

23

twinkle twinkle little stars

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Fighting in and around a bone of contention, say a planet, requires real time strategy. All those involved in the action are zipping about way below the speed of light ( $c$ ) and the only time you lose sight of someone is when they have to flee to avoid getting hit—then pick them up again after they tear-ass back into the fray.

Trying to fight in deep space is something altogether different. At speeds ranging from  $0.5c$  to beyond  $2,400c$  such encounters are rare, and more akin to a deep sea submarine duel where both of you are doubly deaf and blind. In these battles you have to scoot-n-snoop, that is stop and wait to see if you can maybe spot the other guy's displacement signature as they rip past while you're floating along all quiet like or, if they're lucky enough, stopping short of your position at just the right time which can give them the high ground *if* they are smart enough to know how not to use it. This is where relativity rears its ugly head in the worse possible way.

It's more like an art than a science, where guesstimate and SWAG is all that you have to realistically work with until you get a clear fix on them. At one AU the information you collect is already 8.33 minutes in the past, and at practical distances exceeding maybe seven or eight AU the idea of sitting for an hour or two can be daunting, if not downright frightening.

Yet, this is a form of combat that rewards those who have patience, tenacity and the skills to observe; however, the Annex is now in possession of an antenna array that gives them an unreasonable advantage. A tool they cannot take full advantage of just yet.

Empty space is full of stuff—it's anything but empty. On the quantum level it's a seething cauldron of nuttiness and duality slight of

hand. Where electro-magnetism reigns supreme above it and gravity rules below at the Planck level—where the structure of space itself is surprisingly Einsteinian smooth.

Again, ol' Albert got it right but for the wrong reasons.

In KISS our vacua-energy bubble of space consists of an ever expanding clot of tightly integrated string particles. There is such a glut of these wiggling loops and coils that if they suddenly attained mass our universe, now believed to be a sphere a little over fifty-five billion light-years across, give or take, would become neutron star dense in a blink of an eye. In spite of all that there's a lot of room for movement in that-there stuff. Just as particle pairs pop in and out of existence at the quantum level, worm-holes do likewise down in the Planck, and as these pairs are stripped apart by black holes, or the affects of spatial displacement for that matter, many times a particle or two may find their way racing down a string-lined tube. Ripples and waves in gravity are relative and take time to get places, but these rogue particles get to you in less than a jiffy and with the right tools would allow you to see some things in real time as they say.

Bathed by blue light in the CIC of SA36, Command Chief, Jerald Stark, the de facto captain of the Iron Maiden, quietly contemplates the clock as his ship slowly rotates in a silent-running ballet against three cruisers from the Co-op. With all eyes glued on him he once again reviews the events that led up to this moment.

It was clearly a set up.

A few hours ago the AMS Gonzalez, a slow short-haul roll-off, was stopped, and ironically so, by the SS Gonzalez, a light-cruiser that had been lying in wait and obviously so. According to protocol a surprise inspection by the Co-op requires them to stand by and wait for a ship and representatives from the Pleiades to be present before boarding; however, the inspectors for today were Security Services personnel and protocol was not to be adhered to this day.

The Dashi, SA23, blew in and had a boarding party on the freighter before the SS inspectors found what they came looking for.

It was all over a receiver, the thing that defines a gun by law, a ten ton clapped-out piece of junk from a ninety year old plasma canon that had been stripped down for scrap. It was on the approved manifest, approved by the Hyades to come through for recycling, but the SS was out to start some shit and thought it better to impound the ship for carrying contraband and take the crew into custody for smuggling.

From the video feed transmitted by Dashi's boarding party the situation quickly developed into a Mexican Standoff that was cut short

by Security Services who shot first. The fire fight itself was over in a few seconds with everybody getting hit except for two SA troopers who snuck around and mowed the surviving SS down from behind.

When the Dashi's Command Chief ordered a hammer shot across the bow as a warning to the SS Gonzalez it was they that fired one into the Dashi for real. It was a critical hit in her port side, well placed at the root of the flight bay—that was immediately answered to by the Dashi with a full broadside from six plasma cannons blowing the light-cruiser apart.

