

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Judah, Subject to None is a chapter connected, by the space of a few thousand years, to the events that transpire in "Shots Fired" and "Change of Command." It deals with the character of Judah, an escaped war slave who has carved out a living as a mercenary, killing his way through life in a Realm that considers him little more than a living weapon that has slipped its leash.

PILOT JUDAH'S STORY

"JUDAH, SUBJECT TO NONE"

SIMMARKAN EMPIRE SPACE, ALONG THE "REGAL PATH" TRADE ROUTE OUTSIDE THE PARSA SYSTEM THE INDEPENDENT FREIGHTER "*BRR'SHEV*"

The *Brr'Shev's* captain patched into the defense crewman's situation display, and wrung his tentacles in regret for taking on their heavily-guarded cargo. If only the family finances hadn't been so bad; if only his now-harvested brother hadn't run up such massive gambling debts in the casinos; if only his brother's organs had fetched a better price back on Homeworld. A change in any one of those variables, and Captain Natool, Ship's Master and Independent Trader, would not be in this quandary. He silently vowed that this was the last time he hired out his express interstellar freighter to the Vorvan, crime lord or not, enormous fee or not. He punctuated the oath with a curse as the ship's internal structure groaned under the stress of another incoming plasma bombardment.

His strict orthodox beliefs forbade him from profanity, but many years on the trade lanes in this sector of space had softened his once-zealous resolve and salted his tongue. He interspersed whispered prayers of forgiveness between spats of vitriol, but the ratio of curses to prayers grew in the profane's favor as the attacking ship closed the distance between them.

The vessel shadowing him since his departure from Z'Jerga Junction, some 40 light-years' distance, was unknown. Such parallel voyages are not uncommon along heavily-traveled trade routes such as the Regal Path. The near-simultaneous jump into the scorching faster-than-light wastes of Hell Space had commanded his attention at the time of departure into Simmarkan territory.

Watching the unbidden escort keep pace with his ship through the void caused his concern to escalate.

An hour ago, he had ordered the *Brr'Shev* to conduct a routine cooling stop, dropping from Hell Space into reality to shed the massive heat buildup in the ship's force fields. The star-hot temperatures encountered in the "side reality" were a necessary part of interstellar travel, and such a dip back into the normal universe was considered standard ship's routine, even on an enigmatic cargo run such as this. When the mystery ship dropped back into reality at the same time, however, Natool's initial fear back at Z'Jerga Junction was confirmed: pirates.

Even he had not been ready, though, for the blistering storm of plasma bolts that had erupted from the ship. Usually these affairs began with a threat or sinister introduction over a comm-link, with an invitation to parlay ejected cargo for freedom. This stalker had not only unleashed a devastating hail of fire without so much as a how-do-you-do, but it was also throttling its engines hard as it charged to close with the *Brr'Shev*. They wouldn't be satisfied with gathering clumsy floating cargo pods: they meant to board.

Natool had immediately barked for maximum thrust, a stout four-gee acceleration directly away from the pirate, in an attempt to outrun the marauding stranger. The attacker gained steadily, even as it hammered massive amounts of energy into the *Brr'Shev's* still-glowing energy shields. Slipping back into Hell Space would have been futile now, since their fields were stilled burdened with heat, and the steady pounding of blistering plasma wasn't helping things. The ship would not make it very far before being forced to drop out again for cooling, and they'd be in the same situation again.

The alternative was incineration in the depths of the interstellar void as the ship's fields finally gave out, leaving its bare hull at the mercy of the alternate dimension's scorching temperatures. Attempts to contact the Simmarkan authorities on the cee-plus commlink had been jammed immediately. Conventional radio transmissions would take hours, perhaps even days, to reach anyone in the Parsa system. His ship was in a tight spot.

Radiating heat was only one side of the dilemma facing him: there was the matter of what the shields couldn't stop.

