

Before the Great War

Posted on March 20th, 2011
Author: Andrew Lim

Vasudans- The First Contact

Within a month of the first successful prototype that delivered a drone through subspace, the prototype was adapted for standard GTA ship usage. Within a year, every ship in the GTA had one. And Nathaniel Robert Katz was the most famous person in the entire existing boundaries of the GTA that were now expanding far and wide...

“I swear, I’ve wasted my entire life on this crock of a boat.”

Captain Henry George Reynolds of the Network Horizons Inc. Merchant Space Fleet. A little over fifty, with blond hair lined with silver streaks at the sides and a rough gray stubble, Captain Reynolds looked like he’d been through it all? ‘Nam, Desert Storm, World War III, the Martian Revolution, and yet he’d never served in a single one. His frazzled rough-hewn demeanor came from thirty years of piloting freighters, and incidentally, the same one too, the Poseidon-class Freighter *Illiad*.

A perfectly fine name for a lousy ship.

At first glance, the *Illiad* was a freighter in tip-top condition, down to the finish so bright you’d burn your eyebrows off just looking. But it wasn’t.

Upon entering such a pompously named vessel, the first thing that would hit you was the stench. A busted power conduit had zapped the hell out of a bolt that smacked the waste containment unit, or in pilot lingo, the ‘dump tank’ wide open. It’s contents somehow reached the cracked pipes of the ventilation system. The rest goes on from there.

The ship used to smell normal, with it’s stale recycled and Arctic-cold air. It soon moved on to the smell of engine coolant, a major disaster because the configuration and the indication of leaking coolant may have caused the entire reactor to the freighter to go to critical mass and would cause a lot of fireworks, especially with the cargo they were hauling that time. For a while, the smells of the ship had been a good indicator of it’s overall integrity, but now all they could smell was...

“You ate beans today, didn’t you?”

“Now what makes you say that?”

First Mate Gregory Rawlins, twenty eight, said nothing for a moment, shaking his head, and suddenly finding an interest in an incoming freighter that had begun landing outside the viewport.

“Oh, umm..nothing...must’ve been one of those..uh..other people that passed by...” he shrugged, still staring out at the approaching freighter. As it neared the landing pad, at all of it’s vertexes, a hiss of steam shot out, slowing it to a halt as the pilot cut power. They were heading through the West Wing of Arcturus Space Center, a trading port for major companies supplying the outer colonies; on their way to the *Ill*, as it was called, symbolic to the freighter’s integrity.

“Oh...” Henry nodded. Greg turned his brown-haired head back.

“Were you?” he asked. His young face not yet creased with wrinkles from stress looked inquisitively innocent.

“What?” Henry looked at his companion, and raised a bushy eyebrow.

“Eating beans?” Greg said wryly. He dropped his clasped hands to his sides.

“What?” Henry scowled.

“Now don’t start that with me. It’s not a trick question.” Greg sighed. “You have been, haven’t you?”

“Well...no, not exactly.” Henry felt a warmth spread to his cheeks, and he pouted slightly. Greg crossed his arms over his chest.

“Oh? So how exactly do you not exactly eat beans?”

“It’s possible, you know. Hell, if we invented subspace, we probably can do anything!” he said, trying to shy away from the course of the conversation. Greg held fast.

“Uh huh. Just like how we’re gonna hop on the *Ill*, blast off to Icarus, and run into some undiscovered alien species, make first contact, and then become ambassadors?”

“Well you never know...” Henry shrugged as meekly as a man his stature could. It was quiet for a moment, as they loaded on a lift to their launch pad. They muscled their way in, digging a small area for themselves and being quiet for a while as the lift began its ascent.

“So were you eating beans?” Henry asked.

“He probably did,” a nasal voice from behind came. Henry turned to see a well-attired businessman with his fingers pinched over his nostrils. Henry turned beet red as a ripple of laughter bounced across the elevator.

“Thank you for your consideration, Greg,” said Henry as the lift doors open.

“Hey, as long as you leave it in here and not on the *Ill*, it’s fine with me,” he said as the big man ahead of him exited. He quickened his pace to catch up, and the last thing he heard from the lift was from a passenger entering: “Holy cow, what died in here?!”

