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They say flashbacks are normal. Five hundred years ago, soldiers who'd come home from Vietnam experienced them for the rest of their lives. Gulf War vets, Colombian War vets, Utopia Planitia vets—they all relived their battle experiences, over and over again.

And now I was reliving mine, too.

But this would be different, thank God. Oh, I would indeed relive it all, in precise detail, but it would only happen just this once.

And for that, I was grateful.

* * * *

In war, you're always taught to hate the enemy—and we had been at war my whole life. As a boy, I'd played with action figures. My favorite was Rod Roderick, Trisystems Interstellar Guard. He was the perfect twenty-fifth-century male specimen: tall, muscular, with coffee-colored skin; brown, almond-shaped eyes; and straight brown hair cropped short. Now that I was a Star Guard myself, I don't think I looked quite so dashing, but I was still proud to wear the teal-and-black uniform.

I'd had an Altairian action figure, too: dark green, naked—like the animal it was—with horns on its head,

spikes down its back, and teeth that stuck out even when its great gash of a mouth was sealed. Back then, I'd thought it was a male—I'd always referred to it as "he"—but now, of course, I knew that there were three Altairian sexes, and none of them corresponded precisely to our two.

But, regardless of the appropriate pronoun, I hated that toy Altairian—just as I hated every member of its evil species.

The Altairian action figure could explode, its six limbs and forked tail flying out of its body (little sensors in the toy making sure they never headed toward my eyes, of course). My Rod Roderick action figure frequently blew up the Altairian, aiming his blaster right at the center of the thing's torso, at that hideous concavity where its heart should have been, and opening fire.

And now I was going to open fire on real Altairians. Not with a blaster sidearm—there was no one-on-one combat in a real interstellar war—but with something far more devastating.

I still had my Rod Roderick action figure; it sat on the dresser in my cabin here, aboard the *Pteranodon*. But the Altairian figure was long gone—when I was fifteen, I'd decided to really blow it up, using explosives I'd concocted with a chemistry set. I'd watched in giddy wonder as it burst into a thousand plastic shards.

The *Pteranodon* was one of a trio of Star Guard vessels now approaching Altair III: the others were the *Quetzalcoatlus* and the *Rhamphorhynchus*. Each had a bridge shaped like an arrowhead, with the captain—me in the *Pteranodon*'s case—at the center of the wide base, and two rows of consoles converging at a point in front. But, of course, you couldn't see the walls; the consoles floated freely in an all-encompassing exterior hologram.

"We're about to cross the orbit of their innermost moon," said Kalsi, my navigator. "The Alties should detect us soon."

I steepled my fingers in front of my face and stared at the planet, which was showing a gibbous phase. The harsh white light from its sun reflected off the wide oceans. The planet was more like Earth than any I'd ever seen; even Tau Ceti IV looks less similar. Of course, TC4 had had no intelligent life when we got to it; only dumb brutes. But Altair III did indeed have intelligent lifeforms: it was perhaps unfortunate that first contact, light-years from here, had gone so badly, all those decades ago. We never knew who had fired first—our survey ship, the *Harmony*, or their vessel, whatever it had been named. But, regardless, both ships were wrecked in the encounter, both crews killed, bloated bodies tumbling against the night—human ones and Altairians, too. When the rescue ships arrived, those emerald-dark corpses were our first glimpse of the toothy face of the enemy.

When we encountered Altairians again, they said we'd started it. And, of course, we said they'd started it. Attempts had been made by both sides to halt the conflict, but it had continued to escalate. And now—

Now, victory was at hand. That was the only thing I could think about today.

The captains of the *Rhamphorhynchus* and *Quetzalcoatlus* were both good soldiers, too, but only one of our names would be immortalized by history—the one of us who actually got through the defenses surrounding the Altairian homeworld, and—

And that one was going to be me, Ambrose Donner, Star Guard. A thousand years from now, nay, ten thousand years hence, humans would know who their savior had been. They would—

“Incoming ships,” said Kalsi. “Three—no, four—*Nidichar*-class attack cruisers.”

I didn't have to look where Kalsi was pointing; the holographic sphere instantly changed orientation, the ships appearing directly in front of me. “Force screens to maximum,” I said.

“Done,” said Nguyen, my tactical officer.

