

# At The Gates of Kias

**The N1-Starfighter *Spitfire***

**Palioxis Cloud**

**Kias System**

In the wake of the storm, the clouds of the Palioxis glowed gold. A red-hued and orange tinted shine, it often reminded first-time pilots of flying through a slow-moving fireball. That was the more romantic terminology some used. Others claimed it resembled a misshapen travesty of a wedding cake, or a toxic geyser. It had become a game among new pilots to spot shapes within the slow-moving clouds, calling them out one after another. Most of that had been filling Tarvitz's headset for the last half of an hour, as they gently cruised through one of the quieter spots in this region of space.

"Anyone think that distant one over there looks like a vornskr?" one pilot asked.

"Position designation," an older voice chipped in.

"Oh, sorry, twenty-six by nineteen."

"Only if you're half-blind and drunk," another pilot answered, "Looks more like a B1 droid to me."

Tarvitz smirked at that, and fought the urge to join in himself. He would have done so, were he not an outsider here. The sleek hammerhead shape of the *Spitfire* was a lone exception among the unit of industrial grey X-Wing fighters. Several kilometers ahead, the leader of Paladin Squadron was little more than a spec against the orange clouds, flanked by two of his pilots. The rest were scattered out below them, each falling into a small unit if trios, practicing banking and unit formation tactics. Officially they were on patrol, but Commander Isenkyn had encouraged each of his squadron to play this game. His reasoning was the sort of creativity Tarvitz had always liked in Clan Odan-Urr's recruits - It was a means of both encouraging pilots to quickly zero-in on targets, familiarise themselves with one another, and break the tension while they still had a quiet moment on their patrol route.

The Palioxis Cloud itself was a navigational nightmare to all but the most experienced pilots. A maelstrom of writhing astral storms, asteroid fields and micro-hyperspace lanes, it had shielded Kias for decades from some of the galaxy's worst wars. No major invasion fleet could get through it unmolested, but equally that made training new pilots all the more challenging. Simulators only conveyed so much, and after a while the veterans tasked with training the influx of recruits following Nancora had pushed for a more hands-on means of showing them the ropes. So, here they were, nine trainees and three veterans. As farewell flights went, Tarvitz couldn't have asked for more entertaining company.

“Paladin Leader to Paladin Squadron,” Isenkyn’s voice crackled through the comlink, “Turn thirty degrees port and level out flight. Follow the path on your targeting computers to the next marker and then we’ll head for home. Keep formation tight.”

Several acknowledgments answered him, followed by a few curses. Clearly, a few trainees still hadn’t gotten used to the silent “Yes, sir!” used to answer certain orders in snubfighters. They rolled to follow the lead fighters, accelerating ahead and leaving Tarvitz to fall behind.

“Well, that’s it then,” Tarvitz said, looking back at Ratchet as the R3 unit’s ahead swung about to face him, “Start charting a course out of here, shortest distance out of the cloud.”

He flipped a command on the display before him as Ratchet took over, bringing the N1-starfighter around in a tight turn and pointing them away from the Odanite fighters. Tarvitz leaned back, keeping an eye on the display as the navicomputer plotted out a simple flight plan between the denser clouds. If he was lucky he might even have been able to get a few hours sleep before they arrived in orbit over Susevfi. Perhaps time to think over just how he was going to explain his lack of any contact over the past year. Or, if the morose thoughts in his head decided to crop up once more, just what he was giving up in the name of duty.

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## **Chambers of the Council of Urr**

### **Pharos**

#### **Sixteen Hours Ago**

Silence dominated the council chambers. Newly founded and still being refurbished for their true role, the installation on Pharos station lacked the decorum and grandeur of a government headquarters. Lit only by the distant light of the Palioxis Cloud shining in through the transparasteel dome overhead, there was an unnatural quality to the relatively spartan surroundings. Were it not for her typical sense of aesthetic pleasantries, he might have even thought it was an intentional choice by the Clan’s leader.

At the lone desk which had been installed in the room, Alethia Archenksova sat, reading through the report on the datapad before her. The Consul’s expression was unreadable, though minute creases on her brow and the occasional narrowing of her eyes implied some surprise. For all Tarvitz knew, however, that could have been something intended to throw him off. You never could quite tell when it came to politicians. Archenksova came to the end of the text on the datapad, her eyes hovering on the final words, before she looked up at Tarvitz.

