me for a moment before it sunk in and he told the female to go with me while he grabbed everything else. I ended up having to usher them to the ute, whose engine was still idling and helping them get the seatbelts up before he turned up with a duffel bag full of clothes and a laptop, half running and half...jumping? Over.

As I had his seatbelts done up, the winds began to howl and I nearly dived into the driver’s seat with a few choice swear words. Of course. Talorath was on comms screaming at me to get out so I told him to shut up before muting him.

“Your commander seems worried,” The male remarked as his companion busied herself trying to calm the hatchling, “Are you sure we’ll be alright?”

“First of all, I’m his commander,” I retorted with a smirk as I gave the engine a good rev and turned us around, “What do I call you, by the way?”

“Oh, everyone calls me Diesel because of my advocacy for public transport,” He replied with a chuckle, “I had my fur dyed in the colours of the most popular train operator to help push for it and such...”

“Well, just call me Tano then.” I replied as I gunned it down the road, “Oho, we’re well in the shit here, hold onto the ceiling handle if you can.”

“Isn’t this thing more pollutive anyway?” He retorted at me as we came up to a narrow bend.

I threw it around the corner, with the engine screaming and the traction warnings beeping at me. “What, compared to the cars here? Fuck no. We have efficiency standards and this thing runs on ethanol.”

Diesel raised a finger and seemed to want to argue but I was too busy actually driving to make much conversation. However, it was enough to keep his attention away from the fire that I was trying to outrun. I had to tell him to wait more than once as I fought with the ute, with these older ones being a bit tail happy with no gun and ammo in the tray.

I ended up driving it into the landing zone barely in time and with several new dents on the front crash bar too, but all that mattered was that we were safe. I had Diesel and his companion, who turned out to be a sister, handed rations and water as the shuttle took off and we made haste towards to the safe zone. He also left a blue buttock shaped stain on the seats that I had to scrub out later, which was irritating.

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**Cadet Quaren**  
**I.D.A.F. Command Training Program**

“The Captain is away, he’s safe.” I shouted over the chaos in the bridge to Arktak.

Arktak himself heaved a massive sigh of relief, so much that he almost deflated, “Isn’t it against regulations for him to do this...?”

“It is,” Talorath replied with a snort, “Not that he cares.”

“The fires aren’t getting any better, by the way, check your status display,” I added, rubbing my chin, “the other evacuation points are being encircled, the people are being evacuated by their ground forces but the last safe point will be compromised if we don’t do something.”

“What about the native forces?” Arktak replied, still leaning on the chair. I still couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t just sit in it. Is it insecurity? Or does he just not want to sit? He’s not hesitating and dancing around it, in fact he hasn’t moved from his spot!



Talorath poked away at his terminal and shook his head, “No chance, they’re tied up delaying the advancing fronts and evacuating the other spots. Our fighters are supporting. Unknown if they can hold their own if we break off.”

“Uh...how bad?” Arktak replied, gritting his teeth.

Talorath flicked the data to me and I ran a quick simulation, “In the thousands magnitude worst case, but we have thousands in the evac area. We lose more if nothing is done.”

Tano’rath would have just told us to do it, but Arktak fidgeted it and gritted his teeth. I see why Tano’rath went down now and it wasn’t just to make a statement to the natives. “Fine. Divert fighters to drench the areas around Zone C. Inform the authorities. Send whatever shuttles we can spare to pick up the evacuees from A and B. Will a land run be possible?”

“One run, maybe two,” Talorath replied, “but it’ll be rough. There’s a high chance that they’ll hit the front. Don’t forget that we only have three vehicles.”

“Send the order. Have face masks and water ready, drench if we have to,” Arktak replied, sighing as he rubbed his forehead, “Tano’rath is going to want to go, isn’t he?”

“He’s not going to take no for an answer,” Talorath replied. He ought to know, he’s the Captain’s younger brother... “I’ll keep a lock on him, don’t worry about it.”

Arktak could only nod as the orders were sent out and the HUD showed our fighters breaking away to help defend the final evacuation point.

A two-pronged approach was taken, with areas drenched with as much freshwater that we could get before the trees were show down and tractor beamed out of the way and into the already burnt areas, creating a fire break. All surrounding areas were drenched and the fighters stood watch as the three ute convoy grabbed the stragglers from the evacuation and rushed to point C. As a small mercy, they didn’t need to do a second run, thanks to the use of our shuttles and a few last-minute plane and helicopter arrivals.

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**Snr Captain Tano’rath**  
**Cmdr, DES Defiant**

I had spent most of the time we had handing out food and water from the shuttles as we get the evacuees packed up and ready to go. A few conversations here and there had most express no surprise with the fires – they had been getting worse over the past few decades and most mentioned inaction to curb the climate runaway wasn't helping.

Of course, we had to wave to cameras here and there and a few of our conversations were caught by news crews here and there. They seemed hesitant to approach us and we were busy, so I left it as it is. I did, however, have a cameraman come and ask if he could ride with me when he realised that I would be taking the stragglers and I agreed.