In addition to my six bridge officers, I could see two other faces: small holograms floating in front of me. One was Heidi Davinski, captain of the *Quetzalcoatlus*; the other, Peter Chin, captain of the *Rhamphorhynchus*. “I'll take the nearest ship,” Heidi said.

Peter looked like he was going to object; his ship was closer to the nearest *Nidichar* than Heidi's was. But then he seemed to realize the same thing I did: there would be plenty to go around. Heidi had lost her husband Craig in an Altairian attack on Epsilon Indi II; she was itching for a kill.

The *Quetzalcoatlus* surged ahead. All three of our ships had the same design: a lens-shaped central hull with three spherical engine pods spaced evenly around the perimeter. But the holoprojector colorized the visual display for each one to make it easy for us to tell them apart: Heidi's ship appeared bright red.

“The *Q* is powering up its TPC,” said Nguyen. I smiled, remembering the day I blew up my Altairian toy. Normally, a tachyon-pulse cannon was only used during hyperspace battles; it would be overkill in orbital maneuvering. Our Heidi *really* wanted to make her point.

Seconds later, a black circle appeared directly in front of me: the explosion of the first *Nidichar* had been so bright, the scanners had censored the information rather than blind my crew.

Like Peter Chin, I had been content to let Heidi have the first kill; that was no big deal. But it was time the *Pteranodon* got in the game.

“I'll take the ship at 124 by 17,” I said to the other two captains. “Peter, why don't—”

Suddenly my ship rocked. I pitched forward slightly in my chair, the restraining straps holding me in place.

“Direct hit amidships—minimal damage,” said Champlain, my ship-status officer, turning to face me. “Apparently they can now shield their torpedoes against our sensors.”

Peter Chin aboard the *Rhamphorhynchus* smiled. “I guess we're not the only ones with some new technology.”

I ignored him and spoke to Nguyen. “Make them pay for it.”

The closer ship was presumably the one that had fired the torpedo. Nguyen let loose a blast from our main laser; it took a tenth of a second to reach the alien ship, but when it did, that ship cracked in two under the onslaught, a cloud of expelled atmosphere spilling out into space. A lucky shot; it shouldn't have been that easy. Still: “Two down,” I said, “two to go.”

“Afraid not, Ambrose,” said the Heidi hologram. “We've picked up a flotilla of additional Altairian singleships leaving the outer moon and heading this way. We're reading a hundred and twelve distinct sublight-thruster signatures.”

I nodded at my colleagues. “Let’s teach them what it means to mess with the Trisystems Interstellar Guard.”

The *Rhamphorhynchus* and the *Quetzalcoatlus* headed off to meet the incoming flotilla. Meanwhile, I had the *Pteranodon* fly directly toward the two remaining *Nidichar*s, much bigger than the singleships the others were going up against. The nearer of the *Nidichar*s grew bigger and bigger in our holographic display. I smiled as the details resolved themselves. *Nidichar*-class vessels were a common Altairian type, consisting of three tubular bodies, parallel to each other, linked by connecting struts. Two of the tubes were engine pods; the third was the habitat module. On the *Nidichar*s I’d seen before, it was easy to distinguish the living quarters from the other two. But this one had the habitat disguised to look just like another propulsion unit. Earlier in the war, the Star Guard had made a habit of shooting out the engine pods, humanely leaving the crew compartment intact. I guess with this latest subterfuge, the Alties thought we’d be reluctant to disable their ships at all.

They were wrong.

I didn’t want to use our tachyon-pulse cannon; it depleted the hyperdrive and I wanted to keep that in full reserve for later. “Shove some photons down their throats,” I said.

Nguyen nodded, and our lasers—thoughtfully animated in the holo display so we could see them—lanced out toward first one and then the other Altairian cruiser.

They responded in kind. Our force screens shimmered with auroral colors as they deflected the onslaught.

We jostled back and forth for several seconds, then my ship rocked again. Another stealth torpedo had made its way past our sensors.

“That one did some damage,” said Champlain. “Emergency bulkheads are in place on decks seven and eight. Casualty reports are coming in.”

The Altairians weren’t the only ones with a few tricks at their disposal. “Vent our reserve air tanks,” I said. “It’ll form a fog around us, and—”

“And we’ll see the disturbance created by an incoming torpedo,” said Nguyen. “Brilliant.”