* * *

“Yet?”

“Nope.”

“Yet?”

“Nope.”

“Yet..”

Bzzt!

“Oww! Yes, yet!”

“...oops...”

With her long blonde hair tied back in a pony-tail and her lithe figure betraying her formidable strength, Shannon Douglas, twenty seven, extracted her head from the engine’s maintenance hatch and examined her wounded hand. There was a bit of redness, apparent under the black grease that had accumulated from hours of work with the ship’s coolant exchange system. She placed her ratchet down beside her, and leaned over the edge of the ship. About twelve feet down, she looked at her partner.

Timothy “Twinkie” Rawlins, younger brother of the first mate on the *Illiad*, looked up to her with squinty eyes. Like a scrawnier version of his older, brawny sibling, Twinkie could have been better looking had he been grown on a larger frame. But he wasn’t, and his gangling posture was

comical at most. Shannon knew Twinkie had a crush on him, and made light to tease him once in a while, her own personal crusade each day.

“Okay, the pumps are up and working again, and I’ve patched up the majority of the leakage. At least no more waste is gonna get into our coolant tanks,” she reported. Wearing a revealing top and very short shorts, she spent most of their stay at O’Hare Spaceport flaunting her curves for Twinkie’s enjoyment. It was all a game, and she hoped Twinkie hadn’t figured it out yet. As Twinkie nodded, and beamed at her, Shannon returned his smile with equal enthusiasm until she noticed an...odd...odor in the air.

“Shannon! She all set to go?” called her captain, Henry Reynolds, from his approach to the ship. As he got closer, she noted a very...distinct, for the lack of a better word, odor.

“Uh...yeah. We’re all set, but it’s gonna be at least another half an hour before the quartermaster’s ready with the rest of our cargo,” she said. She looked down at Rawlins for some answers, and he nodded gravely. She nodded back.

“You ate beans, didn’t you?” Shannon said, more of a statement than a question.

Suddenly, Twinkie burst out from the hold, staggering and gasping for breath. His tongue lolled out as he collapsed on the floor and began to roll around, stamping his feet and choking.

“The Cap’n ate beans! I’m dying! Gimme CPR, Shannon...”

“...that was subtle...” muttered Greg.

“What is up with you people and beans today? For crying out loud, can’t a guy eat a childog and not have the whole universe breathing down on his neck for it?” he said, throwing his arms up in the air and flabbergasted. She hooked her heels behind the ladder rungs, and slid down. Withdrawing a rag from her back pocket and mopping up her greasy palms, she shrugged.

“An honest question...” she said, and Henry tried to avoid her gaze. Then, he looked back up at her, and with a set look on his face, one of those ‘I’m the captain’ looks.

“So what was it?” Henry asked.

“You would never believe it if I told you,” she said. On their way in-system, their ramjet intake valve had failed and let in a small piece of debris. They quickly landed and Shannon got on the job. She squinted.

“Well, you know how I said, ‘What kind of crap got stuck in there?’” she quoted herself.

“Yes.”

“Well...yeah...”

“Oh...this just does it. I’m lodging another complaint to Interstellar Standards about illegal waste dumping.”

“How do we, of all people, run into it? I don’t think I’ve ever even heard of this happening when space dumping was still legal,” was all Greg could say.

“Who knows? Honestly, I can’t even tell if it’s...biomatter...it looks strange...”

“Never mind that, it’s just some...crap...after all.” Greg brushed the subject away.

“Uh-huh. Well, get ready to saddle up in a half an hour. Twink?” Henry called.

“How’s the Navsoft?” Henry inquired, using spacer’s slang for navigation software.

“It’s fixed, mostly. Trust Macrosoft to botch another program. I don’t even want to touch that

Viewport '97 they're bringing out," he said.

"That Will Bates really gets under people's skins. Hell, he's makin' tons of money but no friends...I'm pretty sure I'd want to be in his shoes though..."

"His five-trillion credit wingtips he uses to run from that Las Vegas lady?"

"The same,"

"Wait, Attorney General Las Vegas is a woman?" asked Greg.

"Yes!" said Shannon, tossing a loose strand of hair over her shoulder.

