

Earth's first interstellar war was a disaster. We were totally unprepared. The first attack devastated our major cities, from a position far out of range of our proudest nuclear missiles. The only thing keeping them from utterly destroying us was their fleet getting called away for some unknown reason. God protects drunks, madmen, and sleeping fools. We were definitely asleep. All wrapped up in our tiny little world.

Our first ships weren't the enormous cruisers of science fiction. They were cramped ten-man affairs with a little more internal space than your average bus. Each nation started building at least one ship of the combined fleet. We built the *United States*, while the Russian Federation built the *Marshal Shaposhnikov* and China constructed the *Changbai Shan*. The smaller countries, built supply ships, engines, made fuel or mined uranium.

But the United Nations Supreme Council decided the crews had to be mixed. That's how the *USS United States* got hold of First Officer Oleg Stepanovich. He came with two ICBM's because not only did we get mixed crews, we got mixed weapons. Four American ICBMs, two Russian, one British and one Chinese. There were only six jump points into the Sol System and we were assigned to defend number two, Point Beta. Technologically it was like being tasked to stop an aircraft carrier with a Civil War ironclad. The only advantage we had was due to our small size and a practical cloaking device, making us theoretically undetectable.

Our ship had been christened by the inventor, a nutcase who read the vessel launching speech in Klingon. I only hope his invention performs better than his social skills. The enemy, it seemed, had much better nerds. Their weapons were balls of high-energy plasma which detonated on impact. One hit and we were a goner. Command estimated that if all our missiles hit one of their ships, it would destroy about 25% of their superstructure. It would take four of us to destroy one of them. Earth was still building the fleet; therefore, Point Beta was only defended by the *USS United States* and the *INS Vikramaditya*. Without a lucky shot, we stood no chance of stopping an attack. Within the first few weeks we were joined by the *NNS Aradu*, but the Nigerian ship was only an automated supply vessel and unable to do any fighting.

Our only chance would be to slow the enemy down, reload from the *Aradu*, and hope the enemy will let us finish them off. It was a plan which had about as much a chance of success as Luxemburg launching a successful invasion of China. The crew walked around like they were at a funeral ... their own.

"Range to target, 75,000km and closing, bearing One, Two, Four," announced People's Major Luo An, "Weapons on standby Mr. Stepanovich."

"Ready on all weapons, Captain" reported Oleg, in his heavily accented English.

"Fire all odd numbered weapons on my command," announced Captain Faulkner.

The compartment was silent, everyone concentrating on their assigned tasks. Light flashed on the consoles, especially one large red LED under Oleg's palm.

"Fire," yelled Faulkner. Oleg pressed the red control.

"All odd missiles away Captain," Oleg announced.

"Fire even weapons," commanded the Captain.

After another press of the red button, Oleg replied, "All even weapons away, Captain."

"Evasive action, Mr. Schneider," cried the Captain, "Get us out of here. Now."

"Engaging engines."

"Two minutes to impact," declared Major An. As the only female on board, her voice had a distinctive quality to it. She counted off the range to the target. It was a long, monotonous countdown and her sharp voice did nothing to calm the crew's nerves. Finally, she made the last announcement, "Five seconds to detonation."

"Target destroyed," announced Tatonga, who was manning the radar and communication station.

"That's 100 targets we destroyed this week," remarked Ernst Schneider, Propulsion Engineer.

"At this rate," An commented, "Were going to wear out the computer."

"Mr. Stepanovich," the Captain commanded, "set us up for another practice run."

So, the captain drilled us. There was little else to do. Naturally all of these drills were computer simulations, because we didn't have the extra fuel to do actual maneuvers. We would need the fuel once engaged. Everyone was more than a little worried the movement would throw the targeting systems off in combat. Everybody was worried, except for Kowalski. He merely figured we were dead already.

"Don't worry Kowalski," announced Tatonga, "We can't lose."

"Oh," he answered.

"I'm Dakota Sioux. You should see what we did to Custer at the Little Big Horn."