Like every other manner of protective energy field throughout the Realm, the *Brr'Shev's* force fields were able to absorb every form of heat or electromagnetic radiation that could be thrown at them, given sufficient time to cool. The one thing they couldn't affect, however, was physical matter passing through them. When that matter took the form of a missile warhead, or worse yet, an assault shuttle loaded with a squad of combat-drugged pirates in power suits, things got nasty.

Natool's boneless digits involuntarily curled at the thought of repelling boarders in the corridors of his own ship. There were worse fates, though: better to gamble with death in Hell Space or fighting pirates than face the Vorvan with the news of his cargo being stolen. For better or worse, he had another option at his disposal. It would severely affect the bottom line for this trip, delaying his

payments to the casinos that had “collected” on his brother, but it was the only option at this point. The captain would have never voluntarily taken the option aboard, but the client had insisted, and one does not say ‘no’ to a Vorvan.

Ka-KRUMPH!!!

Another hammering of energized particles against the shields interrupted the captain’s worried thoughts. Again, his main body bobbed like a weight on a spring. A sigh of annoyance escaped from his gritted beak as his skull bumped the side of his enclosed crash seat. Natool extended a portion of his digits over to the console’s right side storage compartment, searching in vain for his soft crash helmet while keeping two pairs of eyes on the defense readout. Finding no helmet, he resignedly keyed the ship’s intercom, and growled for the mercenary escort pilot to report to him from the launch bay.

The captain’s tactical display flashed momentarily as it received the incoming signal, splitting into tactical on the right, and the helmeted escort pilot on the left. He was a standard human at first sight, repugnant in every manner and likeness, as they all were to Natool.

Though the captain thought they all looked alike, a xenobiologist would have noted the human’s high, sharp cheekbones and powerfully lean build, classic traits of the original Myoshan breed of human war-slave. Unseen from this view were the rugged combat datajacks running along both sides of the back of his neck, implanted ports that enabled him to interface with all means of combat implements. The implement in this case was a strange and brutal-looking space fighter that Natool had been unable to trace in his ship’s journals of recognition.

Humans like the pilot were readily bought and sold all throughout the Realm, now that the Myoshans’ genetic patents had expired. Empires, warlords, criminal syndicates, and even trade conglomerates kept humans as cheap, enslaved cannon fodder. Physically, most humans were four or five times the mass of most sentient beings in the Realm. Their unpredictability, adaptability, and brawn, combined with thousands of years of genetic modification, made them some of the most devastating fighters in the Realm. What made this one different from the tens of millions of others like him were the facial brands marking him as an experimental model, a prototype custom-bred for some enigmatic and unique purpose or task. Whatever this human’s specialty was, beyond piloting fighters, Natool had neither the courage nor inclination to ask. It certainly hadn’t been gene-rigged for courtesy or civility.

“What, this dung-hauling scow can’t handle a little plasma, bone-squid?” The annoyed human spat out the common slur for Natool’s race, the Bash’rans, and the captain’s pigmented signal glands flushed reddish-brown.

Natool struggled visibly to contain himself at the insult to himself and his prized vessel, to the brooding delight of the human. *Damnably giant primates*, he silently raged, *thank the gods they’ve been brought under submission*.

“Hyoo-mon, per the ‘deployment for self-preservation’ clause of the contract I have with your master, you are hereby ordered to engage our atta---“

“I don’t have a *master*, ink-sucker, I’m free-and-clear, just like you,” the human snarled. Its teeth were not impressive in the least, but its voice tone changed, as did the flush of color in its face. The human pilot reminded Natool of a Bash’ran spawnling whose candy had been taken away. Putting the amusing thought aside, the captain plodded along in his business-like tone. These things required a certain air of decorum and formality, as demanded by the old ways.

“Yes, yes, regardless, hyoo-mon, you are bound by contract to protect this ship and its crew and cargo. Prepare for deployment.” With that, the captain flicked the tactical display with a digit, abruptly dismissing the mercenary. Their pursuer was now only a short distance behind them, a scant five thousand clicks, and still closing. Hopefully, the slave...*ah, ex-slave*, would be enough of a distraction to enable the ship to escape. Natool briefly entertained the notion of trading the human’s life and exotic craft in exchange for safe passage, but then changed his mind. Though he was worried about the pirates, he wasn’t going to barter his dogmatic religious principles for survival. Muttering yet another appeal for forgiveness to his family’s deities, he ordered the launch bay doors opened.