“So, you’re leaving,” she said simply, summing up the countless forms, papers and personal notes Tarvitz had filled out in three simple words.

“For the time being at least,” he admitted, “My task here is done.”

“And if I refuse this resignation?” Archenksova asked, leaning back in her seat and reading Tarvitz with a dispassionate look. She already knew the answer, of course, but having others clarify or repeat such points seemed to be a way of establishing power over others. Or perhaps it was simply meant to make them feel guilty when they lacked that.

“Technically you can’t.” Tarvitz replied, nodding to the datapad, “I never joined, not fully. I just pledged to fight for you until your current enemy was dethroned or killed.”

During the conflict with the Iron Throne the recruitment processes Clan Odan-Urr, or rather the Lotus Resistance, had been notably flexible. In order to accommodate the mixture of Jedi, smugglers, former Imperials and the like, the official system tended to accommodate any number of reasons for a member to side with them. In Tarvitz’s case, he had sworn his sword to their service until Pravus was removed from his throne. That time had passed.

“And now he’s gone, that’s it, you have no reason to stay?” Archenksova said, her unblinking gaze boring into him, “You’ll not remain to help us rebuild train new soldiers?”

Tarvitz sighed. She was going to play on a sense of guilt after all then. “The skulking coward you fought fled with his tail between his legs. He tried to be a tyrant, then tried to be a hero once the Clans had done the heavy lifting against the Collective. Now he has an actual war on his hands, against an enemy who can fight him on even terms, he’s vacated his throne and left someone else to finish the job. That makes my oath fulfilled.”

Archenksova rolled her eyes at this, clearly unimpressed at this logic, but Tarvitz pressed on.

“I know less about the current Grandmaster, this Cantor, than I do about the others. So far as I can tell, he’s sane enough to deal with the biggest problem in front of him over causing you any further trouble. He’ll likely even try to use the war as a means to unify the Clans and fix what Pravus broke.”

“An interesting prediction.” Archenksova said, “You came up with all of this yourself?”

“No,” Tarvitz lied, “I’ve just been speaking with people who are more perceptive when it comes to Sith politics.”

“I see,” Archenksova said, leaning forward and crossing the fingers of her hands as she seemingly considered his words, “And did you consider that I might say no anyway? I can still have you arrested if need be.”

“I don’t doubt it, but i’m hoping you won’t.” Tarvitz chuckled quietly, “It wouldn’t benefit either of us to have me locked up in a cell somewhere.”

“Not if it was a warning to others,” Archenksova answered, standing up and walking about the desk, “But i’ll humour you. If you can tell me the whole truth.”

Tarvitz sighed. So, she'd seen through the secondary reasons then. He was hoping it wouldn't have come to this, but there it was. He looked up, nodding to the Palioxis Cloud boiling away far above them.

"When I joined your war, I stumbled on it by accident," Tarvitz said, "I was still serving the Jensaarai under the direct commands of my Order's leader. Since that time, I have officially been absent without leave. For all they know, I might be dead, and I need to address that, along with warning them against the Collective."

"I can see why," Archenksova nodded, "If they hit us, there's every chance they would have targeted Susevfi as well. They have enough ships to spare several to bomb your world back into the stone age."

Tarvitz inwardly winced at the Consul's choice of words. To most, it would have been an innocent - and apt - choice of words given the gravity of the threat they faced. Given how heavily Alderaan's legacy hung on him, and her own connection to the world, it felt like she was intentionally trying to twist the proverbial knife.

"That's only part of it," he said slowly, "The other is that I need answers. You know of the Jensaarai, the Collective knows, nine hells, most of the Brotherhood knows. A few months ago I fought an exile who was apparently trained by the Saarai-kaar herself. The problem is, so far as we were told, no one off-world knew of us."

He paused, considering the best way to summarise the multitude of problems and inexplicable contradictions he had stumbled on since his arrival. No matter how he put it this was going to sound strange if not outright stupid.

"Our own library is incomplete, but I initially put that down to our limited resources." Tarvitz said, "Parts of it referred to the end of our isolation after we were contacted by Skywalker's Jedi, only for us to have cut ourselves off from all outsiders again by the time I was trained. Your own records show that his Jedi Order was destroyed, years before we ever met with him. Worlds my parents spoke of no longer exist on star charts, historical figures we list were officially never born, even wars I fought in have been wiped from all records."

