

LCTN: CALAR-3 (Pleiades cluster)
CORD: M45-B002 (133pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-FEBRUARY-28-THURSDAY
TIME: 05:15zulu (local 30:05mst)

SA deep space dump points are in the millions.

When you look up in the night sky, no matter where you are, everything you see is where it used to be. How far away a star is in terms of light years has a direct correlation to how old that light is by the time it has gotten to you. All objects in space are moving and not in lockstep to one another. Most things are moving away from your line of sight, some towards it, some are moving faster and others are slower—and none of it is ever moving in a straight line.

All relative but askew from each point of view!

This makes navigation a real challenge because one can plot out all those crazy trajectories, in concert around Sagittarius-A, in their dataset but nobody can actually look up and see any of it in real time. The only “right now” view to be had is within said navigational dataset and this makes tracking time critical because if your SNN time is out of synch with the data-model you’ll find your aim off kilter. There are no guesstimates or fudge factors when jumping. The further you risk a jump with a bad clock the more ass-up the results.

If your clock becomes irreparably off then you could take a stab at jumping at where the target star is in the sky now, knowing it will have moved on by the time you actually get there, a nanosecond later, but in a busy place like the Pleiades it’s so cluttered that another object may have taken its place by the time you dump.

Now, thanks to the Orion Trust, the Annex’s navigational data-models are so exacting and, with the accuracy afforded by the SNN clocks, the SA is able to convey any proposed deep space rendezvous on a whim via a simple delimited string of encrypted numbers. Stupidly simple with distance in tenths of Astral Units, the

anchor star SAO or HIP number, the backstop star SAO or HIP collinear point, followed by a date and time scheduled for the jump.

You can even hand-key these values in and *et voilà!*

At this galactic longitude, 25.8 on the Sag-A grid, pretty much everything is moving at least two hundred kilometers a second so between the rules of the road, that is everybody dumps towards the right of the target area, and with the time and angle of each jump determined by one's respective SA designation, there is virtually no chance that anyone could possibly encroach on another's exit point or, as they say in navigational parlance, *bump on the dump*.

Bumps have happened...and the results can be catastrophic.

Anyway, when the Annex wants to clue the Co-op in on an SA deep-space rendezvous, as an invitation for them to crash the party that is, the info has to be something easy to act on like at 37-Tau. Today they have chosen the brown dwarf Calar-3 because everybody knows where this thing is and nobody outside the Pleiades ever goes there. Roving brown dwarfs, especially those stripped of orbital objects, are the perfect infrared navigational beacon, and this one happens to be the regular meet-up locale for the Annex and those parties not on their normal deep-space meet-up A-List.

Eight days ago a squad of Security Service cruisers, three of the new skinny wedge type that have been trickling down to the SS, are floating along all quiet and cold about a quarter of an AU from the brown dwarf. Not in orbit *per se*—but actually falling towards Calar-3 at an ever increasing rate of speed yet far enough away that it doesn't matter because it will take months for them to catch up. If someone were to dump in close proximity to the dwarf, and survey the sky looking for threats, chances are these three cruisers are not going to occlude or perturb the light from any background stars.

Frankenstein, SA22, pops out from a jump about 55,000 kilometers from Calar-3. Now, that "hundreds of kilometers a second" mentioned before only applies to objects in relation to their wonderings while going around the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself is moving at a pretty fair clip back towards the ZOA so when the Frankenstein dumps into static space it is actually Calar-3 that is racing away at over a thousand kilometers a second or 1,023kps to be precise.

Frankenstein is sitting still and Calar-3 is in motion, so when you add the brown dwarfs lateral movement on the galactic plane the dump site has moved significantly and a second later the Dashi, SA23, pops out just over twelve-hundred kilometers away, between them.

Now, to review, two light minutes away from Calar-3, trailing the dwarf's galactic lateral trajectory, are three Co-op Security Service

cruisers slowly gaining on it in gravitational free fall so, between them dropping towards Calar-3 and the dwarf star pulling away from two SA battle platforms at a very high speed, both parties are about ten hours and twenty-seven minutes apart at these velocities.

If things go as planned, this will be over with long before that.

Vacuum Sandwich Zero-Three, one of the eighteen Grigori reconnaissance ghost droids manned by Sophia and Paleo, has been on an orbital down-low for over two weeks waiting for today—not to get involved by any stretch, they're here only to watch.

The droid is in a slow elliptical orbit six million clicks above Calar-3 and, with the Security Service cruisers dropping from above and the Frankenstein and Dashi climbing from below, it was purely by stupid chance that they ended up smack-dab in between these two. Their ship is so small and flat that, as long as they stay reasonably still in their slow and lazy orbit, they should be practically invisible.

Paleo, sipping on a mug of dark coffee, is standing in the dining room of a replica of Sophia's bungalow in Stone Garden. All the recon teams agreed to a rural hillside setting so that when their weekly uploads to the Stone Garden instances of Paleo and Sophia compile there will be marked differences between them all. Even the décor for each of the recon teams is slightly off from the rest so as to better demark whose memories are whose.