Judah swore and stabbed the intercom link to the off position, then locked his control helmet’s visor down. *Damn bone-squids*, he thought. While they were feared for their abilities, humans were still considered the bottom of the great galactic pecking order of the Realm. He’d be damned, though, if he’d let some Bash’ran look down its nose, or the equivalent thereof, at him. The Bash’rans had only bought their freedom a few thousand years before, yet here this arrogant ink-sucker was, pontificating to him like it was a founding member of the Elder Races.

Refocus and prepare, he thought. He ran through his mental checklist, keying up his craft’s fusion power plant with a pulse through the datajacks implanted in his neck. Immediately, the surge of his control system began buzzing in his head, coldly displaying readouts and reports to him in his mind’s eye. He pushed his will past the hard data, into the raw input streams from his craft’s sensors. By merging himself with the otherwise soul-less control computer of his fighter, it became an extension of him. He basked in the deep, solid glow of fusion fire now in his belly. He flexed his armament like it was his own fingers. It felt good to be submerged into the fighter’s embrace again. He ticked off his craft’s other subsystems. All happily reported their readiness.

He secured the acceleration webbing holding his body in the control harness, and squinted as the flashing and rotating lights of the launch bay signaled the movement of his craft into launch position. He really had no reason to squint, since he was deep in the cockpit of his craft, shielded from the light by the opaque hull. One bothersome light had been located next to one of his fighter’s external optic cameras, though, and the feedback of the glare traveled up the data pathways to cause his physical body to wince at the minor sensory overload. He adjusted the gain on the camera with a thought as the fighter was locked into position, and the irritation abated. The atmosphere drained from the hanger with a steadily fading hiss, and Judah forced a yawn as his ears popped.

Once the launch bay was completely depressurized the doors before him opened with a smooth silence. No more than a few meters away, the roiling force fields of the ship were being pounded by staccato of plasma bolts coming from a distant smudge of light no brighter than a large star against the blackness of space. Judah closed his eyes, and slowly sank deeper into his combat trance.

The hydraulic locks that secured his armored craft in its flight mode slid back into their housings without a sound. He could still feel the vibrations and minor metal-on-metal scrapes coming through his hull as they disconnected, and small bits of flotsam and dust drifted in front of his main sensors. The strobe of plasma strikes beating on the *Brr'Shev's* shielding continued as he silently guided his armored craft out of the ship's bay with a few thruster puffs, still staying within the bubble of protection provided by the ships glowing force fields. Once he was clear of the bay, he rotated his fighter's orientation to face towards the glowing halos produced by the engines at the stern of the ship. He focused, absorbing every bit of sensor data pouring in from his cameras and readouts directly into his mind. His thoughts momentarily drifted back to his exchange with the bone-squid, and his mouth drew tight in a sneer. He'd make sure Natool remembered that he was a free man, subject to none.

A starship hull is a relatively fragile object, considering the environments to which it is exposed. What really takes the brunt of punishment as a ship travels through both the normal universe and Hell Space is its force field. Judah happened to occupy that thinnest of margins, floating midway between hull and the bubble of protective force field.

He mentally urged his surrogate self into a heavy acceleration, crushing his physical body back in his webbed harness at more than eight gees. Superheated hydrogen roared wildly from his exhaust vents, blistering and charring the side of the vessel from nose to stern as he slammed the throttles wide-open.

The *Brr'Shev's* protective field transferred a portion of its heat to his own fighter craft's bubble as he passed through it. The small portion he absorbed would dissipate by the time he was in range of the attacker. He continued the hard burn, and watched the freighter shrink in his rear cameras.