It's strange to watch a ship the size of the Gonzalez torn to shreds the way it was. One would expect fantastical explosions, with balls of flame and such, but this is never the case in the vacuum of space. As holes are punched through the cruiser the explosions act more like expanding gaseous sprays that glow eerily blue and white from heat close to the source. The debris from the strike scatters like crazy, but that is the full extent of "spectacular" in any space fight. That is, unless you pop a nuke—which is not as exciting as it would be planet-side, but it still ain't dull by any stretch of the imagination.

As the freighter high-tails it for the Pleiades, at its top speed of 43c, the Iron Maiden slithers in to cover the Dashi as it charges up for a double back-flip towards Electra but, before SA23 could jump, three heavy cruisers blow into the area and spoiling for a fight.

The Dashi immediately dumped the charge for its jump and raced off at best speed to follow the freighter as the Iron Maiden sat there in the dark—waiting for someone to make a move.

By taking the time to look at the residual gravity wake the three cruisers saved their asses for the now because they realized that a second battle platform was already there, but where? Eager for an easy kill they stopped too close and were past the initial gravity wave signature of the Maiden. They can only narrow its position down to within a thousand kilometer wide zone, and this makes it impossible to shoot at without something else to go on.

So, after giving the freighter and the Dashi a twenty minute head start, Chief Stark decides to make a splash...

The Iron Maiden kicks in it's MDDSH engines and streaks off towards the Pleiades by following the same path as the freighter. After about a minute at 1,800c she starts to cork-screw around the freighter's track at an increasing speed. After about three ever widening loops the Maiden switches into creating a zig-zag pattern around, through and then outside the track.

The Maiden, at a quarter AU out, then shoots along parallel to the track for about a half a minute and suddenly stops. The ship then

draws a box, and at each corner she dumps a flight of Thunderbolts overboard. Intersecting the point of origin she then slips back through her approach track at a tenth of light speed and stops after a few seconds. She then immediately backs up through that same track and stops short of the gravity box she drew.

Turning hard-about the Maiden kicks in her main engines, but instead of an oxygenated burn, she dumps tens of thousands of tons of hydrogen fuel through the engines that was heated up to about 23k. Blowing the gas out from high pressure drops its temperature dramatically, but it will still put out enough of a heat signature, however slight, that liquid helium cooled thermal sensors may be able to pick up on it. The gas should dissipate quickly enough so that, when the Co-op does show up, determining a direction of travel or marking a vector will be next to impossible after a few minutes.

The haze from the cloud will still be there for quite awhile.

Approaching their box, but now drifting outside the track, the CIC staff notices on their new-fangled WormTrac array that one cruiser drops out of their run about a tenth of an AU short from their position. Five minutes later another cruiser slithered up at 30c and exits his dash a whole AU parallel with the Maiden, and ten minutes later the third cruiser streaks by along the freighters track at 1,200c and screeches to a stop five AU past their position.

Chief Stark is not watching any of this. Jerry is working this thing without using the WormTrac array and had to wait to see the gravitational burst and wake from the first cruiser on the old GravTrac.

To get an in-depth feel for the dynamics of these kinds of encounters the GravTrac display is a thirty-meter wide hologram that is projected overhead. Everything relative takes time and Jerry had to wait nine more minutes to see the second cruiser drop off.

Six minutes later Jerry watches the third cruiser rip past.

That last one was an obvious lure and, much to the chagrin of the Co-op, Chief Stark didn't snap at it. He learned from the best, and the best beat into him three things: patience-patience-patience.

Jerry looks over at Scott Rutledge and asks, "The third cruiser stopped about four AU or so, right?"

Scott is surprised, "Want me to tell you?"

Jerry nods so Scott gives it up, "Five."

"That gives us a little over forty minutes before we see him."

Mentally working the angles, Jerry steps out onto the floor and walks slowly through the hologram showing the tracks of the

gravitational waves that emanated from the drop off points and the pathways leading up to them. From under the drop off point of the first cruiser he walks to the Maiden's position and looks back as if he full well knows what they're doing.

Turning to look at the position of the second cruiser Jerry quietly says to himself, "Okay...let's twinkle twinkle little stars."

Without looking back he says to Scott, "Ramirez was right."

Scott, who is now standing by asks, "How so?"

