

Last Contact

Posted on Mar 19, 2011

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An atmosphere of trepidation hung over the bridge of the GTSC Damascus. The electronic murmuring of consoles and the steady hiss of the air-scrubbers made up the entirety of sound on the bridge – the crew themselves were silent in concentration. Her commander, Captain Jack Novak, chewed thoughtfully on his pipe as he surveyed his bridge crew. Seated in his command chair at the back of the bridge, Novak had an uninterrupted view of his bridge officers working at their stations. Their tension was apparent in the stiffness of their backs and the knotted muscles in their necks. With a sharp crack he rapped the bowl of his pipe against the command chair's arm. A dozen officers almost jump out of their skins.

"A bit jumpy, aren't they," Novak observed as he began packing his pipe with fresh tobacco. His First Officer, Commander Samantha Solway, grimaced with distaste as he lit his pipe. "I think it's warranted in this case, Captain." She glanced down at her instruments. "Two hours, nineteen minutes since last contact with Delta One. She's now forty-nine minutes overdue."

Novak leaned back in his chair. Given Delta One's programming, her delay could mean only one of two things. Either she had discovered something of importance and was investigating, or she had been destroyed.

The Damascus was holding position just outside a "warp-node", awaiting the return of its reconnaissance drone Delta One. As Einstein had shown, the physical laws of our universe prevent any object traveling faster than the speed of light, but the discovery of subspace and warp-nodes changed that. A properly equipped vessel could enter a warp-node – and within minutes emerge at another star system light years away. Because the only way of discovering what was at the other end of a warp-node was by traveling through it, Novak had instituted the practice of sending automated drones through first.

For the past two years Survey Fleet Three-Oh-Five had been moving deeper into the unknown, cataloguing and surveying star systems. Specially outfitted for long-term operations, the fleet consisted of the Damascus, a science vessel; her escorts – the cruisers Sutherland, Endeavor and Hermes; and two support ships, the freighter Maria and the factory ship Fortune Cookie. These were ships the Galactic Terran Alliance could spare from its fourteen year war with the Vasudans, and as such they were effectively discarded from Battle Fleet. The cruisers had been stricken from the navy's effective list and berthed at the wrecker's yard when they were hastily refitted and re-commissioned. The Damascus itself had spent five years as a secondary transmissions array, directing non-essential communications traffic before being reassigned and refitted.

Over the last six months the survey fleet had found numerous artifacts: derelict spacecraft, abandoned orbital installations, decrepit satellites; indicating the space they were currently exploring had once been part of some interstellar civilization. All the artifacts had shown signs consistent with battle damage, but most ominous of all were the planets in these systems. They were all ruined – scarred and pitted. One planet they found looked like a crystal globe – its entire surface fused into glass – beautiful, yet terrifying. Terrifying because of the almost inconceivable amount of power required to wreck such havoc. If the Terrans and the Vasudans joined forces and showered every warhead they owned onto a planet, the damage would be an order of magnitude less than what had happened here. As they advanced further into this region of space the mood of the crews grew more timorous.

"Warp point forming!" called Ensign Kate Troughton.

"On screen", the captain gestured with his pipe. On the bridge's main screen the black of space was suddenly filled with a billowing mass of luminous gas, which split and expanded into a ragged ring. A moment later, the unmanned reconnaissance drone materialized. A computer generated voice spoke over the com: "Damascus, this is Delta One requesting permission to land, over."

Normally only the larger Orion class ships carried fighters, but by each removing a pair of turrets the Endeavor and Hermes were granted a small fighter compliment. The GTSC Damascus retained her laboratories and science personnel, with the addition of a Xenolinguistics section and other first-contact specialists. With the assistance of the two freighters, the fleet was now capable of long voyages of exploration. Replacement parts could be manufactured, and re-fueling could be accomplished at any planet with a hydrogen atmosphere.

Similarly, the crew were made up of the disgraced, or the young and experienced. The voyage from Earth to the edge of human space at Dubbe saw the refit of the ships completed, while the crew experienced a constant litany of drills and simulations designed by Novak to mold them into an effective fighting force. By the time Survey Fleet Three-Oh-Five left the Dubbe star system for uncharted space, Novak was confident in the ability of his small fleet. Nor had he relaxed discipline in the two years since, as he was a firm believer of the maxim: "sharpen the saw". Every time a new peak of efficiency was reached the crew were rewarded. Friendly competition was encouraged between the three cruisers, with the freighters and the Damascus often taking part in the exercises.