He reduced the burn to five gravities, his standard combat acceleration, and began closing with the attacker. Torching the side of the freighter was brash and ultimately futile, but Judah wasn't in nearly as foul a mood as before. The distance quickly closed between him and the marauder. He was now ready.

"That thrice-damned *choovah*, that...that *ooze-slurping primate*, he's roasting my ship!" Natool bellowed as startled crewmen turned towards their profanity-spewing captain. *The client would hear about this*, the captain raged. Before he could key his commlink to chew out the mercenary, though, the war craft disappeared in a flash. It quickly became a small point of light arcing to meet the bright smudge attacking them.

"The damage appears cosmetic, sir, no structural failure reported." After a short pause, the same young Bash'ran excitedly reported, "The attacker is

deploying defense drones!” The agitated defense crewman’s display flashed red around the perimeter as the readout changed. Four smaller blips emerged from the oblong return given by the pursuing ship. The plasma barrage quickly ended, as the captain was sure that the enemy detected the mercenary’s massive power readout the instant he left the concealment of the *Brr’Shev*’s shields.

They were probably dumping all available power into changing their vector, the poor slugs. May their own gods, if they had them, protect them from the fury of the human. Natool clicked his beak with satisfaction, faintly hoping his two problems would mutually solve each other.

Closing with the enemy ship took only minutes, and Judah began to set up his attack. The defensive drones that had been hastily deployed to spray him with cones of laser fire were easily brushed aside, silently flaring momentarily and flashing out of existence as his fighter’s own built-in lasers found them and quickly overloaded their feeble shields. The enemy ship was burning hard to change its vector, but it had been in such adamant pursuit of the *Brr’Shev* that it had too much inertia working against it. Judah cut his acceleration, letting the ponderous vessel’s now-unwanted momentum carry it directly into his waiting array of weaponry.

Hell, this is almost too easy, Judah thought. His sensors whispered to him that the ship was only forty clicks away, and would soon be in range for one of his favorite types of attack runs.

Judah’s smug confidence gave way to a hollow feeling as adrenaline surged through him. He startled at the sight of a cloud of halo-ringed black spots emerging simultaneously from the marauder’s shielding. Flimsy laser drones were one thing. Guided missiles were another.

Judah swore absentmindedly in his surprise, almost as if it were a normal part of his breathing. Realizing the panic-feigning ship had drawn him in, he slammed his craft into a tight spiraling path perpendicular to the missiles, hoping to carve a long, arcing approach that would bring him directly under the belly of the enemy ship. The incoming warheads responded to his maneuver, jetting their exhausts to an intercept course under much heavier acceleration. His lasers began stabbing at the missiles while they were still at a distance, vaporizing them with each hit, but for every one that he dispatched, the ship ejected two more to join the chase. To make matters worse, the ship had cut its engines, and was no doubt diverting power back to its plasma cannons. This current situation wasn’t going to work, but he had an idea of what would.

Just as he finished the calculations in his head, the mystery ship confirmed his hunch, and once again opened up with its plasma batteries, erupting in a dazzling display of firepower that was concentrated completely on him. Thankfully, the massive weapons were meant for hitting ship-sized targets, not his small battle craft, and meter-thick bolts of plasma streaked and sizzled all around him. Occasionally one would find its mark, rattling him with a massive shock, but no damage was being inflicted through his shielding, even at this extremely close range.

The cloud of missiles now hurtling towards Judah's fighter was getting thicker, numbering over three dozen by the count fed to him by the sensors. He had to play this right, since timing was often everything in an interstellar knife-fight situation like this. Shifting his fighter's thrust to zero, he waited tensely as the missiles closed. As the seconds ticked, the swarm of guided projectiles began to voraciously swallow the intervening distance. Thirty clicks. Twenty-five... Twenty... Fifteen... Ten... At four klicks out, Judah winced and braced himself, spinning his fighter at maximum gee directly into the approaching horde of incoming warheads and the mystery ship beyond them. At the last instant before contact, he jinked at a complete right angle to their attack, engines roaring just as hard as before, and then performed another quick right angle to take him back in the direction of the enemy ship.