"I'd give my right nut and twenty years off the top of my life just to trade off half of our hydrogen and oxygen fuel, shit we don't really use, for tanks of cryogenic helium about now." Jerry hangs his head, "That is, if we wanted to maneuver for a shot, or get the fuck out. Which the later is more my objective about now."

Scott mentally scratches his brain, "You'd take the shot if you had it, right?"

Jerry looks up and points at the first cruiser, "It all depends on this clown. There is a secondary wave behind the heavy knuckle he laid down. He's very aggressive and if he comes in too fast, and hits that frosty cloud of  $H^2$ , I'm gonna bust him in the nose for sure. As for the others, well that depends if I have a solution or not, but I'd rather not."

"We are at war now."

"Ya, Scott, we're in a state of war, but it's better for us to find out what they've been learning to do over the last decade and let them live to continue doing just that. A draw here would put us in a much better position than offing one or two of these fuckers. They keep trying to coordinate amongst themselves and it puts them at a disadvantage. If they ever figure that out then we'll be on a more level playing field, and that would suck."

Jerry looks over at a tech, "What's the external temp?"

A tech looks up from a console, "I was about to tell ya, Chief, it's hitting three-point-seven-five."

"Crap, we need to get it back under three-five k. I want you to start transferring heat to internal air and shut down all non critical systems. We're gonna have'ta cook on this one, people."

Normally the Maiden's external temperature is maintained to closely match ambient space which is normally 3 Kelvin in most places. So cold that hydrogen freezes. If the ship has to radiate heat this is accomplished through the flight decks. When the Maiden dropped off to cover the Dashi she buttoned up by closing the drop bays and

covering all windows to the outside including the dome on the underside of the ship. The flight deck is instantly chilled and heat is now trapped inside to reduce any thermal signature to the enemy's He-chilled sensors. The problem is that when the heat sinks top off the ambient air gets it.

Jerry then asks another tech, "We have two markers, but do we have any from Little Horn flight?"

The tech answers, "Negative, Chief. They're lookin'."

Jerry then calls out for all of CIC to hear, "Okay, everybody listen up! Sergeants Nakayama and Zabel, here are your standing orders. Keep our aft towards the center of the cloud. Preset the hammers for a full particle burn. If target number one so much as dingles that cloud you will take the shot. Confer with me before you do. After the burn you will immediately switch the hammers over for a plasma pulse and fire one salvo at will. Shotgun pattern in full choke. Do you copy?"

After they acknowledge Jerry then calls out, "If we fire I want Tape Worm flight to zip over there and give us a damage assessment. If their aft section is still whole I want them to punch a couple of centipedes into the engines. I don't want anything salvageable. Give them the stand by order."

Jerry then raises his voice a might, "As for target number two, I need to triangulate, people! Laser up to Gargoyle flight and get their eyes on this as well."

The Chief then looks out towards target number three and calls out, "How many valkyries we have ready to launch against both these targets?"

A tech calls out, "Twelve missiles ready to go, Chief."

Jerry thinks for a few seconds, "Make it thirty. We may have to make it look sloppy if we shoot at three."

After a moment of silence Scott pipes up, "If you use the boom you could get a good triangulation, can't ya?"

Jerry looks at Scott and points towards the first target, "This guys is too close and coming in hard. Deploying the boom takes time, and getting it back in takes way too much time if he starts to climb up our ass. I don't wanna cut a boom loose in a pinch, and I don't want to hear about it if I do."

Jerry then looks out over CIC, "By a show of hands, how many C.I.C. noobs do we have on rotation that don't understand what we're doin' here?"

Seven, including Zach Nelson, raise their hands so Jerry motions for them to, "Come on down!"

He then points to Scott, "You stay here too, motherfucker. It's time for you to git edjimicated."

The seven step out from the shadows and stop at the edge of the hologram, only to see Jerry motion for them to come in, "Gather round, people. You can't see from there."

Jerry arches his back and stretches as the seven step up, "In the last war there was two hundred and twenty-one deep space engagements. Out of those only seventeen ships were destroyed, and all of them were from the Co-op. Of those, eight were victims of Marshal Ramirez, and I watched her do 'em all. Back before that shit started Ramirez was saying, and quite loudly, that there was a huge gap in our understanding of how to conduct deep space engagements. She just made Senior Chief, a Romeo-Nine, and her Field Marshal told her to bone up on it and get back to him when she had something for them to look at."