"Oh...sure could've fooled me..."

* * *

Within a half an hour, as the quartermaster promised, the *Illiad*'s cargo had been secured and the crew boarded for takeoff. Twinkie had stayed onboard, playing games on the main computer. Oftentimes when playing simulation games, as he was partial to, he would route the cockpit view through the HUD and use the freighter controls as his own flight controls. He was very familiar with them and was a considerable ace pilot on this type of interface, though could adapt to mostly any other configuration quickly.

This is what nerds do in their spare time..., thought Greg.

The HUD display flashed deep red as Twinkie's opponent scored hits on his forward screens. Lately, he'd become engrossed in a game based on mining robots that had gone haywire due to an alien computer virus. Flying a fighter-ship known as a Pyro-GX, a futuristic version of the descender craft, the Pyro-GT, Twinkie had linked his game through the powerful subspace transmitter to link onto a 'net game. Greg moved in for a closer look.

Twinkie's opponent was good. As Twinkie pursued him, the pilot scrubbed thrust and jerked downwards. The screen flashed red again as Twinkie took more hits to the belly of his fighter. Twinkie immediately responded with a short burst of afterburners, and letting velocity carry him away, he pointed the fighter's nose downward, he let out a long stream of explosive shells in his opponent's direction. The shells tracked up their battlefield's stone walls, stained orange by the light of the lava fall in their current area. Little did the other pilot know that Twinkie's burst was a setup?the other pilot fell back against a small outcropping that Twinkie had anticipated to be there. Distracted for a moment while under the outcropping, he tried to escape sideways, but it was already too late. Twinkie had his thumb down on the secondary fire button, unleashing a massive red projectile in the general direction of his opponent.

For a weapon of its mass, it was extremely graceful as it arced down on top of the other craft, unsuspecting of it and unable to dodge even with the nimble craft's mobility and the slow velocity of the red death heading his way. The projectile smashed head-on into the cockpit, loosing an enormous red shockwave. When the burst had cleared, the opponent Pyro-GX began its deathroll, rocked with explosions as it spiraled into a fiery finish?

"That's enough, Twinkmeister. Tell your buddy to hold on, and route your game to the secondary, we're gonna lift off now. Oh hey, and uh, good flying man," he patted his younger brother on the shoulder.

"Thanks," Twinkie replied distractedly, as he typed a message into the computer. He hit a couple of keys to transfer the game interface into another console, and moved into the corresponding seat.

"Did you purge the controls of your configs?" asked Greg, turning around in the pilot's seat to look at his brother.

"I...think..." muttered Twinkie, once more delved deeply into the game.

"Don't think, just do it," said Greg, relieving the seat for Twinkie to double-check.

"Aww...here come play for me, and don't screw up like last time!" he said.

"C'mon, piloting's my career, what could go wrong?" Greg reassured him.

0. Within five minutes of play, Twinkie's score was at a tenuous 4-3, down from the original 6-

"Greg!"

"Well, I'm just not very good at flying in these types of games..."

"It's not flying in the game I'm worried about now..."

* * *

Within the depths of subspace, the *Illiad's* crew could finally kick back for the rest of the ride. Set on proximity jump beacons in corresponding space to raise the alarm if they were off course, the crew resigned to the cramped, but ample lounge. Shannon had kept the debris that was lodged in the ramjet intake to examine, as they were doing now. They had let it sit, and using bits and pieces of a self-built electron microscope that Twinky had been piecing together, they bombarded it with particles in an attempt to identify it.

"Resolution up some more, Twink," said Greg.

"Res is now at two thousand," said Twink, doing his best impression of a computer's vodder unit. He giggled to himself. Shannon smiled at him, and was thinking Eww, what a dork.

"I remember back in high school when we'd play with electron microscopes. Oh, I remember that time, that immature freshman guy...oh I forgot his name...! Well, anyway, he and Alysa Valdez were like, lab partners, and he like, used the microscope to see if he could see through her blouse oh gosh, like what a pervert!" she said, using her best valley-girl accent.

"Uh...Shannon?" said Twinkie, somewhat quietly.

"Yes, Twinkie?" she replied, twisting a strand of hair around her forefinger.