The hard "S" maneuver forced the missiles to overshoot. Following their combat programs, they flipped 180 degrees, and flared hard to catch him. Judah was now heading directly at the enemy ship as hard as he could physically stand, engines blazing. The ship continued to punch out missiles at him, but his fighter's main lasers were now catching them one by one as they emerged from the ship's protective force fields. The cloud of already-deployed missiles was coming on strong behind him, but the leaders were melting and detonating their internal fuel tanks as they entered his exhaust stream. Those that veered and corkscrewed to avoid the exhaust only fell farther and farther behind.

Judah was now within thirty klicks of the enemy ship, and he was coming in hot. The faster he closed with the ship, though, a tiny pinprick in his forehead worsened into a sharper and sharper pain. As he cursed through the growing agony, he began to realize they had a mental jammer. He had heard of these freaks before, but never had he encountered one personally. The enemy psychic was a being floating in an isolation tank, jacked into some sort of neural amplifier deep within the ship's armored hull. Jammers were trained specifically in the arts of ripping apart other minds. They were trying to fry his, but physical distance was often a limiting factor with these wierdling powers. The pain grew worse and worse as he hurtled his fighter at the pirate vessel. This was not going to be fun, considering that his only option was to maneuver in even closer.

Gasping hard to inhale and grunting harder to exhale, Judah maintained his focus under the massive gee load and psychic jamming. With a mental command, Judah readied his special surprise. It was custom built, a heavy hull-piercing warhead that relied solely on his fighter to guide it to the target. The primitive concept had confounded the manufacturer when Judah placed the order. No advanced guidance systems, no energy shielding, no sophisticated propulsion; just steel, high explosives, and an impact fuse. The weapons contractor built it anyway: if the bloodthirsty human mercenary wanted a crude tube packed with explosives, that's what he was going to get.

As his engines continued to scream at maximum gee, armor panels lifted and split on the belly of his fighter, opening one of the weapons bays concealed by the craft's thick outer hull. His lasers continued to stab and flash at targets ahead of him, each time resulting in a wink of light that signified another

exploding missile, while his exhaust still blazed behind him, incinerating the pursuer that attempted to move in for the kill. The heavy warhead whirred into position from the weapons bay, awaiting his mental signal to release from its rails.

Eighteen clicks...seventeen...sixteen. The white-hot shard in Judah's head was growing more and more severe, and he yelled in pain and fury as he streaked toward the enemy vessel. The psychic jammer was now trying to fill his mind with every possible horrific image and emotion that would break his concentration, but he channeled and refocused the pain, using it as fuel to further his furious charge. This jammer must not have specialized in human neurology; otherwise Judah was sure he would be dead by now of a jetting aneurysm.

Ten clicks...nine...eight...the enemy ship loomed larger and larger in Judah's rapidly-closing tunnel of vision. His fighter's cameras were still feeding the same amount of data, but the blood was draining from his brain as he poured on the acceleration. The gees and mental jamming placed an incredible strain on his mind and body, and his breath burst in and out of him in ragged gasps. His ears bled from the jammer's efforts, but he continued his mad plunge straight into the onslaught. The gunners on the ship had shifted their hail of fire, too late, from his fighter onto the cloud of missiles accelerating hard to catch him. With a madman's grin and a howl of unimaginable pain, he punched his engines even harder. The target ship grew huge in his cameras as he barreled in.

As the ship filled his entire field of perception, he released his heavy explosive from the weapons bay. His fighter slashed through the translucent bubble of the ship's force field. He vectored his thrust hard to carry himself just over the dorsal rise of the pirate's hull. Force fields that would have allowed the marauder to dive into a sun unharmed were useless against the massive charge. A flat tone in his helmet chorused with the wailing collision-warning alarms, signaling that the warhead was away, but his link with the fighter had told him the instant its electrical contacts left the launch rack. Through his closing field of vision, he saw a brief flash of gleaming red metal, and then darkness as his fighter roared past the enemy vessel's hull at a crushing twelve gravities.