Jerry looks over the seven with a perplexed look on his face, "And you know what she did? She studied submarine warfare of all things. Both World Wars and all the peacetime encounters between the United States and the old Soviet Union. Ya know, ya gotta love the U.S. Navy 'cause they keep thorough records. She then read every historical account she could get her hands on." Jerry then smiles, "She even read fictional stories, novels in fact, and those, she said, gave her incredible insight. Written by a Tom...somebody, I don't remember. Anyway, she devises a tactical manual showing us how to do it. Her methods were stupid-simple and direct, and you want to know what happened?"

After a few seconds he laughs, "Nothing."

Jerry throws his hands out, "Nobody was listening! Nobody gave a shit! Nobody in their wildest imagination ever thought we'd be fighting the Co-op. Ya, we made contingency plans for it but nobody took it seriously until they did a Peel Harbor on us."

"So, here we are sitting all stupid and shit out at Forty-Four Tau when the Co-op blows into orbit with five cruisers and tell us to G.T.F.O. Now, we were in our jurisdiction, but the Co-op has always thought different about that and decided to give us a full salvo. Five plasma bursts hit the Marauder solid on the Starboard and killed over two-hundred including the Field Marshal. The ship was a mess and we were bleeding out, but they totally missed the engines and the aft section, so the Chief had the MDDSH kicked on to mitigate air loss and called Ramirez up—all because I made him read her manual."

Jerry raises his hand, "Question, what do you get when you combine plasma, combustibles and atmosphere? Anybody?"

Zach blinks his eyes, "Fire?"

Jerry points to him, "Ding-ding-ding! Whoosh, baby! Instant conflagration! Anyway, the Co-op was demanding that we drop the field for boarding or they were going to finish the job, and the Chief was back-peddling trying to buy time to plug the holes when Ramirez waltzes in."

Jerry laughs, "For your edification, Ramirez swings the biggest balls I know 'cause, without saying a word, she walks onto the bridge, yanks the pilot out of his seat, jumps in, and on manual controls we take off at about 200c! She starts turning here and there all crazy like—all the while the bubble surrounding the ship is filling up with smoke, and secondary explosions were blowin' holes out the Starboard bay, which was loud as fuck, and somehow though all this shit she hears the Chief shout at her to drop the field. In an instant the cloud and debris around us disperse and the fires are instantly—*poof*—gone! The fires were out but the ship was a fuckin' wreck."

He shakes his head, "As she predicted, they show up around thirty minutes later and we take off again! Marshal Ramirez earned her salt that day by showing us how to do what we are doing now. She got so good that six years later she nailed two kills in one sortie, and went back out and got a third inside twenty-four hours. One time she even got them to shoot at one of their own, which she refuses to take credit for, but after three days on the run everything was total confusion. Well, for the seven of them—not for the one of us."

Jerry has already stepped over to the location of the second target, points up and runs his finger along the lines floating over his head, "So, here we now have three markers on this guy. These are simply points where the target occludes or perturbs light from a background object they pass by—from our point of view. This tells us the direction they're going, but we don't know where along these lines they are. We have to wait and get a marker from another source to set up a firing solution and we're using the fighters for that. I'd rather spool out the boom array but the guy behind us is charging in and I don't want to take the chance of having to cut it loose."

Jerry shrugs, "Then there are thermal signatures, light and radio emissions that could come into play if someone gets careless. Academically, like I said, it's real stupid-simple, but doing it for real is a mental skull-fuck. Questions?"

One private raises her hand and Jerry picks on her, "With all this, what does the WormTrac give us?"



Jerry thought that would be obvious, but apparently it's not, "Give us a heads up? Look, if we were to use it for real we'd scoot up closer and triangulate faster for a shot. In simulations we were able to consistently pick off anywhere from two or three of their cruisers per engagement. Yes."

Jerry points to Zach, and Zach asks, "What would happen if the Co-op got it, or came up with their own version of it?"

"Things would get real weird real fast, but the sims tell us that the chasee still holds the advantage. Also, our grav-arrays and optical imaging are two-fold better than theirs, and we have new systems coming on-line that will improve on that, but, argumentatively, we won't know for sure until we're faced with that eventuality."