And then there was Novak. Novak's lineage was filled with ancestors who had served in the military. Accordingly, Jack Novak had followed his family's tradition. Graduating second in his class from the Academy, his career had advanced by leaps and bounds due to his diligence and commitment. Achieving the rank of Captain at the age of thirty, Novak saw action in the early engagements of the Vasudan war. And it was because of his assessments of these battles that Novak's career ran aground. Novak's concept of duty required him to speak his mind, and to point the finger at the people he knew were responsible for the mismanagement of the conflict. Novak reported that the war had become an exercise for economic and personal gain, and in refusing to withdraw his report, had resigned his commission in protest.

Five years later Novak was approached to return to service. Everything had changed in the aftermath of the Vega Engagement. The complete destruction of the Fourth Fleet and its flagship, the GTD Eisenhower, sent shock waves throughout the Galactic Terran Alliance. The illusion of Terran technological superiority was shattered with the appearance of the new Vasudan Typhoon-class destroyers. Suddenly, it seemed that the Vasudans had gained the initiative in the war, and a very real possibility existed that Terra would be defeated. Recovering from the shock, the Alliance replaced the military High Commander and his staff, and commenced an immediate crash program – ordering hundreds of new ships to be built. Raw materials became a premium, and the deep-space exploration program was expanded. Novak accepted his commission on two conditions – that he be allowed to smoke his pipe, and that he be allowed to take his cat, Admiral Halsey, with him.

The information from the drone downloaded, Novak summoned his senior officers to the conference room on the Damascus. Whenever circumstances permitted, Novak preferred to speak to his senior officers in person, rather than through the communication system.

"Hello Halsey, how's my favorite kitty?" Captain Gunter Vanderfield entered the room and reached down and stroked Halsey's silky fur. "Here, I brought you something –" Gunter pulled out of his pocket a small tub of cream, which he opened and placed before the cat. Halsey wasted no time devouring it.

"Gunter, stop spoiling my cat," reprimanded Novak.

"Just keeping in the Admirals' good graces," Vanderfield replied as he sat down.

Novak took one last puff and put his pipe down. "Well crew, this is it. You'll all be given copies of the data from Delta One at the end of the briefing. The salient points are: we've finally located another species. It's no longer just us and the Vasudans. The data from Delta One clearly indicates that System 379 is populated."

With this announcement there was a murmuring of surprise. Captain Jason Sullivan, commander of the Sutherland, indicated he wanted to speak. "Sir, is it possible that this species is responsible for the devastation we've been seeing?"

Novak shook his head. "It's possible but I think it unlikely. Delta One discovered no sentries posted at the other end of the jump-node, and although it flew by the main populated planet it detected no defense systems."

"No defenses?" An expression of incredulity crossed Vanderfield's face.

"I agree it's a mystery." Novak pressed a switch and the conference room's large holographic screen displayed the star system. "It's my intention that tomorrow at fourteen hundred hours we transit to this system. We will then proceed under conventional drive to the main population center –this planet here." Novak pointed at the second planet out from the sun. "In this way we will give the natives plenty of time – I hope – to ascertain we mean no harm." Novak turned back to his officers. "I remind you all that this is a first contact situation, and that we are to exhibit our best behavior. If there are no further questions –" Novak glanced around the table, "I'll turn this meeting over to Doctor Rivera, who will go over the data collected by Delta One in detail."

* * *

The fleet reached the planet without incident. Just as the fleet had settled into orbit, contact was established.

"Captain, we're receiving a transmission - it's by old-fashioned radio, sound and vision."

"Radio?" Novak was puzzled. Surely an advanced civilization like this would be using subspace to communicate? "Put in on screen."

The image was off one of the inhabitants: purple, hairless with a long, tapering head and shell-like ears. Naked save for a large variety of jewelry hanging from various anatomical features. He or she appeared agitated, and its speech consisted of a wide variety of sounds – from squeaks to whistles to long bass notes. With a final exclamation the alien fell silent, but continued to glare out of the screen. "I think they may be awaiting a response sir," said Solway.