Diesel was another special one, he insisted on boarding last and ended up getting turned away by the pilot, with the shuttle already over capacity. He ended up following me too along with the other evacuees that didn't quite make it. We were left with face masks and lots of water. I made sure to brief the evacuees on where to hold on the tray and so on before checking the fluids in the engine and setting off.

Most of the drive was red and black, crossing firelines and shouting at the people behind to drench themselves as I held my foot down, with our convoy of three racing down the charred landscape – what was formerly a lush national park, reduced to the charred skeletons of trees and corpses of wildlife strewn everywhere.

The uplink with the ship stayed stable and I ended up talking a little with the passengers in the cab, including the cameraman and Diesel. It didn't take long to realise that their government wasn't their own, they were the property of the highest bidder and with the big corporations being the richest entities around, it was clear whose interests were represented here. Most people knew that something was going wrong and maybe to some extent why, but most information was suppressed. They actually seemed genuinely surprised at the sight of the data, with my report comparing their planet to that of a typical case and then with Drakonos, our Capital.

I didn't have time to go too much in detail, letting them look through the data on the tablet instead as I drove across the charred and eerily silent landscape, noting grimly that we were closing in on the next fire front.

However, as we closed in, I sighted a pair of police vehicles parked across the track, so I slowed and came to a stop in front of them, with the other two vehicles stopping behind me. As the officers approached, we all shut the engines off.

The uniformed officers approached, their clothes suspiciously clean as they walked around and I wound the manual windows down. "Yes, officer?"

“We would like to escort your convoy to safety, sir, would you please follow us?” One of them remarked tersely, I noted that he seemed to be shifting his feet around a little and his right arm was drifting to his weapon.

I raised an eyeridge, noting that their cars were also suspiciously clean. A glance on the horizon showed a slight flash – light reflecting off something or other. “Sir, we already have a map and the evacuation destination marked, you should be heading to safety yourselves.”

“Just making sure our guests are safe, Captain.” The officer replied, with his hand now on his gun, “Would you fall in line behind us please?”

My comms unit buzzed with a few messages, but stopped mid-buzz as one of them tapped something in his pocket. The clock in the ute lost power too. “Alright then, I’ll fire it up and we’ll go.”

They nodded but didn’t move, evidently expecting something. It was pretty clear what had been done, but that didn’t matter. Not the first time, won’t be the last. I flicked a few breakers then held the switch for the starter down as the starter cranked the engine, which fired and came to life. The gauges were all dead, as I had half expected, which only served to confirm my suspicions.

They drew their guns.

I put my foot down and dumped the clutch, let the tyres scream for effect, then swerved hard left and slammed the crash bar into the right wheel of one of their cars. Didn’t take long before the ute behind me took the other as we diverged, letting the undamaged one take point as we all floored it, with gunfire on our tails as the officers fired on us and the higher calibre rounds from what was undoubtedly a bunch of snipers pinging off the armoured chassis.

I couldn’t call for help, obviously, but Arktak evidently had an eye on me as two fighters decloaked and swooped down, strafing the area with energy bolts as we careened away. They destroyed another three hidden vehicles and strafed what must have been a platoon worth of troops. The best part? The cameraman had a spare camera in his bag, he got it all recorded. Apparently messing with magnetic tape video recorders is a hobby of his.

“How’d you know?” Diesel practically squeaked as he untangled himself from the ball that he had curled into.

I snorted, “Nobody has clean clothes, not even me and they wouldn’t be reaching for their guns if they were here to help. I also didn’t tell anyone what my rank was.”

Diesel nodded again as he tried to turn his phone on, which predictably, didn't work.

"Don't bother, that was a low level EMP they hit us with," I remarked, shrugging as I changed gears, "I'm sure you can get a new one once we're out of this mess anyway."

"Actually, why does the car still work, then?" The cameraman replied while shoving the most obnoxious looking microphone, complete with a large foam cover on it, in my snout.

I gently pushed the microphone away slightly, "That is not a lollipop, I do not want to eat it, but we have our ways around it, it's the quickest and dirtiest way to stop anything advanced in its tracks, so we found our ways around it. I can't tell you how, obviously, but don't worry, we made it, it'll get us there."

The cameraman nodded as he drove on and I ended up making light conversation with them while pulling over to check on the people in the tray to find that one or two of them had taken glancing hits from bullets here and there. First aid was applied before we raced our way to the evacuation point.

Eventually, we did drop them off safe and we pulled out, having done our part. I had supply runs set up to deliver tents, food and the like, but their own authorities had things mostly in order. I made no mention of the encounter, but our passengers were extremely vocal about it and Diesel mentioned that it was probably because I had been caught on camera talking about climate issues...

Either way, I returned to the ship to prepare for proper first contact, knowing full well that it really isn't going to go well this time. I had Arktak checked and found that he was built to be resistant to EMP, and he insisted on going with me anyway. We all had our weapons readied and converted to projectile while arrangements were made to repair the utes... Of course, I got called into another call with Hector once I arrived...