“That’s why they pay me the colossal credits,” I said. “Meanwhile, aim for the struts joining the parts of their ships together; let’s see if we can perform some amputations.”

More animated laserfire crisscrossed the holobubble. Ours was colored blue; the aliens’, an appropriately sickly green.

“We’ve got the casualty reports from that last torpedo hit,” said Champlain. “Eleven dead; twenty-two injured.”

I couldn’t take the time to ask who had died—but I’d be damned if any more of my crew were going to be lost during this battle.

The computer had numbered the two remaining *Nidichar*s with big sans-serif digits. “Concentrate all our fire on number two,” I said. The crisscrossing lasers, shooting from the eleven beam emitters deployed

around the rim of our hull, all converged on the same spot on the same ship, severing one of the three connecting struts. As soon as it was cut, the beams converged on another strut, slicing through it, as well. One of the cylindrical modules fell away from the rest of the ship. Given the plasma streamers trailing from the stumps of the connecting struts, it must have been an engine pod. "Continue the surgery," I said to Nguyen. The beams settled on a third strut.

I took a moment to glance back at the *Rhamphorhynchus* and *Quetzalcoatlus*. The Altairian singleships were swarming around the *Rhamphorhynchus* (colored blue in the display). Peter Chin's lasers were sweeping through the swarm, and every few seconds I saw a singleship explode. But he was still overwhelmed.

Heidi, aboard the *Quetzalcoatlus*, was trying to draw the swarm's fire, but with little success. And if she fired into the cloud of ships, either her beams or debris from her kills might strike the *Rhamphorhynchus*.

I swung to look at the hologram of Peter's head. "Do you need help?" I asked.

"No, I'm okay. We'll just—"

The fireball must have roared through his bridge from stern to bow; the holocamera stayed online long enough to show me the wall of flame behind Pete, then the flesh burning off his skull, and then—

And then nothing; just an ovoid of static where Peter Chin's head had been. After a few seconds, even that disappeared.

I turned to the holo of Heidi, and I recognized her expression: it was the same one I myself was now forcing onto my face. She knew, as I did, that the eyes of her bridge crew were on her. She couldn't show revulsion. She especially couldn't show fear—not while we were still in battle. Instead, she was displaying steel-eyed determination. "Let's get them," she said quietly.

I nodded, and—

And then my ship reeled again. We'd all been too distracted by what had happened to the *Rhamphorhynchus* to notice the wake moving through the cloud of expelled gas around our ship. Another stealth torpedo had exploded against our hull.

"Casualty reports coming in—" began Champlain.

"Belay that," I said. The young man looked startled, but there was nothing I could do about the dead and injured now. "What's the status of our cargo?"

Champlain recovered his wits; he understood the priorities, too. "Green lights across the board," he said.

I nodded, and the computer issued an affirming *ding* so that those crew members who were no longer looking at me would know I'd acknowledged the report. "Leave the *Nidichar*s; let's get rid of those singleships before they take out the *Quetzalcoatlus*."

The starfield wheeled around us as the *Pteranodon* changed direction.

"Fire at will," I said.

Our lasers lanced forward, taking out dozens of the singleships. The *Quetzalcoatlus* was eliminating its

share of them, too. The two remaining *Nidichar* s were now barreling towards us. Kalsi used the ACS thrusters to spin us like a top, lasers shooting off in all directions.

Suddenly, a black circle appeared in front of my eyes again: there had been an explosion on the *Quetzalcoatlus* . A stealth torpedo had connected directly with one of the *Q* 's three engine spheres, and, as I saw once the censor disengaged, the explosion had utterly destroyed the sphere and taken a big, ragged chunk out of the lens-shaped main hull.

We'd cut the singleship swarm in half by now, according to the status displays. Heidi powered up her tachyon-pulse cannon again; it was risky, with her down to just two engines, but we needed to level the playing field. The discharge from her TCP destroyed one of the two remaining *Nidichar* s: there was now only one big Altairian ship to deal with, and forty-seven single-occupant craft.

