

Kings of the High Frontier

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"A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed at some indefinite time in the future."

— George S. Patton Jr.

Carlos Perez nodded at the image of his son on the laptop screen on his desk, glancing briefly into the web cam mounted there. He said, "Yes, that seems best. Leave a minimal team in the captured space station, take all the firepower we have, and blast that new battle station. When can you go?"

Juan looked at his father's image and said, "Right away. There's no advantage to delay, things will only get worse the longer we wait."

Seeing nods from all the others present at his conference table, and from the images of the other team members now in orbit, Carlos nodded once, firmly, and said, "Go with God." He sat back and looked at the main status screen, thinking through the orbital trajectories. A significant concentration of their firepower should be nearing Battle Station 7 in about two hours. Carlos ordered the calculations and had them sent up to the orbiting teams. The same calculations could be made on orbit, of course, but having the ground team handle things reduced the work load on those in orbit.

Hu Ponce spoke up from his position near the ceiling of the *Destiny* lab module. He asked, "Why don't we keep skeleton crews aboard the spacecraft we send against that new battle station, and leave as many here in our captures space station? Wouldn't that be safer than sending everyone into harm's way?"

Juan smiled at his team mate. He replied, "You know better, Hu. Concentrating our forces only makes sense if we use them in attack. Putting everyone in one pressure vessel, the one with the least firepower, makes no sense. It is the same centralisation mythos that ruined the economy a few years ago. As it is, the people we leave here need to isolate each module, and wear their pressure suits with helmets at hand, as unpleasant as that will be. No telling what may happen, except that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy."

Deke Mason looked over to Juan's end of the module and asked, "What is the plan?"

Juan replied, "Envelopment. I want to go at that battle station from every direction at once. We can get everyone there at the same time, about two hours ten minutes from now. Think of it as the enemy's gate in [Ender's Game](#). That battle station is 'down' and our goal is to send everything we've got down at it. If it does to the Guban station what it did to Sky Angel Seven, we're going to have trouble holding on up here."

Sky Angel One

Tiffany Tomasovna was worried. Despite their envelopment of Battle Station Seven, it was still very dangerous. Its sky rods and its rail guns were part of the danger, its MIRV warheads were another, and despite a number of solid hits, its reactor was very much on line. Tif could see its automated systems repairing the damage. Two additional sources of concern. The plane change manoeuvre it had executed was bringing it toward the captured international space station, what they were calling Rebel Orbital Port Two (ROP2). Worse, it was also going to be over Somaliland in a few hours and be able to target its warheads and sky rods at ROP1 now in finally launch prep in the Guban.

The rebellion could lose its temporary logistics hub, lose its main base of operations in orbit before launch, and they'd launched everything they had ready. Additional Sky Angel teams were gearing up for launches in about a week, sooner if anyone could manage, but a great deal of good fortune would be needed to reduce that timeline for any of the potential replacements.

This idea about needing replacements had only just crossed Tif's mind when she saw Sky Angel Fourteen take a direct hit on their propellant tank. There was an explosion and an asymmetrical impulse, causing the vehicle to tumble.

Juan Perez took charge and said, "Ramos, move Angel 12 to cover that gap, we don't want to leave an opening. Pete do you read? Status report on Angel 14 please."

Everyone was busier than usual for tens of seconds while they adjusted their positions. Battle Station Seven responded after a second to the gap with a flurry of rail gun missiles and several more sky rods at Angel 12 to attempt to prevent the gap from being covered.

After fifteen seconds of this activity, Frank Taylor's voice was heard from Angel 14. He said, "Pete Ling is badly injured from an electrical fire at his control station. I've re-routed controls and should have our tumble recovery completed in a couple of minutes. We'll be low propellant though. Main oxygen tank is gone, using auxiliaries only."

Tif opened a separate encrypted channel to Juan. She said, "There's a timing delay. That beast has a remote operator. If we can isolate its signal or destroy its antennae, we can put it on internal control. Then we just have to outsmart a machine."

Juan replied, "Thanks Tif, that's good thinking. There are a number of antenna structures we can target."

Switching to the general channel, Juan called out, "All Angels, target anything that looks like a radio system on that beast. We're not going to break through the reactor any time soon, but we can take down its remote operator's input. That should reduce its tactical capabilities. Angel 8, rendezvous with Angel 14 and deploy tethers. Gil, see if you and Frank can arrange a tow back to ROP2."

Twenty minutes later, a new problem became urgent. Although they were fairly sure the remote operator was largely or at least intermittently cut off, all of their vehicles were running low on ammo. Isaac Vossius in the captured battle station, now designated Rebel Battle One or RB1, reported that he had zero sky rods left. Only one of the rods he'd thrown had damaged the last enemy battle station early in the conflict, and that damage seemed to be fully repaired now.

Juan Perez keyed off the external communications system for his team's spacecraft. Then he looked

across his crew compartment at Hu Ponse and Nancy Farnham who were still aboard. For tactical reasons, to conserve manoeuvring fuel, they had left George Memtok aboard Rebel Orbital Port Two, the former international space station. Hu seemed to have anticipated the moment because he returned Juan's gaze and nodded.

