

Star of Polaris

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The dim lights of the bar were barely bright enough to allow a customer to check his drink, a practice that might come in handy at a place like the Star of Polaris. A crewman's haunt, any occasional pilot who managed to find himself in the bar usually deemed it too rustic and too sullied by the presence, or rather over-presence, of common working soldiers. But pilots weren't out to bomb themselves, and hopefully their problems, into oblivion like the soldiers were. Pilots were looking for a place with atmosphere, a place where they could spout their heroic yarns and convince his listeners that he was more god than man. No, with an atmosphere of smoke, curses, cheap drinks as well as cheap company, the Star of Polaris was not the place for the gods. But it suited communications officers and two-bit engineering assistants just fine. After all, it was the only place in the system you could get drunk, start a fight, practically kill yourself in the process, and still end up with someone to sleep next to at the end of the night. It was only by luck, or more likely sizable donations to the Alliance's military police unit, that a place like that managed to stay open. GTVA commanders, in general, weren't too thrilled to have their men return to duty smashed.

August thirteenth wasn't that much different than any other night. Near the end of the bar was a tall, muscular, auburn fellow, a regular most of the men called Witling, probably because he was always too drunk to know that the word meant "fool." It didn't help him that he accepted the name with pride. Witling was one of few men lucky enough to serve on the GTCv Vach, a ship that had practically been converted into a moving transmitter to act as a comm. relay station for the system, heaven for any communications officer like Witling. Sitting next to Witling was a female officer by the name of Sarah. If you stayed around long enough, you might hear one of the drunken men refer to her as "babe," a comment they would, without doubt, pay for dearly. Most recently, helping to build the engine rooms of the Capa, and previous construction details had certainly helped her establish a reputation with the regulars, who after witnessing a few of her fights, usually came to call her Bad Ass, an unofficial nickname of sorts. Down the bar a ways was a man of medium build named Nikolai. A real barfly, Nikolai was always surrounded by at least three women, to whom he would tell his faux stories of heroism and weaving his tales of valor, hoping to win his way with one of them before the night was through. His usual cover was a fighter pilot, but the regulars all knew he was a lowly soldier from a ship near the front, although no one ever managed to catch the name. Rounding out the Sunday regulars was a skinny character in one of the booths. "Richard. Just call me Richard." That's usually what he said upon any introduction, and most did just that, although broadcasting an uncommon last name on his shirt name-plate brought the typical quips from some of the more boisterous customers. Unlike the others, Richard didn't like to talk about work. You see, he had the unfortunate job of working on the Elyzabel, an investigative ship of sorts. It was her job to secretly take up positions in Shivan space and relay back information on ship movements without getting caught. Perhaps a more romantic job than the others, but you can certainly understand why he would want to forget about it for a day. So, he instead, chose to drink his drinks, smoke his cigarettes, and keep to himself most of the time. And finally, there was the bartender and owner, Henry. An overweight, middle-aged man, Henry fit every backwards bartender cliché in the book, even going so far as to keep a rifle behind the counter. But to everyone who enjoyed the Star of Polaris, the man was a work of art, just another piece of the atmosphere that attracted them there.

The only really different thing about the thirteenth was the quiet nature everyone there had suddenly taken on. And much to Henry's dismay, quiet was bad for business. They weren't drinking as much as they usually did. Even Nikolai only had one cheap woman to tell his wild stories to. But never one to pack it in and give up, the bartender came up with something he thought would get their spirits up, and hopefully their drinking habits: a story contest. While they waited for the nightly news bulletin, each of the regulars could tell the best story they could come up with, and the winner

could take a prize back home to his ship: a little cash or a good bottle. How much could Henry's best bottle cost, anyways? It didn't take him long to convince the regulars to participate. Richard was the slowest to join, but with a little coaxing, even he was ready to take part. What took more time than anything to establish were the rules, and who would be the judge. But that was finally agreed upon as well, establishing the rest of the customers as the judges, and establishing the order of story-tellers: Witling, Susan, Nikolai and then Richard. And the rules were quite simple: the story had to be one of a true experience, it had to be unique, it had to be relatively short, and thanks to a request by Susan, no tales of the men and their exploits with women. Other than that, the subject of the story was free game.