"I wouldn't have taken you for a conspiracy theorist," Archenksova said, folding her arms, "No archive is perfect. Even if you have a complete record, bias, contempt or internal politics alter them all. Some things can be put down to just honest mistakes."

"No arguments there," Tarvitz sighed, "And if it were simply a few mistakes, even major ones, I'd ignore it. But there's more to this than errors. I've visited places which people write off as myths, fought foes in wars people deem as campfire tales or legends. It's as if people are actively trying to deny it was as if whole decades of history had been written out of existence and then quickly replaced with poor copies to cover the gaps."

“And what happens if you get your answers?” Archenksova asked, raising an eyebrow at the suggestion. She clearly didn’t believe the story herself, but she was being polite enough to humour him.

“I suppose that depends on what those answers are, and just who says them.” he nodded, “All I know is that it’s something which can’t be ignored, and that interrogating the Saarai-kaar would be the best start. I’ll see how far that gets me.”

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### **The N1-Starfighter *Spitfire***

#### **Palioxis Cloud**

#### **Kiast System**

Archenksova had eventually relented. There had been some reluctance to do so, but either she believed that he needed to find this out for herself, or thought that holding him would be too much trouble. He had resigned from his position, packed the few items he still carried into the *Spitfire*’s minuscule cargo compartment, and joined Paladin Squadron on its patrol between Kiast and the outlying stations.

There had been no goodbyes as he visited the Kiast system one final time to collect his affects, no proper ones, at any rate. Corvus had been absent for some time, Len was busy elsewhere, and both Edgar and Aura were busy with their own matters. The Clan was recovering and the last thing they needed was another distraction as they rebuilt their numbers. When faced with that lack of closure, the chatter of the greener pilots had been a welcome distraction.

Tarvitz looked down, watching the green triangles of the allies squadron veering away from his own flight plan. He smiled briefly, as their signals began to break up, distorting their voices and garbling their words. Whatever else happened, they were in a better place to handle future invasions, and any foe would have to go through hell and high water to inflict New Tython’s fate on Kiast. Then, behind him, Ratchet gave a series of confused whistles. Tarvitz read the translation on his display and then frowned.

Reaching for the controls he flicked through several sensor display options, narrowing it down through the cloud’s disturbance. He canceled them out one after the other, switching off energy detection, thermal distortions, and chemical masses, until he was looking at a display of gravity and magnetic anomalies.

“You’re right,” Tarvitz said quietly, tapping the display several times with a gloved hand, “That does seem odd.”

Almost a dozen ghost images were lit up beneath him, too many to account for simple sensor echoes, and not dense enough to be stray asteroids. Even counting the Palioxis’ habit of playing havoc with sensors, this didn’t seem right.

"*Spitfire* to Paladin Leader," Tarvitz said, "I've got something strange registering about eight kilometers beneath us. Search for metal deposits and confirm."

Commander Isenkyn's answer was little more than a string of garbled words, awash with static. Yet, his squadron abruptly banked about, each of the green triangles turning before heading back toward Tarvitz's location.

"Alright then Ratchet," he said, "Keep an eye out on those things, I'm going to get close enough for us to have a clear word with the Paladins."

The *Spitfire*'s directional thrusters released bursts of ionized flame as he flipped the ship, before accelerating toward the Paladins at cruising speed. The second that he did, a sense of absolute dread shook him, resonating through the Force. Ratchet screamed and he turned the fighter to its side, barely dodging the set of fat red energy bolts which burned their way up through the clouds. Two of the objects were moving now, quickly, as their slow drift in his wake rose to match his own speed.

Tarvitz swore loudly as he caught sight of a squat six-winged shape through an opening in the clouds, powering up toward him and firing again with a set of underslung cannons. He turned again, allowing the blasts to sail just about his port engine nacelle, before thumbing his guns online.

"Hostiles! Hostiles! Hostiles!" he warned through the open com-link, as the first of the ARC-170s rose into view, its pilot blazing away as he closed the distance. The other objects were moving now, racing toward the Odanite X-Wings, dividing up as they moved to engage the first of the squadron. One of the green triangles winked out of existence as it was caught in an opening burst of laser fire, while another flashed as it was struck several times.