I left Heidi to finish mopping up the singleships; we were going to take out the final *Nidichar* . I really didn't want to use our TCP—the energy drain was too great. But we couldn't risk being hit by another stealth torpedo; we'd left our cloud of expelled atmosphere far behind when we'd gone after the swarm, and—

And the *Pteranodon* rocked again. A structural member dropped from the ceiling, appearing as if by magic as it passed through the holobubble; it crashed to the deck next to my chair.

“Evasive maneuvers!” I shouted.

“Not possible, Captain,” said Kalsi. “That came from the planet's surface; its rotation must have finally given a ground-based disruptor bank a line-of-sight at us.”

“Cargo status?”

“Still green, according to the board,” said Champlain.

“Send someone down there,” I said. “I want an eyeball inspection.”

Heidi had already moved the *Quetzalcoatlus* so that the remaining singleships were between her and the planet; the ground-based cannon couldn't get her without going through its own people.

The remaining *Nidichar* fired at us again, but—

Way to go, Nguyen!

A good, clean blast severed the habitat module from the two engines—a lucky guess about which was which had paid off. The habitat went pinwheeling away into the night, atmosphere puffing out of the connecting struts.

We swung around again, carving into the remaining singleships. Heidi was doing the same; there were only fifteen of them left.

“Incom—” shouted Kalsi, but he didn't get the whole word out before the disruptor beam from the planet's surface shook us again. An empty gray square appeared in the holobubble to my right; the cameras along the starboard side of the ship had been destroyed.

“We won't survive another blast from the planet's surface,” Champlain said.

“It must take them a while to recharge that cannon, or they'd have blown both of us out of the sky by now,” Heidi's hologram said. “It's probably a meteor deflector, never intended for battle.”

While we talked, Nguyen took out four more singleships, and the *Quetzalcoatlus* blasted another five into oblivion.

“If it weren't for that ground-based cannon...” I said.

Heidi nodded once, decisively. “We all know what we came here to do—and that's more important than any of us.” The holographic head swiveled; she was talking to her own bridge crew now. “Mr. Rabinovitch, take us down.”

If there was a protest, I never heard it. But I doubt there was. I didn't know Rabinovitch—but he was a Star Guard, too.

Heidi turned back to me. “This is for Peter Chin,” she said. And then, perhaps more for her own ears than my own, “And for Craig.”

The *Quetzalcoatlus* dived toward Altair III, its sublight thrusters going full blast. Its force screens had no trouble getting it through the atmosphere, and apparently the ground-based cannon wasn't yet recharged: her ship crashed right into the facility housing it on the southern continent. We could see the shockwave moving across the planet's surface, a ridge of compressed air expanding outward from where the *Quetzalcoatlus* had hit.

Nguyen made short work of the remaining singleships, their explosions a series of pinpoint novas against the night.

And Altair III spun below us, defenseless.

* * * *

Humanity had just barely survived five hundred years living with the nuclear bomb. It had been used eleven times on Earth and Mars, and over one hundred million had died—but the human race had gone on.

But our special cargo, the Annihilator, was more—much more. It was a planet killer, a destroyer of whole worlds. We'd said when Garo Alexanian invented the technology that we'd never, ever use it.

But, of course, we were going to. We were going to use it right now.

It could have gone either way. Humans certainly weren't more clever than Altairians; the technology we'd recovered from wrecked ships proved that. But sometimes you get a lucky break.

Our scientists were always working to develop new weapons; there was no reason to think that Altairian scientists weren't doing the same thing. Atomic nuclei are held together by the strong nuclear force; without it, the positively charged protons would repel each other, preventing atoms from forming. The Annihilator translates the strong nuclear force into electromagnetism for a fraction of a second, causing atoms to instantly fling apart.

It was a brilliant invention from a species that really wasn't all that good at inventing. With the countless isolated communities that had existed in Earth's past, you'd expect the same fundamental inventions to

have been made repeatedly—but they weren't. Things we now consider intuitively obvious were invented only once: the water wheel, gears, the magnetic compass, the windmill, the printing press, the camera obscura, and the alphabet itself arose only a single time in all of human history; it was only trade that brought them to the rest of humanity. Even that seemingly most obvious of inventions, the wheel, was created just twice: first, near the Black Sea, nearly six thousand years ago, then again, much later, in Mexico. Out of the hundred billion human beings who have existed since the dawn of time, precisely two came up with the idea of the wheel. All the rest of us simply copied it from them.