"Didn't you outnumber Custer's men by about four to one." Commented Stepanovich.

"I believe the Native American forces were also armed with superior weapons," added Major An as if she was in a school debate.

"Faster firing rate, but shorter range," replied Stepanovich as if he was a historian of the American-Indian Wars of the West.

"Why do all you folks know so much about American History?" Tatonga sounded frustrated.

"American military defeats," answered Luo An, "are required reading in all schools in the People's Republic."

“They say Stalin loved watching *They Died with Their Boots On*,” added Stepanovich. “Tovarich Captain, if we take any prisoners does Tatonga get to scalp them?”

“How do you know the aliens have hair?” Paul Kowalski chimed in.

“We don’t even know if they breathe oxygen,” Major An sneered back at the reactor power chief.

“Major,” Captain Faulkner ordered, “load another drill into the simulation computer.”

“Yes, Captain”

“You see,” announced Schneider, “I told you. You talk too much, Stepanovich. Every time the Captain starts to fall asleep from boredom, he wakes us all up with another drill.”

“I guess we’ll just have to kill 101 alien ships this week,” cracked Oleg.

Our orders specifically forbid us to enter the jump point. First, because Command didn’t want the enemy to learn about our grasp of their jump points. Second, they didn’t want to risk losing even a single one of our outnumbered ships. When we weren’t running any attack drills, we were doing maintenance. Everyone except for me. I was tasked with trying to figure out a way to scan what was coming through the jump point and, if possible, get information about what was on the other side. The Captain was anxious for me to succeed. The only thing he did more often than order drills was asking how my work was coming along.

Technically, all the members of the crew were supposed to speak English, but Mr. Stepanovich kept going around to all the stations and labeling each one in Russian, using some surgical tape from the med kit. Sharkey, the pilot, responded by labeling Point Beta on the radar screen, Point Chard, after the British officer who commanded Roark’s Drift against large numbers of Zulu attackers. It had a certain fatalistic charm to it.

It was during one of our frequent drills my alert board stated to go crazy. “Captain, I’m picking up activity in the jump corridor.”

“Major, discontinue the drill. Set condition one.”

“Aye, sir. Setting condition one,” she replied. Like everyone else, she nervously checked her seat restraints.

“Mr. Tatonga, time to get out your smoke signals. Inform *Vikramaditya* that we have a guest arriving.”

“Aye, Sir. One Indian to another,” Tatonga joked good heartedly.

The Captain was a cool character, but I could tell from his voice things had gotten serious. He never laughed at the crew’s jokes, but then he didn’t growl at anyone either. Yet now, his tone took on a determined quality.

Fortunately, the ship we encountered was by far smaller than the monsters which had launched the first attack on Earth. The Captain estimated only two missiles would be needed to destroy it. Oleg lined up the first two missiles to fire. He chose the two Russian birds to fire first. The captain concurred, but only because they had the largest warheads. Outside the pull of earth’s gravity, ICBM’s had a longer range,

but we still needed to get uncomfortably close to fire them. We had to hit our target before the enemy could fire back.

Everybody sweat while we approached the target. It was clear from everyone's faces the entire crew were keeping their fingers crossed. Would the light, bent around the ship by the cloaking device, be good enough to keep us undetected? Or did they already possess a different method to locate us.

"I hope you know how to fire those things," Major Luo An spat at Oleg.

Unlike fictional cloaking devices, we didn't have to turn ours off to fire the weapons. But as soon as the missiles got outside the perimeter, the enemy would see them. The target was slow and wasn't actively firing. This may be their version of a troop landing transport, sent to occupy a devastated earth. The aliens obviously didn't have much respect for our capabilities, the ship wasn't even escorted.

"Sharkey," commanded the Captain, "bring us to within 5,000 Kilometers."