For the moment the Paladins were on their own. Tarvitz had his own problems to deal with. He jinked several times, dancing about the incoming fire to every warning whispered by the Force and his own experience, before slamming his thumb down on the joystick's firing stud. A single ion missile tore free of the launcher, and crashed into the lead enemy fighter, the energized detonation releasing a flash of blue into the endless clouds of gold and red. The fighter stalled as its reactor shorted out, sailing past the *Spitfire* with its crew now trapped inside. One down.

The second ARC-170, having managed to just escape the fate of its companion ship, continued to blaze away with its guns. Brief pulses of energy appeared about the *Spitfire* as its shields resisted several glancing hits, robbing them of their strength with every attack. Tarvitz responded in kind, blasting away with a stream of green energy bolts. They hammered into the enemy fighter's heavy shielding, slamming again and again into the space directly in front of the pilot's canopy.

Cutting power to his own engines, Tarvitz drifted under the fighter as it hurtled past, its pilot blinded or too busy reinforcing his forward shields to fully realise just what he was doing. He fired again, turning in time with the enemy ship as it missed him. He was rewarded with a

bright explosion as several bolts ate through the heavy armour and hit something vital, breaking the ARC-170 apart in a burning fireball. Two down. Time to get involved.

Reactivating his engines, he raced toward where Paladin Squadron was engaged with the force of enemy fighters. They had been caught off-guard but each had clearly been taught well, and were holding their own against the opposing squadron. It was easy to pick out just who was who amid the mess of combat. Opposed to the uniformed X-Wings of the Odanite fighters, the enemy force was a mess of Die-Wings, Z-95s, and V-19 Torrents. Each either an ugly combined together from the remnants of destroyed ships, or vessels outdated by the time of the Clone Wars.

"About time you could join us," Isenkyn said as Tarvitz closed in, locking onto one of the nearest Z-95 and tailing the ship, "Any idea who this lot are?"

"None. They weren't good enough to introduce themselves before they opened fire," Tarvitz said, grinning despite their situation. "I've disabled one of their ships behind us, perhaps we can ask them once this is over."

Isenkyn snorted with laughter, his response distorted as Tarvitz fired away at his target, and was rewarded with a bright red burst of flame from the Z-95. It jerked, shaking as its shields failed almost immediately and one wing was sheared away by the bright energy bolts. The cannon on the opposing wing exploded under a series of precision shots. Three down, this one alive for later.

The occasional yell of triumph or others keeping score like he was came through the channel, as enthusiasm overwhelmed discipline. The pilots were young, but certainly skilled, as they were quickly proving. One of the Torrents dived past him, flames billowing from its underside as two X-Wings chased down after it. The bright flash of an explosion lit up the clouds a second later. Another joined it a second later, the outdated fighters falling one after the next as the battle quickly began to turn against them. It was the way most battles went against pirates - at least that's what he assumed they were - when they were sent to fight a properly trained military unit. Yet the strange thing was that they weren't breaking.

Tarvitz looked as the fighters continued to harry the squadron, trying to engage them one at a time, attempting to focus their efforts on bringing down a single Paladin at a time. Either they were suicidal or they knew something he didn't. Tarvitz's unspoken question was answered a second later, as his Ratchet bleeped loudly. More objects were approaching at combat speed, almost the same number of them as before, each emerging out from the larger body somewhere below them.

"*Spitfire* to all units," he warned, pulling back on the flight stick as he turned toward the new threats, "Inbound enemy ships. It looks like we have a larger carrier supporting them."

"Acknowledged," someone answered, "Paladin Three here, Preybirds and Eyeballs sighted coming in from mark 11-2-8."

Old Imperial models then. The Odanites had blunted the ambush, and now they were sending in their remains to try and fix that mistake. As Tarvitz leveled off to face them, heavy calibre cannon fire burned through the clouds, each firing in a dispersed formation just wide of their own squadrons. Two surprised screams cut through his headset as a pair of X-Wings were caught in the attack as they circled about to face the incoming ships, both quickly coming apart under the new assault.