It was just then a tech calls out, "Chief, we have a fix from Gargoyle flight for target two. On display."

Looking up, Jerry sees a forth line drawn in from where the fighters were, and a red line now appears emanating from the second targets drop off point showing the direction of the cruiser and cross hairs sliding along it indicating the targets projected current position and trailing position on the clock. Taking into account the drift of the maiden from their own drop off point, the motion of the fighters relative from where they were deployed, and the markers themselves makes for a very complex calculation indeed. A solution that was puked out inside a second by the CIC tactical computer.

After a moment of deep thought, Jerry calls out, "Okay, we'll go with this, but I want a confirmation before I'm comfortable with it. Let's keep our eyes peeled people."

Noticing that the noobs have stepped out of the hologram, Jerry motions for them to come back, "Where ya goin'? Jeez! Get back here. You need to finish this thing."

As they step in Jerry asks the techs behind him, "How much time till we see target three?"

One replies, "Twenty-seven minutes, chief."

Jerry nods and asks, "Okay, let's set up a contingency. Corporal Long, I want the overhead loaded to a file and have it constantly updated until we transmit. I'll have an audio clip in the queue for you to attach in just a minute."

Through the tacnet, Jerry pulls up a simple audio device that hangs translucent in his vision. All he has to do is to think or say *record* and it will record whatever he tells it to. He quietly steps to the far end of the hologram, away from everybody, and looks back over all the people in the CIC.

War is not what anybody *really* wants, but it was inevitable. One by one he glances at the older faces of veterans working the CIC who have fought and know what horrors lay before them. He then drinks in the faces of the seven youngsters, those who will be fighting this time around, and fears for their future. Like the last one, this war is not going to be quick or easy, and he wonders how many of them will make it through the duration.

*Ask and ye shall receive* they say, and the tacnet gave Jerry what he didn't want to know. The thought came to mind so the net immediately provided the information and rudely so. Statistically, as compared to the last war, 2.19 of the seven will die over the next fourteen years, but which ones? In his mind Jerry picks two of them at random, and a leg off a third, and the creepiness of this thought he finds troubling.

"Voice record on." Says Jerry as he turns away from that image, "This is Command Chief, Jerald Stark of the S.A. Three-Six. From the display you can see we are currently in a hostile engagement near Upsilon-Taurus with three Security Services cruisers, and were forced to fire on target one. We have a clear solution on target two and are requesting authorization to launch a strike on that cruiser which is about one-point-zero-eight A.U. away from our present position. You have the count down. If we do not hear from you by the thirty second mark we will disengage and echo-three back to the Carrie Nation. Chief Stark, out."

Jerry turns and walks back through the hologram for a private chat with a Corporal Long, "Corporal, the audio is in the queue."

"Got it, Chief."

"Attach it to the display file. The second we fire on target one I want you to make sure that the count down to target two is running. Once I give the order you will speed-dial it to G.O.P. Command and Control. Got that, Long?"

"Copy-copy, Chief!"

Jerry nods with approval, and as he turns to join the young bucks in the hologram, Scott asks, "Jerry, how we doing on this?"

Looking into Scott's eyes, Jerry smiles, "You really don't like doing this, do ya?"

"You have to ask that? Fuck, no, I hate this shit! I'd rather go punch-drunk crazy in some slug-fest over a Homer-infested piece of turf any day instead of this waitin' around and sneekin' around shit."

"You want to know something?"

"What?"

Jerry leans in, "So would I."

Zach is startled as Jerry steps up behind him, "Okay, corporal, what are you thinking about?"

Zach turns around, "Thinking about, Chief?"

"Ya, what are you thinking about? We got time to kill, so?"

Zach looks around and shrugs, "I was thinking about how cool your job is. I mean, this is some scary shit, but you are so damned cool about it. If you don't mind me saying—you make Picard look like a pussy."

"Well, Picard ain't a pussy, but thanks."

"You a fan?"

"Are you going to out me? I'd rather you not. I have a reputation to keep."