Sophia is sitting at the table tapping a pen on a yellow legal pad that has a scribbled picture of their current tactical situation. The walls are translucent from the tactical hologram showing Calar-3 and the two platforms to their left and the three cruisers to their right.

Their Grigori should have been back in a previous orbital quadrant for this event, the argument of perigee as they say, but a planned second Delta-V to round out their now sloppy elliptical orbit was thwarted when Security Services showed up earlier than expected. They now find themselves exactly where they shouldn't be which is sandwiched in between the cruisers and the platforms.

Paleo, checking Sophia's notes says, "Yup, that's about right."

Sophia looks up, "Boxcar fifty-one-ten, should link up in about fifteen-twenty minutes. As it is we'll end up right between them."

"That's boxcars, plural."

"Hu?"

"It's from craps."

"Craps? What's that?"

"Dice, rolling a double six is boxcars."

Sophia thinks about it and realizes, "Oh! The drop stations on the underside of the platforms! I get it."

"Boxcars was a common maneuver back in the day before the stations. I hear the Marauder did a hundred link ups after 44-Tau."

"What's the game plan if they spot us and take a shot?"

"Well, if it's ten or twelve seconds after the Zodiac hits that means they've been tracking us and closed in for the shot. If we get shot at forty or so seconds after it goes off means their bomb flashed us. No matter what, they have to scoot in to confirm the kill and if they scoot in close to us then we'll be flashed, guaranteed. Knowing them they'll opt for a long convergence hoping to get a lucky scissors on us but the best they can hope for is to strobe us."

"If they shoot we shoot back, right?"

"Well, yea! From a cold start we have eight seconds to spool for dash so if they get a fix on distance we're toast! If they bust on us you will immediately launch a spider and if we're lucky we'll nail 'em before they see the return and calculate a proper solution."

"So, if they pull in close we're fucked."

"It'll be a close race. You follow our shot by zipping us into the cruiser blast zone and from there you launch our second spider out to the Zodiac blast zone and park it on stand-by."

"Missile settings?"

"Autonomous."

"If they shoot and miss?"

"If they miss us we continue to sit and stay buttoned up."

"Stupid and quiet, right?"

Paleo nods, "Yup."

Sophia throws out, "If they're smart they'll leave us alone."

"You're learnin' fast however, the bonus to pop us may be irresistible." Paleo then points to both sides of their position, "Chances are, if they don't see us now, SOP says they'll zip in around here to watch the show. Well, either way I expect them to end up somewhere around our position. If they stay put they may not notice the flash returned from our little ship but if they do, from there, they may think it's an optical anomaly so they just may let it go."

"What's the chances of them spotting us already?"

"A coin toss? They've been here eight days." Paleo nudges Sophie's shoulder with his hip, "It's early but we should mount up."

Ghosts don't require a physical cockpit but here they operate from a digital copy of the one used on the F380 Cerberus. Given that they have the exact same view—if they were real then their heads would actually be sticking up outside the fuselage. A Cerberus cockpit is normally a tight fit from side to side, but not needing to be modeled in a fighting suit they are each lounging comfortably in BDU pants and a t-shirt with coffee in hand. Replicating normal physics that would require them to strap in and deprive themselves of their beverage has been suspended here because it simply is not necessary.

Paleo may be in command but this is Sophia's shift so she takes the forward pilots seat. Paleo is always happy to allow Sophia to take the lead because she simply needs the experience. As a precaution his OODA response time has been overclocked so that if there were a problem he could respond instantaneously. There are a lot of unknown variables today but Paleo really needs to have Sophia work this mission without him butting in or taking charge.

The Boxcars link up for today, as the story goes, is that the Frankenstein has two MDDSH nacelles out from last month's action so they can't actually "dash" above 0.2c, or go beyond 20% light speed that is. The Iron Man class couldn't do this on two but these bigger ships can, it's just that 0.2c is really not enough *get up and go* if they get in a bind or get jumped...which is all horseshit because all the damage they have is actually superficial at worse.

After about three minutes surveying the sky, looking for threats, the Dashi kicks in their MDDSH engines and zips up close, eating those twelve hundred kilometers inside a half a minute. Coming out of the dash nose to nose with the Frankenstein, the field around it pops like a soap bubble. This is followed by the Dashi then venting a plume of hydrogen as thrust, without the oxygen or the burn, to start their final approach to the Frankenstein.

It takes thirteen laborious minutes for them to travel the three hundred meters for the hard link up, and when their noses touch from inside the ships it sounds like a soft cottony plonk.

Now queue the party crashers...