"The hell is-" he heard one pilot say, before gasping as the source of the incoming fire became clear. Rising out from the crimson-gold particles like a whale breaching the surface, the bulbous nose of a capital ship breached through the clouds. It was hundreds of meters in length, a grey slab of armored durasteel ramps, cannons and launch bays. At one point in its life it had been a Neublom-B frigate, but it had been quite clearly modified. Layers of launch platforms and flight support decks were strung beneath its cylindrical spine, each active with scurrying support crews and pilots moving to board their fighters. The ship's name blinked into its existence as Ratchet decoded its IFF - *The Hammer of Vauzem*.

Gritting his teeth, Tarvitz diverted his attention toward the first of the TIE Fighters. Loosing several missiles into the swarm and watching with some satisfaction as it punched a hole in the opposing squadron's formation. Most veered off course, but several collided in a storm of fragmenting metal. The remainder pulled back, buying them a few precious seconds, as the more durable Preybirds moved to punch through.

"We've more fighters inbound after this lot," Tarvitz said, "Even if we finish the next wave they'll overrun us with sheer numbers."

"I can see that, dammit," Isenkyn answered, his laughing confidence now replaced with focus at their increasingly dire chances of survival, "These aren't pirates, that's for sure. They're not taking salvage or prisoners, and they're not going to just let us run."

Tarvitz was about to ask just what he meant, when he spotted the bulbous extension toward the aft of the ship's spine. Despite its extensive modifications, certain sections were still recognisable, and Tarvitz would have bet every credit to his name that part was a gravity well projector.

"Plans?" he asked.

"What do you think?" snapped Isenkyn, "Turn tail and run like hell. Perhaps we can outrun their ships in the cloud."

As plans went it was the best of a lot of bad ones. Perhaps they could outrun them, perhaps the smaller ships could escape into a storm where the larger *Hammer* couldn't follow, but they were going to lose a lot of people even if that succeeded. Another X-Wing disappeared from his display even as he thought this, a static ridden scream cutting through the channel before it ended abruptly. That marked five of them dead already, just under half of the squadron.



Some small part of Tarvitz, the voice of pragmatism which had kept him alive for so many years, was telling him to run. He had done enough, he had kept them alive before they could be ambushed, and downed his fair share of units. He had resigned, this wasn't his fight, and without him there was no one else to bring word of the Collective to the Jensaarai. Or to pursue his questions. He almost listened to it, just for a moment, until his better senses took hold.

"Let me try something first," Tarvitz said, turning into the incoming squadron, "All fighters, lock onto my signal and prepare to fire your torpedoes. As many as you can get off at that time."

"Tarvitz, are you insane?" Isenkyn asked with rage and astonishment, "For all that- You want us to shoot at you!?" Behind him, Ratchet screamed something in agreement with his sentiments.

"Only when I give the word," Tarvitz said, diverting power into the *Spitfire's* engines and racing into the incoming enemy swarm, "If I'm alive to give it."

He didn't wait to hear the Commander's objections. Head-on engagements were almost always a suicidal affair, and any pilot from any academy was always taught to avoid them. The chances were that, even if you downed the opposing ship, its wreckage would destroy your own in the process. It was common sense, and he just hoped that the incoming enemy pilots had enough of it to act accordingly.

The *Spitfire* accelerated to full speed, shunting Tarvitz back in his seat and hurtling through space toward the Preybirds like a bolt from a pistol. Shots rained about him, most of them from the enemy fighters as they fought to get a clear lock amid the Palioxis Cloud's interference. A few struck, flashing against his shields, dropping them lower and lower as he closed the distance. He was close enough to see them now, close enough to hit them without the assistance of a targeting computer, and he pulled both triggers. The N1-Starfighter screamed as it released the remainder of its missile payload and a continual stream of energy bolts. The enemy squadron scattered, veering away as they broke from their tight formation. The missiles exploded, catching only a few of the enemy fighters in the shockwave, but leaving a gap open for the *Spitfire* to punch clean through.

"All Paladins, fire now!"

Warning lights blinked on Tarvitz's display as the fighter registered seven target locks, and twice as many Proton torpedo launches. He flew away, at all possible speed, with the torpedoes following in his wake; racing through the opening he had created. Following him, as he flew directly at *The Hammer of Vauzem*. The enemy frigate had been following its fighter screen with all speed, perhaps its captain hoped to more readily support his fighters by closing the distance. Perhaps its crew had never anticipated that someone would be insane enough to risk a direct attack through inbound fighters, and live to tell the tale. Whatever the reason might have been, they had just given the Odanites a chance to fly away from this alive.

