

Flame Race

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Flame Race: Return to the Dance

GTA Front Line Relief Outpost

Silence. That is all the bridge crew of Vega's sole FLR Outpost has known for the past thirty-six earth hours. The silence of repetitive, incessant computer beeps and quiet, robotic whines indicating all is well. The silence of the fusion reactor deep within, the constant powerful chaos inside muffled by several station decks. The slight, grinding silence of a hangar door sliding open or closed somewhere, consuming or spewing a Centaur support ship out to refuel or rearm perimeter guard ships or sentry guns. The silence of the bridge comm console letting out periodic beeps of varying reverberating strength as the station's radar boasted the presence of the constantly moving ships. And most importantly, the silence of an anxious bridge crew, waiting nervously for news of distant battles.

Currently, only one GTA task force was out looking for trouble. The GTD Citadel, her arrangement of several hundred fighters, and her four-cruiser escort squadron were out and about, doing GTA's dirty work. Everybody else was back at GTA Command, preparing for the worst. Every hour or so, a subspace transmission probe would tumble out of subspace, bringing relievingly uneventful news of the Citadel fleet's patrols to the Vegan FLRO faster than the speed of a standard radio transmission. With calmed sighs, the comm officer would relay the probe directly to GTA Vegan Command, a good several dozens of billions of kilometers distant at this time of Vega IX's 427-earth-day year. The probe would rocket away and disappear into subspace. Undoubtedly, the Citadel sent backup probes simultaneously towards GTA Command directly. But the commander of the Vegan FLRO was just being safe in his redundancy. Probes, despite several methods of course-maintaining programming, could be knocked off course by unknown celestial entities, such as an extremely intense gravitational eddy in subspace, or even less likely by an enemy ship.

Subspace is so multidimensional that the likelihood of running into another manmade concoction by accident is virtually nil. Two ships heading for the same destination, even if they began only a few kilometers apart, could be divided by light years upon embarking on "parallel" routes through subspace (that is, routes through which both ships will reach the destination at the same time). The relatively warped nature of the parallel universe of subspace makes routes that look thousands of light years long in "normal" space distances in actuality dramatically shorter. In subspace, a centimeter traveled can mean light years when translated to normal space, or occasionally in some areas a light year in subspace could only mean millimeters in normal space. It takes a good many months for GTA subspace surveyors to judge the proper course to take through subspace to achieve the highest efficiency. And even after months of intense examination, it is almost one-hundred percent fact that even shorter routes lay undiscovered under the shroud of dozens of different dimensions. Humans once got by merely on three dimensions, and it took a long time for everybody to add and easily understand time as a fourth. But over a hundred? Takes a while to get used to that. Of course, these routes were constantly and dramatically changing, since the normal universe was constantly expanding. But fortunately, and much to everybody's curiosity, some ancient, long gone, and magnificent civilization had constructed large "nodes" and bridges through subspace. And the kicker was that these routes remained comparatively constant, lengthwise in normal space, since incredibly the network of nodes traveled with the rest of the stars and important celestial objects in their expansion from the universal center of the normal universe. Nobody even knows how to begin to ponder the fantastic steps this incomprehensibly advanced race took in building such "wonders of the universes." Everybody was just happy that it worked, and that they knew how to use it. Happy, that is, until they ran into the Shivans.

Despite the slim chances, the bridge crew of the FLRO, and presumably everybody back at

command, hoped that the unlikely was true. The next transmission probe from the Citadel was well overdue. Rather than a probe every hour, it had been tense silence for the past four hours. Had the Citadel met Shivans? And Shivans in such numbers and strength that they couldn't afford to send out a mayday probe? Or were too dead too soon to send one? Perhaps, however improbable it may seem, the probes were getting knocked off course by some unusual subspace anomaly. All of Terrans and Vasudans in Vega were on their knees, praying something of such minor impact had happened, and is all that had happened...

And then the silence was finally broken by the comm console screaming about the sudden emergence of a subspace transmission probe.

Avery Naffer's imagination was finally starting to catch up with him. Just over ten minutes ago, a subspace transmission probe from the GTD Citadel had jetted out of subspace, slowed to a stop, and emitted its contents via radio. It was, apparently, a mayday transmission. The Citadel had run into tremendous opposition a mere seven hours away from Vega IX. Based on GTA presence in the area, it was probable that the Shivans knew about the importance of the planet and were going to explore it from within the range of their guns soon enough. But the GTA would see that their inevitable arrival is delayed long enough to assemble enough of a defense to take them on. The skeleton crews of two of the Citadel's escort cruisers were shuttled from their ships onto the Citadel. The empty cruisers, along with half of the Citadel's fighter complement, were pushed off under autopilot as a distraction in a direction opposite that of the course the Citadel and her remaining two cruisers would take to head back to command via subspace. The loss of so many ships, whether willing or not, was quite a blow to the GTA effort in the area, but was worth the preservation of the GTD Citadel, which was one of only two GTA destroyers traversing the Vega system.