The ship shuddered as the engines came online. I started sweating like mad. 5,000 kilometers was frightfully close. Not that I was expecting they would pick us up. Our ship's station was always between the sun and Point Beta, so we would be attacking with the sun behind us. It was our last bit of protection, in case the cloaking device didn't work. No, I was afraid the ship would be caught in the shock wave from our own blast. Apparently, the Captain wanted to make sure we didn't miss.

The approach was painfully slow. Finally, Sharkey announced, "target in range."

"Standby to fire numbers one and four Mr. Stepanovich."

"Standing by, Tovarich Capitain."

"Fire," yelled Faulkner. Oleg pressed the red control.

"All birds away Tovarich Capitain." Oleg announced.

"Evasive action, Mr. Schneider," cried the Captain, "Get us out of here. See if you can get me a little more speed this time Ernst."

"Engaging engines."

We'd spent so much time on drills, the change in course shook me up. I found myself struggling to keep my head over my seat. Even though I was strapped in, my whole form was straining against the restraints to stay upright.

"How are we doing, Sharkey?" queried the Captain.

"Speed Two Four Double Zero, sir."

"Two minutes to impact," declared Major An. Everyone waited, holding their breath. Finally, she made the last announcement, "Five seconds to detonation."

Five seconds came and went, with everyone looking at each other blankly. "Missile one missed," announced Major An, "weapon passing other side of target."

"Mr. Tatonga, inform *Vikramaditya* that we have a loose weapon coming their way."

Before he could respond, the interior of the cabin was filled with a blinding white light.

“Missile four, sir,” explained Major An.

“Sharkey, bring us around,” the captain ordered. As the missiles were strapped to the ship’s outer hull, we had to be pointing at our target to fire. “Ready numbers two and five.” As I found myself thrown in the other direction, I heard Tatonga announce, “Captain, target has broken in two. Missile four yield higher than expected. The weapon exploded a few hundred meters below the central spine. It may be a weak point.”

We spent the next 24-hours standing off our target, silently waiting ... and sweating.

“Set condition two,” the Captain finally ordered, to everyone relief. We had met the enemy and he was nothing more than drifting space garbage. *Vikramaditya* went in closer to the debris to determine if we could pick up any useful intelligence while we rendezvoused with the *Aradu* for resupply.

“Mr. Stepanovich,” the Captain looked directly at the Russian with a cold stare, “I want only American birds this time.”

Oleg looked as if he wanted to protest, but the Captain’s eyes made him change his mind, “Aye, Captain. Low yield capitalist weapons it is.”

The two stood for a time, looking at each other pointedly. It probably wasn’t long, but I was sure if something flammable had been between them, it would have exploded. They might even like each other, but they each felt the same way Felix Unger must have felt about Oscar Madison. The tension between the two was endless; it was like watching two angry parents fight. The volume never went up, but they spat every word.

“Doesn’t the Russian Navy have a history of mutiny?” I asked watching the two of them mentally slugging it out.

“Yes,” Major An replied, “But Oleg’s a strict party man. They don’t rock the boat.” She let her comment sink in for a bit. “Besides, the Captain has permission from the Federated Republic to space him if he gets out of line.”

Oleg was huge. In his case, the phrase Russian bear had a special meaning; an almost physical resemblance. Right down to his having to shave twice a day. I couldn’t imagine anyone managing to force him into an airlock, without Oleg having his skull cracked first. But for all of Oleg’s remarks, he never once gave the impression anyone besides the Captain should be in charge. So much so, I think if the Captain ordered him into an airlock without a suit and Oleg would have gone.

“What about you?” I asked.

“Me?” She replied faking innocence, “The People’s Navy doesn’t know how to mutiny; it’s not covered in Mao’s little red book.”

After we resupplied, the captain stepped up the drills. Now we were shooting up about 200 fictional aliens a week. He was either training us to be the best ship in the fleet, or he wanted the crew to be able to fight without any sleep.

Bandit number two appeared about a week later. Unlike its predecessor, it started firing the moment it jumped into Sol space. The first series of blasts proved our cloaking devices were working. They were firing blind. The blasts were nowhere near where we were. The ship was smaller than the one we had already destroyed, but still about ten times the size of the *United States*. We approached even more slowly than the last time as the alien ship was moving away from us, so we had a tough time catching up.