Tarvitz snarled as cannon emplacements criss-crossed his path, lighting up the cloud ahead with streamers of energy bolts. He weaved and dived, putting the ornate fighter into a series of complex spins, tight turns, and abrupt dips to keep the enemy gunners from locking on. He couldn't afford to turn, to engage in complex evasive patterns to throw off their aim. While Nabooian ships had been built for speed, there was no outrunning a missile once it had locked on. With every passing glimpse at the sensor array, he could see the torpedoes closing in. Six kilometers. Five. Four. Ratchet was screaming out a mixture of curses, warnings, and questions, but he didn't have time to reach their translations. With every passing heartbeat, they were gaining on him. Swiftiness was his only ally, leaving him to brave the firestorm of anti-fighter defenses and hope that surprise and speed would keep him alive long enough to carry out his intended goal.

He rolled to starboard, speeding directly for the blunted nose of the *Hammer*, and then flying close enough to skim its metallic surface. The *Spitfire* was too close to effectively target with coordinated fire, forcing each turret to act on its gunner's initiative, each trying to individually pick him off. Even without coordination or guidance, they might have stood a chance of downing him were it not for the ship's modifications. The flight platforms blocked the view of the rear guns, while the bolted-on gravity well projector and greater extensions stood in the way of many turrets' firing solutions. That left it open for a single attack run.

Skimming the main body of the ship, Tarvitz leveled out his flight as he crossed its spine, before diving alongside the ship's oversized flight decks. Pilots were desperately attempting to take off now, and he could see a few more modern ships - A-Wings among them - in the process of lifting away. He didn't fire. Instead, he reached out with the Force, and picked out the torpedoes which were closing to within a kilometer of him. His brow creased with the strain as he grabbed hold of one and then the other, using telekinesis to divert their flight directly into the grounded squadrons.

The first of them exploded between the plating, with enough force to punch clean through and strike the crews underneath. The other exploded between a pair of TIE Bombers, striking the munitions they were being loaded with. One detonation after another rocked the ship, as a chain of explosions tore through the upper platform, blasting through the awaiting squadrons. Tarvitz directed another three torpedoes into them for good measure, each one aimed toward a separate group of units, and each one claiming munitions, ships, and men with their blasts. The last of them missed the deck entirely, punching through into the rear section of the frigate. It blasted inward, disabling the complex mechanisms of the forcefield projector which separated the flight decks from open space. Men died as they were dragged into the vacuum, and multiple ships collided as they were pulled free from their housings, before the emergency generators blinked into life.

Closing on his true target, Tarvitz didn't spare the carnage a second glance. He couldn't. The gravity well projector was rising up before him, rising from the *Hammer's* superstructure like a metallic tumorous growth. He closed his eyes and shunted every last shred of willpower he had into the Force. One after another, the torpedoes tracking him veered away, slamming into the projector over and over again. Fire mushroomed from the machine as the

explosions rocked it, parting its bulbous metallic shell with enough force to almost rip it free from the frigate.

“*Spitfire* to all surviving units,” Tarvitz managed through labored breathing, “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Several voices answered him. He couldn’t tell how many or even if Isenkyn was among them, but at least some had survived. He slumped back in his seat as the *Spitfire* pulled away from the stricken frigate, and Ratchet’s screams became a series of bleeps confirming a hyperspace jump. The droid had picked out the closest destination it had in its banks - Kias. Even as the target locks of several returning Preybirds sounded off inside the cockpit, Tarvitz couldn’t help but laugh slightly. The ship’s engine whined and clouds of Palioxis disappeared, replaced by the blue tunnels of hyperspace as the *Spitfire* made the first of its micro-jumps back home. Whether it was the will of the Force or just poor luck, it seemed the Brotherhood wasn’t done with him yet. Something told him that what they had fought here, what had guarded the gates of Kias, was merely part of a greater threat back home. He couldn’t walk away now, not while they were threatened by something else.

“One last time then,” Tarvitz sighed to himself, “One last enemy, one last battle in the name of Clan Odan-Urr.”

He wondered how many more times he would need to say those words to himself in the months to come.