Of course, the use of this diversionary tactic was only supposed to be a last, extreme course of action employed only if absolutely necessary. Which, apparently, it was according to the crew of the Citadel fleet. Their long-range scans read a massive Shivan force comprised of two Demon class destroyers and over a dozen Lilith class cruisers. It seems the GTA had underestimated the efficiency of construction at that local shipyard. And, needless to say, the entire Citadel fleet would have been decimated if they waited around for the Shivans to catch up with them.

So now orders were for everybody to fall back to Vega IX. All civilians, if possible, were to jump out-sector via Vega IX's local node to somewhere further into GTA space; this was presumably well underway by now. In the meantime, the GTA force of approximately equal numbers to the Shivans currently at Vega IX will intercept the Shivans and duke it out. It's assumed the Shivans will decelerate out of subspace cheek to cheek with GTA Vegan Command and Vega IX. However probable the presumed point of arrival was, once the Shivans enter subspace, it will be impossible to track them. The Shivans know subspace better than anybody else, and seem to be able to choose, with frightening speed, efficient routes that do not lie within the manmade, and constant bridges and nodes. And so the GTA does not dare venture a guess as to where to intercept the Shivans in subspace and is forced to simply wait for them right next to Vega IX.

The Vega campaign was an iffy one at best. Nobody knows how the Shivans suddenly figured out the importance of a system they had previously not even thrown a glance at. But when they came, they came in frightening numbers; they set up shop and home awfully close to surprised as hell Vegan GTA Command. Hastily, GTA High Command on earth fired off three destroyer fleets, the Insurmountable, Povograd, and Citadel, to protect the highly populated Vega IX. Consequently, GTA strength in other sectors has been weakened. The three mighty fleets, while the Shivan force in the area was still in early stages of development and organization, managed to hold the Shivans back long enough to allow a pretty impressive buildup of GTA and PVD cruisers around Vega IX. But once the Shivans were up to full strength, the GTA offensive effort was forced back into a defensive position. Already, the Shivans have taken down the GTD Povograd, and the

Insurmountable was heavily damaged in a huge ambush. It seemed unlikely nowadays that a single destroyer could do the job alone anymore, which was not the case during the Terran-Vasudan war, during which a single destroyer could practically serve defense for an entire system. And so the Citadel swoops around the vast, empty canyon of Vega only to scurry back home upon finding the predatory Shivan task force. She had shed a few feathers to get the enemy scratching before diving into subspace. And now it was time to move the nest.

New Venice Surface Spaceport; External Launch Pad

Ketan spun the control ellipses in front of her repeatedly to check the thruster vectoring of her Seth-class fighter. She glanced out her ship's viewport to eye Terran transport ships landing several bodylengths away, only to wince at reflected Vegan sunlight. She quickly fumbled with the glare control lever and darkened the hue of her craft's viewport. Her skin and eyes were not used to absorbing so much sunlight. Vega IX's atmosphere was a mixture of certain gases and vapors whose lensing nature caused the planet's surface to be eternally bathed in sunlight. Even at Vega IX midnight, although darker than mid-day, it seemed only like early evening to her. Thanks to special chemicals released in the air at regular intervals by planes, any excessive radiation was countered. But still, it was nothing like her home city.

She had come to Vega straight from Second Vasuda, her homeplanet (and a terraformed moon of Vasuda Prime) in the Vasuda system, and much cooler, drier, and tolerable than this planet. Her friends did not share in her stubbornness to adapt. A majority of them, upon arriving at Vega IX, immediately set out to explore the strange culture of the Terrans up close.

The Terrans seemed just as interested in learning about Ketan and her fellow Vasudans, although they seemed to take different measures, welcoming the Vasudans into their own homes rather than going out and exploring the Vasudans in the Vasudans' homes.

Vega IX was primarily a human planet. Vasudans only came along after discovering the Shivans, since the Vega system was only a short, safe stop away from the tiring action of the front lines. Therefore, Vasuda was relatively ill-represented at first by Vasudan soldiers relaxed only a little after going from the enemy Shivans into the uncomfortable but welcoming arms of previously enemy Terrans. Then along came the diplomats, and soon enough, Vasudan colonies began ramifying out. For a while, the Terrans and Vasudans on Vega IX were pretty isolated from each other. Then the GTA and Vasudan Parliament (which is what the GTA called the Vasudan diplomatic regiment and representative government) agreed that in order to serve each other best, they would have to learn to coexist, and so large hybrid cities such as New Venice were founded.