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Witling took his spot at the center barstool, and turned to the small crowd that had gathered around him. He put his hands on the sides of his head, trying his hardest to think up a good story, well, as hard as one can think with a few too many in them. Finally he opens his mouth and points his finger toward the ceiling. It would be a few seconds before he actually got something out of that mouth though. "Okay, I got one. Back when I was just getting settled on the Vach, we got this new captain in, a real fresh out of the academy 'I'm gonna rip you a new one' officer. You all know the type. You know, real mean son of a gun. Well, anyway, about the third day on the ship, all hell breaks loose. Gunnery can't get half the weapons to function, the engineers are having trouble with the number two engine and for some reason, our comm. station is relaying everything we do to the entire system. Then out of nowhere, I start picking up a distress signal. It wasn't that far from the lines, so it wasn't unheard of. So, in spite of all of our problems, the Captain orders us to pick ourselves up and relocate to the signal's origin. So we get there, and sure enough, a small cruiser is under fire from three Shivan corvettes. Well, there's no way the Vach can take on all of these ships. Even if we tried, the Alliance can't afford to lose our transmitters. The captain has us move in anyway, so we manage to draw some fire, and the little cruiser goes off who knows where. But we're taking one serious beating for it. All three of the corvettes are pounding away at us. Finally, one of 'em manages to blow off part of our weapons system, and the ornery little captain looks down and notices our hull is getting really close to critical. And he just breaks.

"Get us out of here! Get us out of here, now! We're not gonna make it!' He's screaming bloody murder all over the ship, trying to convince the engine room that they're just not working fast enough. By the time they finally diverted enough power to get the jump drives going, the man was hysteric. Couple seconds later, we jump in a few clicks from a Vasudan installation. He looked down at the scanner, and three Shivan ships jumped in behind us. He doesn't even bother to check what type. He just takes the comm. station away from me and starts broadcasting our troubles all over the system. I mean, everyone was listening. He was really tearing into that poor Vasudan on the other end, too. 'Listen, if you don't send support now, we're going to die! Three Shivan ships have been chasing us all the way from another sector!... Do you hear me, you stinking oversized lizard? WE'RE GOING TO DIE!'

"Meanwhile, this Vasudan on the other end is staring out the screen at what must have been a hilarious sight to a Vasudan. A Terran corvette being chased across the system by three Manticore fighters and we're just screaming like there's no tomorrow. Finally, after about the third species insult, the Vasudan comes back calm as can be. 'Terran, are you sure you are in that serious of a condition?'

"Well, the captain, more mad than hysterical now fires back at him 'Yes, you bloody idiot! If you don't send out support this minute, we won't be able to fight them off long enough!'

"So, the Vasudan thinks about it a little more and comes back, once again, as calm as can be, 'Okay,

Terran, we're dispatching a Vasudan ace pilot to save you. Until' Well, the captain is really steaming, now. Screaming at the top of his lungs how he needs half the fleet behind him. 'Until then Terran, if your condition really is that poor, I advise you to repeat after me: Our father, who art in heaven...'

"That was one of the funniest things I'd ever seen. With the whole system listening in, this captain breaks down over a few fighters. Even the Vasudans had a ball with that one and I didn't know they had a sense of humor. I don't think he'll ever live that down... Last I heard, he was transferred to a cargo barge in Alphard system, just about as far away from action as Command could put him."

"At this point, Witling was convinced his story would be the best. Most of the bar was rolling over laughing. Although, one can't always take the response to a humorous story completely at face value when dealing with a bar crowd. For all Witling knew, they might have laughed at Edgar Allen Poe. But it was enough for him to be satisfied. After some time passed and the crowd died down, the bartender turned to the muscular woman, now sitting in one of the booths with the rest of the crowd. "So, what do you have for us, Susan?"

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Susan took the position of storyteller and started talking almost immediately. "Well, I don't have any funny stories to tell. Not very many stories of any nature, actually. But I'll try. This is one from one of my many construction jobs... A couple years back, we got this job rebuilding a damaged corvette, the Brazen I think it was. This ship had almost everything wrong with it: major fractures all over the hull, an almost totaled bridge, and a weak structure. It was in such bad shape, they wanted to take it to a surface repair station in Sirius. But they cancelled that idea when the gravitational field pulled the main beam right through the bridge. Everybody on the team knew the ship would have been better used as scrap. Rebuilding just wasn't worth it. But apparently, someone very high up had a sentimental attachment to this particular ship and wanted to save it if at all possible. The only reason my team even agreed to stay on for the job was that they managed to find our financial breaking point.