"Chief, you are all kinds of whoop-ass style points." Zach gestures to the hologram, "Knowing what I know now, if it were anybody else running this show I'd be pissing myself."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but we're in a pretty good position here. Target one is coming in behind the H<sup>2</sup> cloud so he really can't get a fix on us at all. Target three will not be able to get a clear solution on us at that distance and angle, so we can focus on target two. And, as for target two, from his vantage point we lucked out because we've been running along a deep space corridor that we will enjoy for only another twelve minutes. At that time we'll be cutting it close to the star Botein and this gives me a choice. From there we'll have eight minutes to either bug out, or we can blow the rest of the H<sup>2</sup> in our tanks and put out a big plume behind us and mess up everything for five arc seconds from his point of view. And, as I see it, I have maybe five minutes to decide on what to do."

"On a hydrogen dump which direction would you take us?"

"Towards him, of course! Look, he would not be able to see us against the cloud because with this ship we'll be too cold, and he would not expect it because it's just not our style. But, for *my* edification, what would you do, Nelson?"

Zach replies with no hesitation, "I would wait. We don't know where target one is so I'd wait to see if he sticks his head out. If not, then I'd take the shot at target two and get outta Dodge."

Jerry stares at Zach with a deadpan look, trying to make him flinch, and Zach brazenly stares back. The kid got it right. Usually it takes a few tries in the simulators for someone to comprehend this stuff, but he has a complete grasp of the situation and this is rare.

Zach did make corporal right out of boot and this proves to Jerry that they chose correctly putting him on the path to becoming an XO.

Jerry smirks, "You're right. I'm impressed."

"Don't be, it was a trick question." Jerry blinks, so Zach elaborates, "Chief, if you were going to blow the tanks you would have done so only to buy time to get a fix on two, but you have that solution so why bother? Wait for one to show up."

"Like I said, I'm impressed."

Just then Sergeant Zabel calls out, "Chief, we have a firing solution on target one."

Jerry turns to him, "Talk to me."

"Thermal signature, up on display, bearing one-eight-seven, ascension zero-zero-two. Initiating particle burn."

Raising his hand, Jerry looks up, "Hold on a sec."

He sees the cross hairs of target one sliding through the  $H^2$  cloud, heading towards them, and when they are about ten seconds from exiting the cloud he points to Nakayama and orders, "Fire."

On a ship this size nobody can feel or hear the hammers fire in particle cannon mode from the CIC. On the outside nobody can see anything emit from the guns except a ghostly hue exiting the muzzles. The particle blasts are practically invisible in space—nothing like the spectacular fire hose of sparks and light shown in the movies and neuronet interactives. Watching this from the source is rather disappointing, but at the receiving end it's a cataclysm.

The beams hit the target instantly, and because they were close, on a monitor they watch in real time as the faint thermal blob of the cruiser suddenly lights up with what appears to be jets of hot gas venting out in all directions.

Calmly Nakayama informs them, "Plasma launch in four, three, two, one, on the way!"

Where in particle mode the hammers don't look like they are doing much of anything—plasma mode is altogether different. In particle mode protons can be sent on their merry way without much effort, but plasma needs something to hold onto to throw it any appreciable distance. The sequence starts with a robotic node about the size of a beach ball suspended in the receiver of the cannon. It is then charged with a meter thick sphere of plasma superheated to several million degrees Celsius. When the charge peaks a thirty ton skid, attached to rails, slingshots the weapon towards the target and absorbs the recoil by sliding back into the receiver with a violence.

This is total eye-candy that you can feel in the CIC.

In the hologram everybody watches intently as twelve blips race towards the target—gaining speed and constantly adjusting trajectory to converge on the cruiser in unison. Between the velocity of the plasma nodes, which actually had to slow down because the cruiser was coming in too fast, the weapons hit the front of the ship like sledge hammers at just over 90 kilometers per second.

Amidst a collective of ooohs and aaahs and whoops and cheers, Jerry turns to Corporal Long, "Transmit now."

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It took all of thirteen seconds from Jerry giving the order to transmit for the display to transverse a worm hole and pop up in the Command and Control Center at the top of the Spike on Sapphire.

Bob is pissed because he knew this was coming and didn't want to be here in this capacity when it did. He was hoping to retread back into the ranks, but when the Frontier separated from both the core and the United Nations, and the SA joined forces with the Frontier's own version of the UN, the Federation of Independent States, the FIS up and voted him in to be the new Alpha-6.