And what a city it was. As strange as the Terrans were in just about everything they did, Ketan grew to be extremely fond of New Venice ? even though it was her first time in the city. Not only does she see the uniqueness between the two species, but also the uniqueness within those two species. Many different quintile orders have taken to living in New Venice - even smaller, outer-rim nationalities make a strong showing in New Venice. And as if differing Vasudan nationalities were not enough for diversity, the Terrans themselves sported an even more diverse variety. From what Ketan has learned over the years, even the Terran homeworld is divided into hundreds of unique nations, which surprisingly seem to get along very well with each other (or at least now they did). And those different cultures present in New Venice make the beautiful city an extremely exciting place. Just walking down a street in New Venice, smelling the different smells, hearing the different sounds, seeing the different sights at every block makes the short break from military service very much worth it.

But ironically, nearly as fast as the people came to Vega IX, they now must leave almost faster. Those Shivans seem to have pinpointed the importance of Vega IX and want to see the planet for themselves up close. According to a transmission probe relayed by the Vegan relief station, the Shivans were coming in frightening force, with two of their gargantuan battleships (which the

humans call “Demon-class destroyers” - it was always confusing to Ketan how the humans came up with these designations) and an innumerable amount of cruisers and fighters. The Terran battleship Citadel just barely escaped the Shivan’s claws, and was on its way through subspace back to Vega IX. Meanwhile, Vasuda Prime has budgeted out the three-sevens battleship, which the Terrans call the “PVD Ketanora” because they cannot pronounce the Vasudan name for it, to oversee the evacuation effort. Such an effort was going on right now, and the spaceport control was giving Ketan and her escort squadron the “go-ahead.”

Ketan signaled her confirmation and powered up the lateral thrusters. A loud grinding of metal and the roar of fuel burning reverberated through her body as the entire squadron lifted slowly off the ground. The wave of evacuation transports Ketan and her fellows were to escort lifted off, and Ketan rolled the control balls around to follow the ships off-planet. She would miss not being able to walk down the streets of New Venice anymore, but she took comfort in the fact that the people that made the streets so special, and so excitingly diverse, would survive.

GTD Insurmountable; Vega Task Fleet Assembling

“The Citadel should arrive here in the next two hours,” said the GTA Vega Command Mission Official to admiral Larisle. “You’ve got the fleet formation, so relay it to her once she arrives. The fighters aboard your ship are also your responsibility. But the rules are simple...Shoot anything that ain’t human or Vasudan.” The official tried to force a comforting smile, but failed quite miserably. Larisle tried to smile back, but was no more successful “We’ve already contacted cruiser squadron commanders. You have your orders, Admiral. Command out.” The screen flickered off.

Larisle stared out the window as yet another group of Leviathan-class cruisers jumped in. That brings the total count to sixteen. Add to that another Orion-class destroyer, and countless fighters, and the total comes to the largest strike fleet Larisle has ever seen assembled.

“Greg?” And the biggest fleet assembly Holwin has ever seen, too. Larisle turned to his friend.

Holwin stepped slowly inside Larisle’s command room, his eyes gaped with awe as he watched the amassing outside the window. “Damn, that’s a lot of ships, Greg.”

Larisle turned back to the window and nodded his agreement. “God, you’d think with this much force, we could take on the whole damn Shivan fleet.” He then shook his head in disappointment. “It’s scary, John.” Larisle’s voice was practically a whisper.

Holwin sighed deeply as he watched a group of Apollo fighters glide past, performing their drills. “Extremely scary.”

After a few seconds of letting the quiet vibrations caused by the Insurmountable’s fusion reactors do the talking, Larisle abruptly turned from the window and took a seat at his desk. “I hope you’ve got good news, John.”

Holwin drew a pad from his breast pocket and placed it on the desk. “Medal orders, Greg,” he explained. “Permission from the Brass to award every person in this fleet the GTA Medal of Valor.”

Larisle scrolled through the orders and chuckled slightly. “Command seems to be getting a bit edgy here. I can almost see them shedding a tear when they wrote this.”

Holwin laughed quietly in reply. “Well, they may seem like robots half the time, but they know when to get emotional.” The two suddenly turned somber.

Larisle tossed the pad on the desk and massaged his chin with his hand. “Ceremony’s at

twenty-hundred hours in the Vega Command station ceremony hall. God, the place will practically be flooded with tears.”

Holwin nodded slightly in agreement. “You can’t blame ‘em. The Brass, for once, didn’t want us to think we were just being tossed away.”

“Times like these you wish you were more like a Vasudan,” Larisle added. “Those people never seem to get mushy.” The two sat silent for several seconds. Then the silence was broken by the intercom. “Admiral Holwin to the hangar bay. Port relations shuttle leaving in ten minutes.”

Holwin pushed himself out of his chair. “Damn Command doesn’t let us relations officers off easy,” he said with a forced smile.

Larisle smiled back. “I’ll see you at twenty-hundred, John.”

“You can count on it,” replied the rear admiral. The room door slipped shut behind him, and Larisle was left alone with the reactor vibrations once again.