So it was probably a fluke that Alexanian conceived of the Annihilator. If it hadn't occurred to him, it might never have occurred to anyone else in the Trisystems; certainly, it wouldn't have occurred to anybody any time soon. Five hundred years ago, they used to say that string theory was twenty-first-century science accidentally discovered in the twentieth century; the Annihilator was perhaps thirtieth-century science that we'd been lucky enough to stumble upon in the twenty-fifth.

And that luck could have just as easily befallen an Altairian physicist instead of a human one. In which case, it would be Earth and Tau Ceti IV and Epsilon Indi II that would have been about to feel its effects, instead of Altair III.

We released the Annihilator—a great cylindrical contraption, more than three hundred meters long—from our cargo bay; the *Quetzalcoatlus* and the *Rhamphorhynchus* had had Annihilators, too, each costing over a trillion credits. Only one was left.

But one was all it would take.

Of course, we'd have to engage our hyperdrive as soon as the annihilation field connected with Altair III. The explosion would be unbelievably powerful, releasing more joules than anyone could even count—but none of it would be superluminal. We would be able to outrun it, and, by the time the expanding shell reached Earth, sixteen years from now, planetary shielding would be in place.

The kill would go to the *Pteranodon*; the name history would remember would be mine.

* * * *

They teach you to hate the enemy—they teach you that from childhood.

But when the enemy is gone, you finally have time to reflect.

And I did a lot of that. We all did.

About three-quarters of Altair III was utterly destroyed by the annihilation field, and the rest of it, a misshapen chunk with its glowing iron core exposed, broke up rapidly.

The war was over.

But we were not at peace.

* * * *

The sphere was an unusual sort of war memorial. It wasn't in Washington or Hiroshima or Dachau or Bogatá, sites of Earth's great monuments to the horrors of armed conflict. It wasn't at Elysium on Mars, or New Vancouver on Epsilon Indi II, or Pax City on Tau Ceti IV. Indeed it had no permanent home, and, once it faded from view, a short time from now, no human would ever see it again.

A waste of money? Not at all. We had to do *something*—people understood that. We had to commemorate, somehow, the race that we'd obliterated and the planet we'd destroyed, the fragment left of it turning into rubble, a spreading arc now, a full asteroid belt later, girdling Altair.

The memorial had been designed by Anwar Kanawatty, one of the greatest artists in the Trisystems: a sphere five meters across, made of transparent diamond. Representations of the continents and islands of the planet that had been Altair III (a world farther out from that star now had that designation) were laser-etched into the diamond surface, making it frostily opaque in those places. But at the gaps between—representing the four large oceans of that planet, and the thousands of lakes—the diamond was absolutely clear, and the rest of the sculpture was visible within. Floating in the center of the sphere were perfect renderings of three proud Altairian faces, one for each gender, a reminder of the race that had existed once but did no more.

Moments ago, the sphere had been launched into space, propelled for the start of its journey by invisible force beams. It was heading in the general direction of the Andromeda galaxy, never to be seen again. Kanawatty's plans had already been destroyed; not even a photograph or holoscan of the sphere was retained. Humans would never again look upon the memorial, but still, for billions of years, far out in space, it would exist.

No markings were put on it to indicate where it had come from, and, for the only time in his life, Kanawatty had not signed one of his works; if by some chance it was ever recovered, nothing could possibly connect it with humanity. But, of course, it probably would never be found by humans or anyone else. Rather, it would drift silently through the darkness, remembering for those who had to forget.

The flashback was necessary, they said. It was part of the process required to isolate the memories that were to be overwritten.

Memory revision will let us put the Annihilator genie back in the bottle. And, unlike so many soldiers of the past, unlike all those who had slaughtered in the name of king and country before me, I will never again have a flashback.

What if we need the Annihilator again?

What if we find ourselves in conflict with another race, as we had with the people of Altair? Isn't it a mistake to wipe out knowledge of such a powerful weapon?

I look at the war memorial one last time, as it drifts farther and farther out into space, a crystal ball against the velvet firmament. It's funny, of course: there's no air in space, and so it should appear rock-steady in my field of view. But it's blurring.

I blink my eyes.

And I have my answer.

The answer is no. It is not a mistake.