They begged him in fact.

There has always been a disconnect with the old Alpha in the UN and the SA, but with the last war there was a complete severance of ties. This Alpha, on the other hand, is a political appointment from the ranks of the Annex and functions in an ambassadorial role as an observer mission outside the normal voting body of the FIS' version of the general assembly. Whereas The Holy See has also been granted observer status with the Federation, and has no throw weight, the Annex *is* the throw weight for the frontier states. This is not exactly what Bob was interested in doing, being saddled with the job of coaching their Secretary General day and night in the subtleties and pitfalls of nation and consensus building, but with the newness of the FIS Bob had little choice but to accept the job or see it fail.

When the situation out at upsilon-Taurus blew up Bob, and many of the SA commanders on site, moseyed on up to the C3 to see what they could do to help, but as it was all they could do is stand around and wait for something to happen.

It's actually pretty quiet in the C3, with an underlying tone of melancholy to further darken the already dark ambiance of the room. For that last hour all they've really had to do was to suck down coffee and crack lame jokes in a fruitless attempt to lift their spirits—anything

and everything to take their minds off of the wait.

They didn't have to wait long.

Overhead the hologram display from the Iron Maiden pops up and runs in fast forward while Chief Stark's message broadcasts through the sound system. When the display hits the point where the thermal image of target one shows up it switches over to normal speed. When the Chief's message ends they watch as the plasma weapons hit the SS cruiser dead on.

You can hear a pin drop in the C3 as they all look at the countdown clock while it passes the seven minute mark. Bob looks over at the black glass wall where his office used to be, and is now occupied by Maria Ramirez who has yet to come out. Everybody knows she's in there, they saw her go in, but whatever it is she is doing is a mystery to all. Maybe she is watching them to see what their reactions would be to this situation. Bob has done that in the past, but this has never been her thing. That is, until now.

Bob suddenly realizes how unnerving that practice is and, more likely than not, she's just giving him a taste of his own medicine, "By a show of hands, how many say we take the shot?"

Of the three Marshals, six Field Marshals, two Deputy Field Marshals, and a Command Chief, only half raise their hands—which means the debate is on.

Bob stays out of the argument. He knows what the military answer is, and he knows what the political answer is, and he knows what the big-picture answer is, but for a simple yes/no question none of the answers have a two to one match. The military answer is obvious. The strategic view has been to not beat them up so severely that they get totally spooked, but when faced with the political question in his mind it's a win-lose both ways.

The discussion started out civil enough, but with the deadline looming overhead it was getting heated fast. With three minutes left to go Maria slithers out of her office and pulls up behind the group who are now on their feet and in each other's face.

Bob was on the sideline and smiles as he watches Maria simply clear her throat, "We done here?"

Now mute, like little kids they feel somewhat embarrassed that their discussion was getting out of hand, but it was the Chief who had the gumption to speak up, "Sorry Marshal, we've got some strong feelings 'round here."

"Don't apologize, Chief. All of you are right because there is no wrong option, but here are some things to think about. We are in a

state of war now. No doubt about it." Maria then gestures up at the hologram, "And, Chief Stark does have a solid fix on that cruiser. If he doesn't sack it then we're bound to meet this bad-boy again and it may not end up in our favor the next time."

Maria glances over at Bob, "And, yes, it's been our standing orders not to hit them in these engagements too hard because they just might turtle up on us; but if we can make them do that then it can buy us some time to get the next six replacement platforms outfitted and deployed. And, if not, they'll have one less cruiser."

Nodding heads all around, so Maria asks, "So, if you have any reservations nuking the sonofabitch then speak up now."

She then looks over at Bob to see what reaction she gets out of him, but he simply gives her an approving, yet grim smile, and a subtly given thumbs-up sign.

After a whole ten seconds of silence, Maria turns to a C3 staffer, "Corporal Vossler, message to Iron Maiden... Take the shot. Confirm and Echo-three to Hippo-One. End message."

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The four fighters from Tape Worm flight reached target one in less than a quarter minute after the plasma did. The first half of the ship, which was primarily flight ops, was rendered into a debris field that was drifting out from the blast zone. One of the engines was pulverized by a plasma hit, so the flight leader punched two centipede missiles into the intact one for good measure.