The pain in his head ceased instantly as the primitive weapon found its mark, its massive explosion severing the enemy ship like a machete through a fish. Flaming atmosphere, glowing debris, and flailing alien bodies vented from the devastated hull. The two portions of the ship twisted slowly on the small section of keel that still connected them, reeling from the massive explosion that had brutally cleaved them. Cutting his own engines and switching his camera view to see behind him, he saw the pursuing missiles try to follow him through the ragged canyon he had torn through the enemy's hull. Canister-shaped escape pods began separating from mounts on the rear half of the doomed ship, slowly drifting on maneuver jets as they tried to gain distance from the crippled hulk.

First one, then four, then all sixteen remaining missiles silently slammed into the side of the stricken vessel. Strangely, there were no initial detonations

as the sleek projectiles savagely penetrated the hull. The missiles must have been impalers, kinetic-kill munitions that are meant to puncture and disable without tearing the guts out of a target with explosives. These attackers hadn't been hoping to destroy their target, they wanted to skewer it for capture; that target had almost been him.

Secondary flashes of exploding equipment modules or venting pressure cabins rippled along the skin of the foundering wreck. The pirate's shields winked out, their massive charge of unvented heat imploding into the ship's ravaged hull. Simultaneously, the engines of the paralyzed beast detonated in a blinding flash of hard radiation and star-hot plasma that incinerated the ship and all of its too-close escape pods. One of the impaler missiles must have breached the ship's magnetic fusion bottle, allowing the captured miniature sun that powered the vessel to both collapse and fly apart in an all-consuming fireball. Other auxiliary power sources, like compressed nuclear fission reactors, compounded the fusion bottle's rupture. That must be the reason his radiation sensors were spiking. Fusion detonations were usually very clean, no muss, no fuss. Fission brought with it the prospect of long decontamination sessions for both man and machine.

Judah whistled softly as he regained his breath from the heavy acceleration. He watched in subdued wonder as the molten mists that had been the enemy vessel swirled and cooled in the wastes of space, shifting from white-hot fog to a darkened cloud of drifting fallout. His hard-earned momentum was carrying him away from the atomized space debris, and he made sure he would give it a wide berth when he returned to the *Brr'Shev*. Paying for that bone-squid's paint job was going to eat up a good chunk of his bonus, as it was. Deconning of his fighter would have only made the bill worse. Well, perhaps the squid would be too afraid, or appreciative, to demand the credits from him. Truthfully, Judah knew that wasn't going to be the case; Bash'rans were annoyingly tenacious when it came to financial matters.

Judah brought himself back from the deepest parts of his combat trance, and removed his helmet once he confirmed the devastating explosion soaked up the remaining missiles. Wiping the trickles of blood from the sides of his neck and ears, and even a surprise nosebleed that cleared with a few crimson snorts, he silently pondered the identity of the now-dead attackers. He knew that his cash-up-front presence on this trip meant that it wasn't going to be a leisurely stroll, but this encounter had been a little too weird even for him. If those were run-of-the-mill pirates, he was an ink-sucker's uncle. Which reminded him...

"Come in, bone-squid. The target's taken out. No trace of identity, and I'm returning to the ship. Contact the client on a Cee-plus commlink, and let him know that I'm going to want a face to face." He waited a moment, grinned his toothiest grin, and added, "Think you can handle that, '*master*'?"

Judah ignored the stream of Bash'ran profanities spewing from the commlink in reply. Most of them lost their meaning in translation anyway or didn't apply, since the recent majority of his ancestors had been test tubes.

He flicked off the commlink with an avenged smirk. He set his navigation computer to rendezvous with the *Brr'Shev*, at a relatively-sedate two gees, and alert him when he was five klicks out from docking.

He closed his eyes, rubbing his temples as he sorted through his newest array of problems. A mystery ship loaded with plasma weaponry, impalers, and a psychic jammer, trying to take on a Vorvan's private cargo. The big lizard was definitely not going to like this.