"Very well. Com, open a channel via radio. Sound and vision."

"Aye Captain, channel open."

"This is Captain Jack Novak of the Earth ship Damascus. We come in peace, and wish to establish friendly relations with you." The alien on the screen had cocked its head to the side as it listened, then immediately started a further barrage of improbable sounds.

Two hours had elapsed by the time Doctor Rivera appeared with the translation. "Too put it briefly

Captain, they want us to leave." Novak raised his brows. Rivera continued. "They accuse us of using 'forbidden technology' and say that we will anger the 'Destroyers from the Underworld', and that we will bring down their wrath on them all. They demand we leave at once."

Later that evening Novak relaxed in his favorite armchair, Halsey the cat purring contentedly on his lap. Strangely, Halsey was the only being aboard the Damascus that didn't seem to mind Novak's smoking. Perhaps the comfort of a warm lap outweighed the nasal irritation. Novak reached over Halsey's body and picked up the latest translations from Xenolinguistics. Damn it, he thought. This system's natives had made it abundantly clear that the Terran fleet was not welcome. However, as much as he would like to respect their wishes, it would not be possible. Terra was at war. Every opportunity had to be taken advantage of, and this was too good an opportunity to miss. He came to a decision – the fleet would leave orbit but continue to scan the system and amass as much information as possible before returning to Earth. Then, any future decisions regarding this system would be left to the politicians. His intercom buzzed. "Captain, Doctor Rivera here. We've made a breakthrough."

Rivera was standing in the Damascus's conference room, pointing to the large holographic screen. In attendance were the fleet's senior officers. "Xenolinguistics has been monitoring the planet's various transmissions, and we came across this." He pressed a switch and an image of a massive star ship appeared on the screen. "This is one of the Destroyer's spacecraft. The natives call it the 'Planet Killer'. As you can see, it's larger than even our Orion destroyers." Captain Vanderfield slowly whistled in appreciation. "This image is from a history program. Apparently half a million years ago there was a war between two of their colonies. Suddenly the Destroyers appeared, and within a matter of weeks all of their star systems save this one had been destroyed. Then a prophet appeared who proclaimed that the Destroyers were punishing them for their violent ways and for using 'forbidden technology'. The natives destroyed all their weapons and 'forbidden technology', and promised that they would never use them again. The Destroyers have never been seen since."

Rivera deactivated the holographic screen. "Captain, I believe their 'forbidden technology' is subspace tech."

"That would explain their use of radio, rather than subspace for communicating," said Solway.

Novak filled his pipe with tobacco as he digested the information. "If you're right, then these 'Destroyers' may have some way of monitoring subspace." Rivera nodded.

"I believe that would be a reasonable assumption."

Novak lit his pipe and surveyed his officers as he slowly puffed. "If these 'Destroyers' still exist – given that these events transpired half a million years ago – what do you think they would make of our subspace jump to this system?"

Rivera was about to reply when he was interrupted by the intercom. "Captain – signal from the drones we stationed at the node -- there's a warp point forming."

"Pipe the transmission down to the conference room." Novak ordered. The holographic screen projected an image of the opening warp point, its maw expanding to enormous proportions as a gigantic ship emerged. A collective gasp echoed across the conference room as everyone recognized the ship.

It was the Planet Killer.

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"Captain, the signals from the planet - they all think they're going to die."

"There's a mass panic, hysteria - one of the news readers just cut his own throat!"

Samantha Solway almost tripped over Halsey as she hurried onto the bridge. Sweeping him up in her arms and she deposited the startled cat into the bridge's escape pod. "You'll be safe in there" she said as the hatch swung shut. A moment later Novak stormed onto the bridge.

"Status report" he ordered.

"Three additional ships have arrived and are currently stationed at the warp point," reported Solway. "The Planet Killer is moving towards the planet."

"They don't want anyone leaving the system," he observed wryly. He walked over to a display of the star system.

"Captain – the planet is signaling the alien ships – they're giving the aliens our location!"

"I don't know how we can fight them, sir," said Solway.

"It may not come to that. See, here..." Novak pointed to the display, "...the Oort Cloud and the Kuiper Belt intersect in this band."