For a moment, it stopped firing, then swung around and headed towards us.

“Kowalski,” the Captain demanded, “The cloak still up?”

“Aye, Captain. Cloaking device engaged.”

“Captain, do you think they found a way to detect us?” asked Major An. It was the first time I’d heard a note of distress in the Major’s voice.

“Give be a distance count, Major” was only the response the Captain gave her.

The distance between the ships closed rapidly. A blast appeared on our starboard side. It was a good distance away from us, and slightly behind, but the blast wave shook the ship. I nearly cracked my head on the overhead panel. Two more blasts filled the starboard windows, but these blasts were less intense. Either that or I was getting used to being thrown around. One thing was for sure, they were no longer firing blind.

“5,000 kilometers,” announced the Major.

“Hold your fire,” the Captain ordered, “Sharkey get us in around the port side. I want to fire at her broadside.”

“Aye, captain. Plotting a course to our port.”

“Keep us within 5,000 kilometers,” the Captain added.

“Captain,” Oleg questioned the Captain, “should we not fire now? Those shots are getting awfully close.”

As if to argue with the First Officer’s opinion, another blast went off to our right. But this one was even farther off than before. No one had any idea where they were firing. It was clear they were aiming at something. A bright flash filled the cabin, followed quickly by a second one.

For a moment the firing stopped, then it resumed with more intensity.

“That was the *Vikramaditya*,” Tatonga reported, “Two direct hits on the alien’s engines. She’s drifting.”

“Get us in there, Sharkey,” the Captain put his hand on the pilot’s shoulder. “I want to put one right under the central spine.”

“Target in position,” announced Major An.

“Fire weapons two and five,” the Captain ordered.

“Two and five away.”

Our wait was punctuated by the flashes of light billowing up on our starboard side. Until two big flashes occurred forward. Our ship seemed to glide to a slow and graceful stop. It was no longer being rocked by explosions to one side. Tatonga at radar confirmed the target was now floating inert in an ever-widening field of debris. We had stored two hits, directly under the alien's weak point.

While the *Vikramaditya* waited to intercept any new arrivals, we moved to the area Charlie had been firing on. No one had any idea what the aliens called themselves, so most everyone just called them Charlie. There was no debris, But the scanners showed a small concentration of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen. It didn't seem like an air leak at there was twice as much carbon as oxygen or nitrogen. It didn't make any sense. Ships don't leak carbon.

"Uric acid," Oleg announced.

"What?" Schneider shot back.

"Uric acid has a high concentration of carbon, but includes hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen." Oleg answered. "Kowalski when was the last time you made a waste dump?"

"This morning, why?"

"You mean the aliens were firing at our waste dump?" Schneider couldn't believe the what the big Russian was trying to explain.

"Essentially yes," Oleg continued, "once it was outside of da cloaking screen it was detectable. They couldn't see anything else so they fired at what they could see.

"OK, Kowalski, no more waste dumps. Bag everything and we'll transfer it to the *Aradu* when we resupply."

The Russian had an odd smirk on his face. "Something wrong?" asked Schneider.

"Something I don't get," Oleg replied. "Their weapons are supposed to explode on impact. How do you impact a bunch of small acid droplets?"

"I don't know," Schneider answered, "They wouldn't seem to be big enough. The plasma would simply push them out of the way. But if your betting command doesn't know what it is talking about when it comes to Charlie's weapons, I'll take a piece of that action."

"That may just be it," he growled. "Only now we need to learn what causes the weapon to explode."

"Why?"

"If we can set off their own weapon right after it launches," interrupted the Captain, "we could use the plasma discharge to destroy them."