Via a small version of the WormTrac array, Sophia and Paleo watch as it takes a Zodiac missile six seconds from release to travel the thirty-seven million kilometers from their larger Rapier cruiser to hit the intersection point between the Frankenstein and the Dashi. They see the signature of a fifty-megaton plume erupt that envelops and consumes both platforms—but it will be another fifteen seconds before they see it outside their ship for real.

"Oh shit!" says Paleo as both he and Sophia notice the cruiser suddenly drop from high up to point-blank range only forty-kilometers

away to their right.

They feel a bump and start to rotate as a hot vapor chine flashes around their ship, and before Paleo can shout for Sophia to launch, she has already fired the spider missile. They were hit by a particle beam with a laser like convergence that, in retrospect, was kind of dumb. It cut off the last six meters off the Grigori's tail, bisecting the razors, yet leaving their ship still fully functional in space. Flying in atmosphere would now be out of the question.

From release it takes two seconds for the spider to reach the Security Services cruiser, and by then it is buzzing along at 2.1c. At twice the speed of light the missile hits it square in the tip of the nose and this absolutely vaporizes the two kilometer long ship. Its slender wedge contours quickly balloon out into a spherical and blinding fireball that simply pops after a handful of seconds,

And all this commotion in deafening silence.

To mask their heat signature, now that they have had a chunk of their tail cut off, Sophia pulls their ship into the cruisers blast zone that is quickly dissipating just as they see the nuke from the Zodiac missile explode in the direction of Calar-3. As planned she launches their remaining spider which quickly drops off and parks itself within the Zodiac's already fading blast zone.

A week of sheer boredom has exploded into fifteen seconds of frantic insanity...and is handed back over to the strain of boredom.

After a few minutes of watching the WormTrac, looking for the tell tail signature of a launch, dash or jump from their littler Epée cruisers, Paleo speaks up, "Sophie, I have to say you did real good."

Sophia just shakes her head and points out, "I can see a piece of our ass floating out there. How's that good?"

"We were lucky and you were spot on." Paleo takes a sip from his coffee and asks, "So, what did they do wrong?"

"They should have fired the PB's smooth-bore, no choke. That would have cooked our goose for sure."

"Yup."

"What are they going to do now?"

Paleo thinks about it, "If I were them? At this point I would just leave. They kinda know where we're at but they can't pinpoint us in the residual heat so, tactically it's not good for them...buuut, if they knew we only had the one missile out there they would definitely come swat us like a bug."

Sophia then wonders, "How many were on the cruiser?"

"It was a shiv so...seven...seven-eighty? Around there."

They sit for another hour in a blind stand off until they notice on the WormTrac the two little-but-lethal Epée cruisers spooling for a jump. These Security Services assets are yet again too deep inside Annex controlled space to hold ground, and what should have been a cherry on top, whacking the Grigori that is, ended up wasting one of their newest ships and a complement of over seven-hundred.

Anyway, the SS got what they came for so when they jump back towards safer space they leave Sophia and Paleo twiddling their thumbs for another two hours while on the lookout for fighters. The latest Gryphon-Djinns would tear-ass after them in a flash but nobody came and, yet, they had to remain vigilant just the same.

They didn't see the drop ship kicked overboard to follow up.

When the Basilisk, SA26, appears for a wellness check on the two platforms, expecting to find this mess, Paleo burst transmits their telemetry and video feed for the last two weeks and immediately has Sophia jump them out of the area for U-Turn.

After three jumps they have twenty-two hours to blow before the final one to U-Turn, so in that time Sophia and Paleo celebrate her first kill as a bona fide fighter pilot. After twelve bottles of wine and relentless commemorative sex in each room of her little abode, by the time they skid their wreck of a Grigori to a stop on the deck of the Carrie Nation they are a little worse for wear.

Sober but strung out nonetheless.

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In the Stone Garden, each Sunday morning, Paleo and Sophia wake up to their newly compiled selves. All of their experiences over the last week from the eighteen recon teams, and a handful of other missions, have been uploaded into their long term memory. The droning tedium and innocuous memories, the boring stuff, has already been reviewed and parsed out. All of this unnecessary junk retrievable but sort of buried before they wake up. Interesting and unique events, especially their carnal pursuits, are all retained in vivid detail, but for this morning things happen to be a bit off for Sophia.

So much so that Paleo takes it upon himself to cancel their Sunday morning brunch with Jacob and Babette.

With the elation from her victory now behind them, Sophia wakes up to the part of combat that everybody dreads after the fact. The sadness and self-loathing that comes with killing has now hit her like a ton of bricks. Killing a person or two is one thing, but faced with

being directly responsible for the death of hundreds is quite another. Like everyone else it is her job, and like everyone else she must face this insidious little demon head on—even when it assumes Cthulhu like proportions.

People like her father have the strength to go it alone, and so too will Paleo when that time comes. Today the shock, hopelessness and melancholy is overwhelming for Sophia and she is blessed to wake up to Paleo who, without batting an eye, spends the day holding her in his arms...soothing her pain and easing that burden.

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