Solway studied the display. Oort Clouds and Kuiper Belts are features common to many solar systems. Composed of dust and ice, the intersection of the two would be especially dense. "I doubt the Destroyers would be able to locate us in there."

"My thoughts exactly," Novak replied, "but first we have to get there."

Novak turned back to the bridge and began to issue orders. "Shut down all transceivers – rig for silent running. Helm – set course for the Oort/Kuiper band, maximum fleet speed. Com – open a channel to the fleet: All ships – zero emissions mode, communicate via laser only. Engineering – power up the warp engines."

"Warp-point forming sir! Bearing oh-nine-seven by one-eight-two, range twenty point nine kilometres"

"Damn! How soon to jump?" Novak demanded.

"Five minutes."

"Four new contacts sir. Erratic sensor readings, but profile suggests four fighters or light bombers. Am designating contacts as Zulu."

Novak frowned at the screen. "What's causing the interference? Some sort of electronic warfare?"

"Unknown captain."

"Since they've found us, let's try and be friendly. Com, hail the ships – standard greetings."

"Aye, captain."

Novak stared at the main-plot. The fleet could only travel as fast as their slowest ship. The alien ships were of course much faster, and rapidly closing.

"No response to hails."

"I don't want the aliens to think we're being aggressive, so for the time being keep the turrets and missile launchers powered-down. But, tell engineering to warm-up the tertiary fusion plant and to leach power to the reserve energy bank. If push comes to shove that should speed-up weapons activation."

"Zulu's speed is oh-seven-five kps. Will intercept fleet in four minutes, fifteen seconds."

A buzzer sounded.

"Captain – Zulu has launched weapons. I repeat Zulu has launched weapons!"

Samantha looked up from her console. "Weapons release confirmed."

"Launch fighters, activate all turrets and missile launchers," snapped Novak. "Signal the fighters: Alpha wing, engage those contacts. Beta wing, stop those warheads."

"Captain, Weapons identified as free-fall bombs."

"Com, signal the fleet - Formation Citadel."

"Aye captain." The fleet's best chance of survival was to maintain a close formation. Using Formation Citadel the three cruisers would close together into a "wall" with the weaker Damascus and the freighters inside. This would give the cruisers overlapping fields of fire, enabling the ships to cover each other with their turrets.

The Angel fighters that made up Beta Wing ignited afterburners to intercept the warheads. Eight missiles screamed from Beta Wing - and six of the bombs erupted in unexpected fury. "Don't let them through – " ordered Beta One – Commander Esmerelda Concepcion, as she opened fire. The rest of Beta wing followed her, firing lasers at the remaining ten warheads. Nine more disappeared. One bomb flashed past Beta Wing and into the fleet.

"Captain, one warhead got through – impact in five seconds."

"Fire Control - destroy that bomb" snapped Novak.

"Turrets still inactive sir, on-line in seven seconds." Novak smashed his fist down on his armrest.

The four Apollo class fighters that made up Alpha wing ignited afterburners and streaked in to engage the enemy. Nina Rochaix, piloting Alpha Two, pulled up to avoid the lead bomber's burst of fire. Mitchell Devereaux in Alpha One opened the throttle up, and with a quick boost of the afterburners was on a bomber's tail. Lining the aiming reticule up on his HUD, Devereaux squeezed the trigger. Four M-16 ceramic argon lasers crossed the distance at the speed of light – and dissipated in a flash of energy. Devereaux blinked, then fired again. The rapid flashes etched out a vague shape...some sort of barrier.

"Damascus, this is Alpha One. Zulu is equipped with some sort of shield, our lasers can't penetrate,

over."

The small bomb sailed into the fleet. Inside a proximity fuse noted the mass of a nearby cruiser, and in a nanosecond computed that this would be as close as it would get. The fuse sent a signal to a relay which in turn deactivated the bomb's internal power supply. Without power a small containment field collapsed – and one kilogram of antimatter suddenly realized it was in the wrong universe.

"Turrets now on-line, sir."

"Captain, the Sutherland's been hit!"

"How bad is she damaged?"

"Report coming in sir – her subspace drive is off-line." Novak clenched his fists – without the subspace drive the Sutherland would not be able to withdraw – and damned if he'd leave her behind! Brow frowning in concentration Novak studied the main plot.