"Our first week on the job, we went after life support systems, hull fractures, and artificial gravity systems. After all, a construction team can't exactly work very well in space suits, can we? It took us three days just to get to the engineering room, let alone fix life support and gravity systems. So, we decided to work on the hull first. Big mistake. There were stress fractures everywhere. And when you're talking about rebuilding a ship, even the most microscopic of cracks has to be patched. By the time we were finished, the ship looked more like a giant metal patchwork than a ship. Not exactly the mark of a fine work crew. Finally, we got so tired of looking at the ugly thing that, without orders, we requisitioned the parts and just placed a completely new layer of armor over the old hull. To cover ourselves, whenever someone asked us about the new layer, we told them it was just to make sure nothing happened to the ship again. Most people bought it. Others just accepted it without bothering to question.

"About a month later, we finally got the life support systems online. We could finally work outside the confines of those crummy suits. Rather than risking the gravity systems, we decided to go for the structure next. Besides, for us, it was kind of fun floating around the ship. We were able to do a lot of the work this way, but the majority of the structure would require some of the heavy equipment, requiring that we bring gravity online. So, after finishing all we could, we put in temporary support beams all over the place, warmed up the gravity unit, and prayed that it would work.

"As we turned on the unit, we could literally hear sections of the support systems weighing down on

the beams. For a while, we were afraid to bring in the heavy equipment, fearing that it might fall through the weak floors on some of the decks. But eventually, we had to bring it in, in spite of our fears.

“The bridge had to be one of the worst parts. We had y-beams supporting the main rails, bringing all of the weight in the room down on the floor. To play it safe, we only brought the small stuff in at first. But even some of the smaller vehicles put plate-sized indentations in the floor. Even with our terrible expectations, this ship was managing to exceed them. In some sections, we literally had to rip up the floor and relay the ground supports. It was horribly slow work, but at least it was working. And at least, we finally did finish the bridge.

“After we finished the bridge, we were given a two-day furlough. When we got back, we went after the engine room. May have been the only part of the ship that wasn’t severely damaged. All we had to do was clean it up. The only problem was that even though the engines were in good shape, they still wouldn’t come on. We brought in a couple of scientists, who told us that the problem was in the reactor room. They told us they knew how to fix it; they just didn’t have the manpower to do it. So, we figured, hey, even an animal can follow simple instructions. This shouldn’t be too much of a problem. And we told them we’d be more than glad to help them out... I’ll never set foot in a reactor room again. We followed every instruction they gave, and the room came down on top of us. According to the scientists, some of our supports were interfering with the reactor or something like that. I didn’t really understand it, but what I did understand was that they needed to disappear if the thing was going to run again... It took them three weeks to dig us out of there. Two of our men died under the weight of the rubble. And the entire time, we could hear the rescue party on the other side. ‘Be careful. If you move something the wrong way, the entire ship could go up.’ It was hell in there...” Susan’s voice stopped there, leaving the crowd to talk amongst themselves. Some of them weren’t sure she was even finished until she stepped down and let Nikolai take the stool.

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“That was an excellent story, Susan. But I don’t know if it’s a winner.”

Somber as she may have been, she was quick to respond to that. “Oh, I suppose you have something better, Nikolai?”

“Matter of fact... There was this one time I was out on patrol”

“You can cut the crap with us. We all know you’re a grunt like the rest of us.”

Nikolai’s face turned bright scarlet, and he had to clear his throat a few times before he could continue. But after a couple of false starts, he finally managed to get a real story underway. “You’re right. I’m a grunt. But back in the day, I was a planetary trooper... Don’t roll your eyes at me. It’s true. I swear it. I served my first hitch doing surface control in Mintaka... Anyways, my first year in the system, I was stationed on Peris, one of the moons of Mintaka 2. And the civilians that had migrated there were just irate, furious because the GTVA had yet to recognize one of their petty little nation states. By the end of my last month on the moon, they actually started attacking GTVA troops. We didn’t enjoy fighting armed civilians, but it’s something you have to do when the orders come down.

“So, rather than actively attack the civvies, we decided to set up a line of bunkers across a large mountain ridge in one of the more hostile areas. If they decided to move in and attack, we just did enough to defend ourselves.