Nancy was a little busy just then targetting their rail gun to send the last of their ammo at the enemy. That accomplished, she looked up at Hu's tap on her elbow. Seeing his gesture, she looked over at Juan.

"We can hit that reactor with a collision," Juan said. Nancy looked confused for a moment, not sure what would be colliding with the enemy's reactor. Then her eyes widened.

A thousand thoughts passed through Nancy's mind in a few seconds. Misgivings, unfinished business, and the situation screens in front of her all flashed by in her mind's eye. The deciding factors were the vulnerable space station on the ground and the recently captured space station in orbit. They didn't have much time left to save either target. They really wanted to save both. All these ideas brought home the conclusion that Juan had reached. Glancing briefly at Hu, she realised that he had also steeled his resolve. Looking Juan in the eye, she nodded.

Juan's hands moved on the controls to shift their orbit, and he keyed on their communications with the fleet. "Sky Angel Twenty, to all angel teams. I've taken a collision course with the enemy battle station ..."

Isaac Vossius spoke up, "I'm sorry sir, but I cannot let you do that. Tell my family goodbye."

From the position of his vehicle, it was clear that he had reached the same conclusion even earlier than Juan had. Moments later Isaac's massive captured battle station collided with the nuclear reactor of the enemy vehicle. The collision broke open the containment vessel, destroyed all the coolant systems simultaneously, and the explosions from his propellant tanks took Isaac's life and further damaged the enemy station.

There was a moment of stunned amazement. A general intake of breath could be heard followed by muttered prayers and expressions of shock.

Unfortunately, in its death throes, the enemy station now launched all its remaining sky rods and all six of its MIRV warheads. None of the rebel fleet were targetted. The sky rods headed toward the orbiting space station and the reentry vehicles headed for ground targets.

Tif said, "What can we do? Everyone is out of ammo!"

Gil Dartmouth spoke up, "Not quite everyone. Frank and I are targetting the sky rods now. We should be able to disable them before they damage anything."

Juan's eyebrows went up. In the heat of battle, he'd forgotten about Angels 14 and 8 which had shaped orbit for the captured space station earlier in the conflict. He sat back full against his padded seat and sighed.

At that moment, Nancy saw an indicator light up on her control panel. She said, "New signal detected."

Seeing that she had her controls well in hand, Juan said, "Let's hear it."

There was a brief squawk of radio noise. Then a new voice spoke up, "Rebel fleet, this is Master Control. My name is Lars Hopkins. When you removed the antenna systems, Master Station Seven went to internal command and control. Unfortunately, its software design was determined by psychopaths who made sure it would wreak havoc if it was about to be disabled. I am now triggering the self-destruct systems for those nuclear warheads. Please confirm. My action is going to be seen as betrayal by the owners, of course. No doubt it is my moment to take independent action. As you can imagine, I don't want the destruction of six cities on my conscience."

All across the rebel fleet, optical systems were already focused on the re-entering warheads, and, sure enough, one by one they began to show small explosions. Safety devices detonated their internal propellant tanks and exploded their guidance systems. These asymmetric impulses caused each warhead to tumble.

Nuclear warheads designed for reentry are fairly robust, but they do depend on attitude control during reentry. Otherwise, the enormous heat of atmospheric reentry can completely consume the components necessary to cause a nuclear explosion. Of course, the nuclear material itself is very dense, and some components would likely reach the surface of the Earth, but with neither guidance nor propulsion, and with their reentry shielding rendered useless from tumbling, there was no longer a danger of nuclear detonation, with one exception.

As each warhead was nullified by the self-destruct system, Lars entered a new set of codes at his work station, giving him the ability to signal the self-destruct on the next warhead. He was acting rapidly, but his controls were designed to limit his freedom for independent action. He was having to over-ride multiple systems meant to lock him out in case he went rogue. These intricacies worked the first time, the second time, the third time, the fourth time.

All across the sky, and down at Angels Control, sighs of relief were widespread as each of the first four warheads was destroyed. About thirty seconds went by and then the fifth warhead detonated.

Typing furiously at his work station, Lars experienced a power failure. His entire work station went dark. A moment later his entire vehicle went dark. The internal protocols had given up on keeping him in line, and had nullified his ability to act.

Juan typed a few commands and sent an in-the-clear radio message. He said, "Lars, come in Lars. Master Control, five out of six is good, but can you go one better?"

There was no reply. Far below, the last remaining reentry vehicle dwindled with distance.

Juan switched back to the rebel fleet channel and said, "Angel 16, see if you can rendezvous with that Master Control spacecraft. I think our new friend is in trouble. And, anyway, there's zero chance he'll want to return home after what he's done. Angel Control, there's going to be a nuclear detonation somewhere on the eastern seaboard."

Hampton Roads, Virginia, was a body of water famous for the battle of the ironclads in 1862. At that site, the *USS Monitor* and the *CSS Virginia* fought for two days in early March in an ill-fated to lift the blockade of Confederate ports. The surface detonation there of a 475 kilotonne nuclear warhead wiped out ships, warehouses, bridges, buildings, ended tens of thousands of lives, and wiped out electrical and

electronic systems for miles around.

The war for freedom had just gone nuclear. No one in the rebellion had any idea why Hampton Roads had been targetted.

[End part thirty-two, continues in part thirty-three]

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