Beta Wing joined the engagement with the enemy bombers, and mere seconds later Beta Two and Four were blown away. Undaunted by the ineffectiveness of their weapons, the remaining fighters continued to harass the enemy bombers, preventing them from launching any more attacks on the fleet.

Novak jabbed his finger down on the main plot. "Com, download these coordinates to Alpha One, and open a channel."

"Aye Captain."

"Lieutenant, we're downloading a new nav-point into your flight computer. Lure the enemy fighters to this point."

"Alpha One acknowledged," Devereaux replied.

"Open a channel to Endeavor and Hermes."

"Aye Captain, channel open."

"Captains, please cease fire and train your turrets onto this point in space. Await further instructions."

"Orders acknowledged captain."

Devereaux's fighter was damaged. Glancing hits from the enemy had destroyed his starboard engine and his missile launcher. Flight control was erratic - some of his attitude control thrusters were miss-firing, jinking his fighter. His damage control system was fighting a losing battle against the steadily accumulating injuries. These enemy bombers were something else – superbly agile, weaponry at least twice as powerful as his M60 laser cannons. One direct hit would finish him. Nina had ejected a split second before her fighter had become a fireball, and Tony Portelli in Alpha Three had disappeared. He checked his computer for the nav-point – there, about three hundred meters from the fleet. A blast of heat swept over his cabin from another near miss. Smoke filled the cockpit as insulation started to burn. Eyes stinging, Devereaux closed the face-plate on his suit. Unable to see his instruments through the smoke, Devereaux pulled out his side-arm, pressed the

barrel against the cockpit's glass, and fired. The laser punched a hole and the escaping air blew the smoke out with it. Noting that all four bombers were now on his tail, Devereaux dashed for the nav-point.

Novak watched the main plot closely. Weaving and dodging, his remaining fighters made their way across the plot to a large yellow circle. "Open channels to Alpha and Beta Wings, Endeavor and Hermes."

"Channels open, Captain."

"Listen closely. Pilots, on my command, hit your afterburners and get out of their as quickly as possible. Endeavor, Hermes – at the same time I want you to commence rapid volley fire with all turrets."

"Alpha one acknowledged."

"Endeavor acknowledged"

"Hermes acknowledged."

The fighters followed by the bombers entered the yellow circle. "And...cruisers – open fire, Pilots – get out of there now!"

In perfect concert the turrets of Endeavor and Hermes opened fire. Sixteen large laser cannons – powerful enough to bombard cities from orbit – opened fire. At the same time Devereaux slammed his throttle forward and triggered the afterburners. An explosion of energy washed over his fighter....

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...And Devereaux awoke. Lying in bed he looked up at a circle of concerned faces. "What are all you people doing in my bedroom?" Devereaux tried to sit up but suddenly felt dizzy.

Nina gently pushed him back into the bed. "You're in sick bay."

A memory resurfaced. "The enemy bombers –"

"All destroyed – and you almost with them." Devereaux sank back into unconsciousness.

The fleet had just entered the Oort Cloud when Jean Pommelet at the communications station turned to Novak. "Incoming subspace signal Captain. Audio only"

Solway turned sharply to Novak. "The inhabitants of this system don't use subspace communications. That means —" Novak raised a hand.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions, Commander. Com, put it on speaker."

A high-pitched screech pierced the bridge. "What in blazes is that?" demanded Novak. The bridge crew looked around in astonishment. "Com, see if you can trace the signal."

"Aye Captain."

Novak turned to Sub Lieutenant Rowntree. "Anything on sensors?"

"Captain, with density of dust out there, sensors can't see past a couple of kilometers," she replied.

A few minutes later the screech repeated, this time longer and louder. The anxious crew checked instruments and monitors frantically.

"Pipe the transmission to xenolinguistics, maybe they can make something of it," Novak ordered. The screech repeated, this time with an air of desperation.

"Got it captain, it's coming from very close to the Damascus...it's right on top of us!" exclaimed Pommelet.

"But there's nothing on sensors!"

"Admiral Halsey!" Cried Solway. Before Novak's questioning look she ran over to the escape pod and opened the hatch. A tabby streak dashed between her legs and rocketed down the corridor. "I forgot I put him in there during the alert!"

Somehow the cat had managed to activate the subspace communications system in the lifeboat.

"Never underestimate a hungry cat," Novak said wryly.