“Finally, one day they figured out how to successfully attack one of our bunkers. They traveled up small roads under the guise of farmers, even going so far as to take a Mintaka bull along. For those of you who don’t know, a Mintaka bull is probably one of the ugliest creatures in known existence. It looks like a cross between the Terran species of Water Buffalo and Hyena. I mean, really ugly sucker. Well, what we didn’t know at the time was that instead of carrying supplies and food on the beast, about a third of them were carrying explosives in their packs. Some of those things were pretty ingenious, too.” Nikolai reached for an empty glass to demonstrate in fuller detail for the audience. “For example, one of the meanest things we came across out there was a bomb we called a Chaser. The rebels would take a metal cup like this one, stuff all the gunpowder and plastique they could get their hands on into the bottom, add a touch sensitive detonator to the top, loosely tie a pin of some sort to the detonator, and seal the cup with its lid. After they threw it, whenever it hit something, the pin would get knocked loose from the detonator and the whole thing would just go up, taking out anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way.

“Fortunately, the locals didn’t have enough supplies, resources or manpower to attack all the bunkers at once. By the time we found about the tactics, my bunker could already see another one down the line go up in flames. We notified Command about the situation, but what could they do? Their hands were tied. You can’t just close a farming road. So, rather than rely on command, we had to take a more aggressive defense tactic. We made it an unofficial rule that no livestock or supply craft pass through our area without what we called a ‘routine inspection.’ Needless to say, the civvies didn’t take any more land after that.

“When Command heard rumors about what we were doing, and heard that the locals weren’t making any more progress in taking land. Combined with news that casualties among farmers were up, but overall casualties were down tremendously, their curiosity was more than a little raised. So, they sent an Intelligence unit to investigate the situation, to make sure we weren’t abusing our military power. The unit went through and visited every single bunker. And they always made sure to ask how we had managed to keep the locals back without killing very many people.”

Nikolai stopped his story there, leaving his audience hanging for almost a minute. They all felt there had to be something more, something he left out. Finally, someone from the crowd spoke up. “So, what did you tell the intelligence officer? When he asked how you were doing it?”

Nikolai took a sip of his drink and stared into the now empty glass. “I told him the truth. ‘Well sir, we do the same thing you all do at intelligence. Shoot the bull and hope it doesn’t blow up in our face.’ I was transferred to space duty inside a week.” The story wasn’t one that would cause people to react in any special way. It wouldn’t have them rolling in the aisles or deeply moved, but it got a few laughs, and it was, in itself, a good story. There wasn’t much reason for Nikolai to think he wasn’t in contention for the prize. In the corner, Richard was just lighting up a cigarette when Nikolai stepped down. “Look at him. He’s always so quiet. But I bet he’s got a million stories up his sleeve.”

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Richard calmly removed the cigarette from his mouth and looked over the crowd. He didn’t bother to take up position on the stool, choosing instead to speak from where he was. “I might have a few.” He took another puff, exhaling the smoke downwards, over his lower lip and onto his shirt. The crowd had to wait several minutes before Richard started to speak again. “Back in ninety-seven, I was flying espionage on this bird named the GTC Venus. But due to the cramped conditions, all the crew took to calling her the ‘Flytrap.’ She was a small cruiser we had retrofit with heavy engines so we could get back and forth from Shivan territory faster. Our job was the same as almost any other SOC ship: watch the enemy, report their actions, and pray to God you didn’t get caught. Some of

the commanders even took to posting that last item on the crew's official orders.

“So, one day our intelligence guys wake up and notice the entire Shivan fleet is on the move. This is something we have to report. There was only one problem. We're employing the use of a new device that blocks Shivan scanners from picking us up as long as we're not moving, a device some of the boys in intelligence came to call a “scanner jammer.” And the Shivans were close. The Shivans were so close they could pick up on even any secure transmissions we sent and know, down to the coordinates, where we were. And if we moved to another location, they were sure to pick us up on scanners. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, we chose to send the communication from there, hoping against hope that the Shivans wouldn't be looking for our signals in their own territory. Needless to say, they were. As soon as they figured out our location, two Shivan destroyers came barreling down on us. Before we managed to get more than five hundred meters, one of their salvos managed to cut through the life support power grid. Without life support, we couldn't even recycle the oxygen, and when you're talking about a spy ship undergoing hundreds of separate classified operations, you're talking about a lot of men. We had five thousand people crammed into that little ship. We were losing oxygen fast. Some of the men were going to kill any prisoners we had in the brig, but the Captain put a stop to that. It wouldn't have done any good anyways. They made up such a small percentage of the ship's population, it would have given us what, twenty seconds of additional air?