The Captain and the First Officer spent the next two days with their brows furrowed. In a cartoon, wheels would be turning in their heads. The trip took on an eerie silence with those two thinking. Space is not a loud environment, but with everybody playing the silent game, the only sound were other

people breathing. After a while you can recognize who is taking in oxygen. Oleg's exhales sounded like a furnace blower going off. But the Captain's was a hollow, shallow whisper.

"Kowalski," the Captain inquired, "Can you rig me up a couple of large balloons?"

"We'll, I could fill a couple of the supply bags with CO₂ from the scrubbers. Melt the ends closed to keep it all inside. That should make a pretty effective balloon. You planning a party?"

"In a manner of speaking. We're going to let the BEMs have a little target practice. Make those balloons. When you have them ready, you and Mr. Stepanovich put them in the air lock number one."

"Aye, Captain."

"What did he mean by BEMs?" Tatonga asked in a dull undertone.

"No one knows what the aliens look like," Kowalski explained, "so some of the officers have taken to calling Charlie BEMs. Like the old Science Fiction stories from the 1950's."

Tatonga looked at him as if BEM was Latin or Greek.

"Bug Eyed Monsters," Kowalski elucidated.

"Ah, my tribe has a term which also means hostile invading alien."

"Oh?"

"White men."

We dropped the balloons forward of Point Beta, lining up the ship to keep an eye on them. The forward portion of the *United States* was a telescope, similar to the old Hubble telescope. It had a camera at the back end so we could get a pretty good view of our targets. Right now, we had it trained on three large white balloons floating in space. From my point of view, we were uncomfortably close to Point Beta. Only 500 kilometers from where the aliens usually appeared. I kept imagining Charlie materializing a few feet from us and then plowing right through our superstructure. But we needed to be that close to keep an eye on Charlie's new targets.

Space travel is not exciting, but combined with what amounts to guard duty on a couple of balloons and it's downright boring. We sat and took turns watching our three air filled friends. Of course, they weren't going anywhere. But every time I had the watch I keep wishing for a micrometeorite strike ... or something ... anything to alleviate the tedium of staring at three stationary bags.

Charlie finally came. The third ship was twice the size of the second. As its predecessor had, it started firing blindly as soon as it crossed over into Sol space. It took about a minute for Charlie to find the balloons. They went nuts, firing a whole salvo at them. An instant before they hit a tiny red dot appeared on the surface of each balloon. Dead center. When the plasma struck ... blam ... no more balloons, or little red dots.

"Mr. Stepanovich, get me the laser pointer you used at the last crew briefing." The Captain turned to Terry Sharkey, "Turn this thing to face our uninvited guests."

Oleg found the pointer and the Captain rigged it up on the manual targeting display. The display was meant to navigate the ship manually, in case of computer failure. It aligned anything looking out the front window to face in the same direction as the ship. The monitor was no longer showing us our makeshift balloons, only empty space. Until Charlie's nose finally broke into the camera's view.

The captain turned the laser pointer on.

The next shot Charlie fired went off as soon as it left the nose of their spacecraft. The blast was intense, followed by a few more in quick succession. The first explosion must have ignited something in Charlie's ship. It went off like throwing a lighter in a pile of fireworks. When it was done, all radar could pick up was an expanding cloud of dust and gas from where Charlie's ship had been.

"How did you know that was going to work?" Oleg asked the Captain.

"That's why they never fired at any of our incoming missiles." He explained, "they had plenty of time, but once they left our cloaking field, they were too close."

"They couldn't fire at them without endangering themselves."

"Exactly. The plasma itself is unstable. They use a laser to point out the target. Once the plasma crosses the reflected beam it explodes. It doesn't matter if the target is a ship or a carbon droplet."

"H. G. Wells would be proud," remarked Oleg.

"I don't get the reference," Tatonga looked confused.

"H. G. Wells, War of the Worlds. High-tech aliens from the planet Mars, invade earth but are overcome by local bacteria for which their immune systems were not prepared."

"So, our Earth bacteria is a 25-cent laser pointer?" Tatonga inquired.

"Seems kind of ironically fitting," Oleg stated, "Do your people have a word for that?"