"That freshman was...me..." he said quietly.

"Oh. Oops, sorry," she laughed, ending in a sigh.

"Oh...gawshwhadadork..." she muttered. The lounge attendance became suddenly remote and drifting conversations began.

"Hey, hey crew! Lookit I think I found something!"

"What? What?"

Greg, Twinkie, and Shannon gathered around their captain.

"This piece of crap just isn't any piece of crap!"

"Think before you speak, sir." said Twinkie.

"I mean, this piece of crap ain't human!"

Shannon gasped, while Twinkie leaned in for a closer look. Greg still looked skeptically at it.

"Uh...and how would you know that?"

"Trust me, when you work with crap, you know crap." Henry cracked with a wide grin.

Shannon immediately on an impulse, whacked him in the back of the head. The force of her blow laid his face deep into the biomatter.

“Eww! Haha, the cap’s finally done it! He’s a craphead!” laughed Twinkie. He rolled around on the deck hysterically.

“Oh, sorry!” cried Shannon, though half thinking of Twinkie’s dorkiness again. She went down to the kitchenette and drew a roll of paper towels. Helping Henry mop his face could only make Twinkie laugh some more. Suddenly, there was a chiming sound.

“What was that?” Henry asked, wiping the matter off his eyes.

“Comm signal!”

“What? From who?”

“Get cleaned up first, you don’t want anyone to see you like this,” said Greg. “I’ll get it.” he hopped up a step and disappeared into the hall to the cockpit. He returned less than a minute later, a look of awe and amazement on his face.

“Who was it?” Henry asked, about to head up with Twinkie and Shannon at his heels.

“Uh..he’s still on...” Greg could only say. He fell into step next to him as they all headed for the cockpit. Henry turned his attention on the communications screen.

“Well who?” Henry looked at Greg’s face, which was tinged in the bluish backlighting as they entered the bridge.

“You’d better see for yourself,” said Greg.

“Oh my...”

“Huh...?” Henry wheeled his head around to look?

“What? What? I can’t see!” Twinkie cried out, hopping up and down to look over his taller crew members shoulders. As he squeezed between Henry and Greg, he gasped. For a moment, they stared, their faces bathed in the green glow of the communications screen. The person at the other end had stopped talking, and moved closer to the camera. The person tapped it a couple of times and breathed on it. The four still stared in awe.

Tall, with broad shoulders, the alien could not be discerned shapewise as the rest of it’s body was hidden under a large metallic armor-like shell that encased him. His small squinty eyes were placed under a large browridge. Lacking a nose, his mouth came up just a few inches under his eyes. His head jutted backwards.

“Ign’manuk?” it said. “I’vrmalabalakyutgeso...ie?”

Finally, Greg broke the silence.

“You were right, Cap’n,”

“About what, Greg?” asked Henry, eyes glued to the monitor.

“You can ‘not exactly’ eat beans...”

After the original transmission from the Vasudan ship, Capt. Reynolds attempted to create a lingual rapport between himself and the Vasudan at the other end. Though he was able to teach the Vasudan the Terran Standard words of “hand” and “nose”, they failed utterly otherwise. Falling back to discuss what to do next, they occupy the alien a while longer while Greg clandestinely

alerts GTA to the presence of a new sentient being. Meanwhile, Twinkie is struck by the idea to send a mathematical first-contact package, as math was the universal language. Little did he know that on a number system based on eights, it did not go completely understood. In doing so, the Vasudan ship finally gave up, and with a few parting words of gibberish, departed. Tracing the Illiad's wake trail back to the O'Hare Spaceway, the Vasudans met with the GTSC-Archemies, who tried to convey to them to trade off information of a general-access type to them so they may match and correlate, and come up with a "squawker" program to translate languages. This was done so, and within the hour of meeting, they were able to inform the Vasudan captain to try to arrange a meeting in exactly one month, where they discovered that Vasudan and Human territories intersected.

So begins a path anew, one of hopes and dreams shattered forever in the wake of a galactic conflict to ever change the face of the universe as we know it. A terrible war of destruction, only to leave behind a legacy of pain and unanswered questions. And to those who ask the questions are left with nothing but shouts in the darkness.