“It was obvious to everyone that we couldn't make it. But some of the officers did manage to come up with a Hail Mary. The idea was to divert power to the engines and get as far out of range possible as quickly as we could. Then, they thought we could come full stop and divert all power to life support systems until we were at risk from the Shivans again, hopefully cycling out enough air to make it breathable for the next run. They brought the idea to me first. I told them the truth: it didn't stand a chance in hell. But as long as we were dying anyway, it wouldn't hurt to try. So, from me, they take their plan to the Chief, then the XO, and then to the Captain. All of them gave the same response I did. That settled it. We were going to try it.

“Our speedy little cruiser was now crawling out of the enemy territory. Burning the engines till we were out of range, and then cutting everything until the Shivans started firing again. But even with long runs, we weren't going fast enough. And as we were forced to take longer stops for life support, sure enough, the Shivans caught up with us.

“When the men started passing out, they moved most of the crew to the escape pods. I went with them. For the longest time, we didn't have a clue what was going on. Almost an hour later, we found out. A Terran destroyer had come within flying range, and it was decided that we would destruct the ship and hope we made it out in the escape pods. But once our pods made it out of the shockwave, the Shivans had already scrambled fighters. One by one, the pods started disappearing from the scanner. Most of us were just waiting for our turn to die. By the time we were even within sight of the allied vessel, we had lost over half of our pods. By the time we were safely inside her landing bays, we had lost two thirds. Everybody who made it was just happy to be alive.

“But we had a surprise waiting for us. Not minutes after we scurried out onto the decks, armed guards showed up. They arrested all of the officers and half of the surviving crew, including myself, and told us they were going to investigate us for court-martial offenses. Thankfully, at the end of the day, us crewmen were released. The officers had told how they had managed to get the attention of any nearby vessel. They sent out an All Points Emergency Transmission, asking for backup. And that's when they broke one of the biggest rules in the book. You see, one of the first things you learn in the spy business is to not let anybody know where you, or any other ships, are. Well, whenever a ship sends out an APET, the transmission goes to every ship in the system listed on the computer's database. For security reasons, standard issue ships don't have the listings for undercover ships,

allowing us to keep from getting caught every time someone gets into trouble. But here's the kicker. Before our mission in ninety-seven, no one down at intelligence had ever even thought about what would happen if one of us SOC ships were to get so desperate, we'd actually send out an APET. We ended up giving the Shivans, down to the exact coordinates, the location of every spy ship in enemy territory. In the time it had taken us to finally reach safety, the Alliance had lost all but two vessels behind enemy lines, and they disappeared a short time later. To rescue their own hides, the officers had sacrificed the lives of literally millions of soldiers. Everybody knew that the crew wasn't responsible, but it didn't help that we were there. To this day, we still have to live with the fact that just one of us might have been able to prevent it... After the trials were over, the GTVA stopped putting the exact location of other SOC ships on board our computers. They didn't want any repeats of the biggest massacre in history, a killing spree that remains stained in ink on our records to this day." Richard took a last puff of his cigarette, rolling the smoke up into the air, and tossing the butt down onto the table. "And the stain reads: Crewman, GTC Venus, October, 2397..."

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Before the silent response was over, the news bulletin they had been waiting for came on. "Ladies and gentlemen of the GTVA, the Polaris system has been officially upgraded to Red Alert status. This evening at twenty-two hundred hours, the Shivans took control of the Polaris node to Epsilon Pegasi. Shivan forces are now moving into the system at astounding speed. As of this moment, all furloughs are cancelled. All officers are ordered to report back to their ships..."

Henry turned down the volume for the rest of the bulletin, and began to speak. "Okay, you heard what the man said. All furloughs have been cancelled. I can't serve anymore drinks. I'm sure you'll all be needing to get to your transports right away, but what do you all want to do about the contest?"

When nobody spoke up, Richard made a motion for the bottle to the bartender, who turned it over to the beckoning customer. Richard reached over the bar himself and pulled out shot glasses for everyone who was still there, including Henry, slowly filling each glass to brimming. As he finished his own glass, he raised it into the air and waited for the others to do the same. "Here's to... next Sunday, back here at the Star of Polaris." The crowd finished a round, threw the bottle into an antique fireplace in the corner, and walked out to their awaiting transports. It was not until three years later that the lone surviving contestant was able to return, only to find the Star of Polaris was ground into debris during the war, now nothing more than a memory awakened whenever her customers happened to pass through one of the many the graveyards of space.