"No, but I did have a great aunt who died from the flu."

"Close enough."

A few days later the Captain assembled us all in the ward room. It's not a room, per say, it's only a section of the ship we use for meals. Basically, because it has a table.

"We're going through the jump point," the Captain announced.

"Tovarich Capitain. We have strict orders not to go through the jump point." Oleg protested.

The captain hung his head for a moment. "The most advanced ship ever built by the people from Earth, a ship with her fighting power still intact! And you'd stay waiting until a ship big enough to destroy us comes along? So much for the famous Russian fortitude!"

Oleg shook his head. "You'd rather we jump into unknown space and leave da planet defenseless," our Russian First Officer protested.

“We’ll leave the *Vikramaditya* here. Now that she knows how, she can stop another one if they come through. We’re days away from communication with command. I’m changing our orders to meet the current combat conditions. It’s Captain’s discretion.” The Captain was in no mood for an argument.

“And what if they send thousands? What then? What if there are a few thousand on the other side? Are you going to take them all on?” Oleg was beginning to become red in the face. If it was anger or frustration it wasn’t clear. The result was the same either way.

“If they send a thousand through that jump point, it won’t make much difference if we are here or not,” the captain bellowed. “We have the advantage.”

“Advantage?” Oleg retorted.

“Yes, they can’t see us and we know how to use their own weapon against them.”

“And what if we fail?” our first officer demanded.

“I never even thought about failure,” returned the Captain as if he found the Russian’s Achilles’ heel. “It’s time for you to get your head out of your ass, Mr. Stepanovich. Admit it. You came up here because you thought you’d get it over quickly, heroically. You came up here to die. Well, I don’t like to lose and I have no intention of dying ... but if it will make you feel more comfortable, you have my permission to use the airlock. Without a suit.”

“Tovarich Capitain. I do not believe you are sane,” the big Russian stated flatly.

“Never bothered you before,” Faulkner quipped. “Either we win or we die, but nobody will have to wait around for it.”

Oleg stood there for a moment as if tottering on the brink of something important. “Patterson, plot us a course through da jump point.”

“You can’t let him violate our orders,” Sharkey piped up.

“Did I ask you for your opinion, Mr. Sharkey?” Patterson still hadn’t moved. In fact no one had moved. The Captain and the First Officer were still locked eye to eye. “Mr. Patterson, I don’t see you moving.” For the first time, Stepanovich’s eyes moved from the Captain. They bored into the navigator like two diamond drill bits. “Mr. Tatonga, you have my permission to scalp anyone not following the captain’s orders.”

Tatonga smiled and Mr. Patterson reluctantly went to the navigation controls, but the rest of the crowd remained.

“Don’t you people have work to do?” Oleg bellowed, “If you are not working you’d better be putting in for a transfer. But no matter what, you should not still be standing around here.”

It took a while, but we were finally ready to make our move. The first faster than light jump by a ship from Earth. It was historic. Tatonga put up a navigation chart for everyone to see. It was a simple drawing. On one side was Point Beta. To its right was a large curving arrow. On the other side of the tip of the arrow, Tatonga had written ‘Point Charlie.’

“Ready Captain,” Propulsion Engineer Schneider announced.

“Let’s do it,” was all the Captain said. Schneider engaged the engines.

A wave of dizziness came over me. I came this close to puking all over my console. Somewhere in the back of my head I had a vision of the jump setting off all eight of our warheads. Maybe the captain was right, we’d all come aboard expecting to fail ... and die. My subconscious still wasn’t entertaining the idea of success.

The other side of the jump point was ... well, to be honest, I’m still not sure where it is. It might not even be in our galaxy. After all my work to use the sensors to discover what was on the other side, I was getting an eyeful from the telescope monitor. Radar showed we were in some kind of six planet solar system, only the jump point was too far away to get any good readings on the planets. Besides there wasn’t much time. Charlie had also put his ships right next to the jump point.