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For a week the fleet drifted deep inside the Oort/Kuiper band. For one week two thousand people perspired in silence and darkness while outside the ships were battered with clumps of dust and ice. The steel shutters became pitted and scarred, delicate instruments were smashed into uselessness. Finally at the end of that week the drones stationed at the warp-node broadcast a signal - the Destroyers had left.

When the fleet finally arrived back at the planet, an altogether familiar scene of destruction awaited them.

"Captain, all the cities have been leveled, there's a lot of dust clouding the atmosphere, and the oceans have gone! The surface of the planet is uninhabitable."

Solway glared at the screen. "But why? They didn't do anything!"

"Any transmissions? Perhaps there are some bunkers, some survivors?"

"Captain, a lot of the atmosphere boiled into space with the oceans, and most of the planet's surface has been pummeled into gravel."

"Why?" repeated Solway. "They had no armed forces, no defenses. They weren't threatening anyone!"

"They're dead. All dead."

"We didn't even know their name."

* * *

Two weeks into their journey home the fleet discovered a badly damaged courier drone.

Since leaving System 379 Novak had spent most of his time in his quarters. Solway was worried about the Captain. She knew him well enough to know that he was blaming himself for the holocaust in System 379. She knew that he believed that there must have been something that he could have done to prevent it, even though in hindsight he knew nothing could have saved them. The discovery of the drone brought him to the bridge.

"Looks like the Vasudans tried to stop our mail," remarked Novak.

"Well, I'm glad they missed this one," said Solway, "we've been out of contact with Terra for nearly six months."

"Captain, the drone is broadcasting to us, it's heavily encrypted – level six."

"That's me, " Novak stood up. "Pipe it through to my quarters." He strode off the bridge. Fifteen minutes later he reappeared – and looked as if he'd aged ten years. "Send signal to fleet, all senior officers are to report to the Damascus' Conference room immediately."

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With a heavy heart Novak addressed the assembled officers. "The Vasudan war has ended. The GTA and Vasuda are now allies." A murmur of disbelief filled the room. "Now the bad news. Earth and Vasuda are at war with a new race named the "Shivans". The Shivans match our description of the Destroyers." Novak paused, noting the shocked expressions. "Two months ago Vasuda Prime was lost. Destroyed. As of six weeks ago when this courier was sent, Earth had lost all of its jump nodes. All contact with the colony worlds outside Sol has been lost. All military forces outside Sol are presumed lost."

"Earth's been blockaded. This drone was one of several hundred sent through Earth's warp-node – and it's the only one that made it. The initial assault on Earth was repulsed, but Terran Command doesn't know if it will be able to repulse the next one." Novak stood up. "People, we have a decision to make. Whether to continue back to Earth, or to withdraw into deep space. As this decision affects each and every one of us, I propose that we all vote on the matter in a weeks time."

A week later all the senior officers received a summons to the Damascus. When Novak appeared the assembled officers were surprised at his transformation. Gone was the drawn look and slumped shoulders. He stood straight, full of energy with a spark in his eyes.

"Fellow officers. I expect you have all been wondering where I stand on this issue, given Earth's plight and our own situation. Well, I won't keep you in suspense. I intend to save Earth."

For a brief moment there was stunned silence. The officers were dumbfounded; they were expecting Novak to state the obvious – that as a survey fleet they were ill equipped for military operations – especially against an almost invincible enemy; that the only reasonable course of action was to retreat into furthest reaches of the galaxy and attempt to reestablish humanity far away from the Shivans. The silence broke with a dozen objections. Novak waved them down.

"People, I assure you that I have not taken leave of my senses. This may on the surface appear to be a futile effort. But before we vote, hear me out. For the last week I have gone over all the information we have gathered, both our direct observations at System 379 and the information contained in the courier drone. The drone contains in its memory banks complete intelligence on the Shivans, and all the latest technological advances of combined Terran-Vasudan science. We have the

latest fighter and weapon designs, and specifications on how to construct energy shields. I have met with the scientists here on the Damascus and have run through the computer a number of simulations – and some interesting possibilities have emerged." All the officers were staring at him, with mixed expressions.

Novak stopped, lit his pipe, drew a long puff, and put the pipe down.

"Fellow officers, I have a plan..."