Even though this ship was a total loss they will learn later, and much to their relief, that more than seventy-percent of the crew and compliment attached to the cruiser survived the attack.

Now it's time to wait.

As the minutes slip away Zach decides to lighten things up by asking Jerry on the sly, "Janeway, would you?"

Jerry was not expecting that and quietly chuckles, "I'd fuck her in the ass and steal her command. How about T'Pol?"

"Have to chip through that frigid labia of hers to git to the goodies, but sure." After a few seconds Zach leans in and asks the stupid question, "K'Ehleyr?"

"D'uh!"

"A mile to the source?"

"You bet!"

It was just then at the ninety second mark when the text message comes through from C3. The alert flashes in Jerry's head and he pulls it up with a frown.

Jerry turns to sergeants Nakayama and Zabel, "Got that?"

Zabel responds, "Yes, Chief. Orders are to take the shot. Firing solution is good to go."

"Standard pyramid. You know the drill."

Nakayama announces, "Launching Valkyries."

They feel an ever so slight jostle as five, seventeen-ton missiles are launched into space and spread out.

Nakayama gives an evil smirk, "Five big balls of kiss-my-ass in three-two-one, mark."

Everybody watches the blips on the monitor as they suddenly zip off towards target two.

While Zabel give the orders to the bridge for the approach and confirmation one of the youngsters asks Jerry, "Chief, we don't see the missiles on the holo. How long till they reach the target?"

"They already have."

"oh."

The MDDSH engines kick in and the Iron Maiden streaks out to a half-light minute from where the bombs went off.

When they stop Zabel calls out, "Eleven seconds people."

On the monitor they watch as five bombs, 50-megatons each, blossom to life. Like a sideways pyramid they are positioned out at four corners of what would be the base, with the fifth covering the center outside of the box. Each of the eight-kilometer wide fireballs are evenly two kilometers apart and they look like blinding suns as they instantly expand then hang in space.

Flying sideways, the cruiser hit the fireballs at high speed right as they pop. Coming out the other side the CIC crew picks it up and displays the ship on the monitor.

If they had a few seconds notice then they could have kicked on their plasma shields—which could have mitigated much of the severity of the blasts. As it is the cruiser is now scorched and tattered, and venting air from the flight deck in the bow. In the aft it is dumping fuel, and between the two it starts to flat spin.

After a moment of silence, Zach asks, "Can they recover?"

Jerry shrugs, "Ya, if the fuel doesn't mix and—"



Just then the fuel tanks on the side that was venting blow out, and the following continuous burn makes the ship spin faster and faster and out of control.

Zabel informs them, "Estimated G's at twelve, and climbing."

All Jerry could say was, "Crap."

The centripetal forces at work here will make it impossible for anybody to stabilize the cruiser in time to help any survivors. Of the capital ships the SA took out in this fashion during the last conflict four of them suffered this same dreadful fate, and a paltry eleven people were rescued, those who by sheer luck were able to jump ship, only to give horrifying accounts on how their crewmates perished.

Instead of letting these people suffer crushing and confusing deaths, Jerry turns to Nakayama, "Put 'er down."

Another Valkyrie is launched. It takes just a few seconds for it to reach the target, but those in the CIC have to wait thirty seconds to witness the *coup de grâce*. On the monitor the bomb goes off right beside the cruiser, and from this strike the ship is totally vaporized.

There is no celebratory cheer on this one, but a wearisome pall that descends over the whole of CIC.

Jerry clears his throat and asks, "Internal temp?"

Zabel responds, "Three-zero-seven, Chief."

Jerry sighs and starts barking commands at his crew by ones and twos, "Let's open it up and dump some heat before we scoot. I want all systems on-line. Boys, take us out of here and prepare for jump. Echo-Three in five minutes. Inform the flights that we'll meet up with them at the rendezvous. Let's get this on the hump, people!"

It was only Zach who then overhears Jerry quietly mutter to himself with a sad quiver, "I wanna get the fuck outta here."

The Iron Maiden races away and quickly increases her velocity to 2,000c. After three minutes of twisting and turning she drops off and spools up for a jump.

When the charge is set what looks like a baby black-hole yawns and swallows her whole.

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