What we found at Point Charlie was the mothership. It was huge. If you could have put Tokyo into space, it would still have been smaller than Charlie’s ship. The crew sat in stunned silence. The Captain ordered Sharkey to get us in closer. As we approached, we picked up four smaller craft hanging around the larger ship. They appeared to be the roughly the same size as the second vessel we encountered, but each was configured in a unique way. The general impression was that unlike Earth ship’s, each of Charlie’s vessels were custom built. No standardization.

It seemed like forever, but Sharkey slid the ship into position, 5,000 kilometers from the port side of one of the smaller ships. The Captain intended to fire on this ship, hoping to draw the fire of the others. Then the laser pointer would go into action.

“Arm Missiles One and Four. Major, I want both those birds right down the throat of their weak dorsal point.” The captain was cool and detached. The major nodded, as if breaking silence would attract the aliens.

“Missiles, One and Four ready,” Tatonga reported.

“Fire.”

We all felt the slight shudder as the two ICBMs left their tubes and headed for Charlie number one.

“4,000 kilometers,” Major An read the missile track to target off steadily as if it was a countdown to landing on the moon. She called off every 1,000 kilometers. The missiles were half way to target and still no response from Charlie. Did the aliens sleep? For a moment it came to my attention these aliens were complete mysteries. We assumed they kept separate watches, like we did. But for all we knew their entire crews behaved like dogs, sleeping twenty hours a day. It struck me that maybe no one was aboard these ships at all. Maybe Charlie was too smart to send his people into space. They were depending on automated systems to detect our missiles and our weapons were too primitive for the systems to detect as a hostile attack. On the other hand, maybe no one had ever fought back before.

Strange how many thoughts go through your head as you are nervously waiting for something messy to happen. I closed the door to the main telescope. The nuclear flash would ruin the optics anyway. Besides we'd get more than enough light through the front window.

"Blam ... Blam" Both flashes went off in quick succession.

"Bingo," yelled Tatonga, "scratch one Charlie." The entire crew screamed and raised their arms in triumph. Well, all except for the Captain and Oleg. Those two knew the show was far from over. They made an impression by their quiet concentration and everyone settled down quickly. One down. Four to go.

The loss of one of their ships woke the aliens up. The sky was filled with plasma bursts. Charlie was setting them off like fireworks at Chinese New Year. That is until the Captain switched on the pointer. The result was almost immediate.

Yea, there is no sound in space, but I swear I heard it.

Our little surprise worked all too well. We didn't set one plasma charge off, we must have set off hundreds. Instead of disabling the mothership, we caused it to blow itself apart. The debris destroyed the other three ships as well, cutting at least two of them in half. We were much farther away, but that only meant the blast took longer to reach us.

The blast sent us into an uncontrolled spin. The ship rocked and shook so hard it was like a crazed version of a rollercoaster ride, only with more jolts. There were so many shocks, I swore it would make my liver fall out. It took both Schneider and Sharkey a full minute to get us to zero out our yaw rate. I know it was only about a minute, but it felt like an hour. Debris took out missiles two, six and seven. Fortunately, the warheads were not armed, so all it did was waste two missiles. As for the third one, number six, well the blast tore off the whole launching tube. One less weapon for next time. The crew spent the next ten minutes patching holes in the hull to stop atmosphere from leaking out. Luck for us nothing big hit us.

When we were done, everyone noticed Oleg was still strapped into his chair. I guess in the rush, no one noticed the big Russian hadn't moved. His eyes were still open and there was a slight grin on his face.

Tatonga checked him over. His neck was broken. His lifeless body sat stoically at his post.

"Tatonga, can you alter the logs?" the Captain announced solemnly.

"What sir?"

"I want them to show that Mr. Stepanovich fired the laser. I think I know how we all feel. I know what I'm feeling. I think he would have wanted that. When we get back, make sure you tell everyone that it was our Russian friend that scored the first major victory for Earth."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

The Captain closed the big Russian's eyes. "Let's go home."