

## Beyond the White Stars

by Adam Casalino

The cruiser crashed painfully to the earth. It skidded across the rain-slicked runway for several feet before coming to a stop. The chief engineer came running from the observatory. She jammed her hand into the emergency retrieval switch and held her breath as the crumpled hatch slowly rose. To her relief the man inside was alive.

“Are you insane?”

“Yes.”

“We told you not to jump back,” she groaned, “there were too many near the atmosphere. And look at you! You’re not even wearing your flight vest. You could’ve caught your death of cold.”

“If only.”

The chief engineer extended her arms and helped the pilot out of the damaged space craft. He was only wearing a light shirt and jeans—far from the standard uniform—and the rain quickly soaked him to his skin. Blood was dripping from his forehead and it ran down the side of his face. He favored his left side and after several unsuccessful attempts at walking, leaned heavily on the chief.

“I swear, Hank, sometimes I think you *want* to get yourself killed.”

“It’s the only thing I’m not good at, eh Becky? Who the hell are they? Don’t tell me you sent for medics?”

A swarm of men—draped in macs—were rushing towards them.

“Those are my engineers,” Rebecca replied. “They’re going to see just how much damage you caused my cruiser.”

“The *States’* cruiser. Is it too much to ask to be forgiven a few bumps and scratches for defending the planet?”

“You won’t be doing much defending if you keep wrecking ships, Hank.”

“Ah, Becky...”

They entered the base through the take-off observatory, a many-windowed station swarming with satellite monitors and orbital engineers. Rebecca’s supervisor shouted some order, barely heard over the general noise of the room.

“I’m taking Captain Brillson to Medic.”

“Well be quick about it. We got four more cruisers coming in and they’re in worse shape than his!”

“You see,” Henry replied. “I’m not the only one who got banged up out there.”

“You’re just the one who *started* all the trouble,” Becky said.

They exited the observatory and Rebecca started down the left terminal. Henry pulled her around.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Mission Control.”

“Mission Control? No, I’m taking you to Medic.”

“I need to report in.” It was a lie. Pilots who survive a crash *always* go to Medic first. Reports can be filed at any time. They both knew this.

“Hank, there is nothing at MC that concerns you.”

“It *always* concerns me.” His voice lost its usual charm and grew cold. “I need to know if we broke through the blockade.”

The round chamber of Mission Control was crowded with pilots. Brigadier General Grieves stood in the center. The murmur died down at the raise of his hand. Only the soothing beeps of the myriad consoles were heard. Henry and Rebecca entered and stood in the back as Grieves began to speak.

“Thanks to the courageous efforts of our cruiser fleet, our enemy was forced to withdraw. However, what we thought was a blockade was merely a disguise. The so-called blockade ships were actually transmitting false-data to our satellites. Our view of the space surrounding earth was cut off, allowing them to bring in invasion carriers. They pulled the wool over our eyes good and tight on this one.”

The large screen behind the commander lit up, displaying several rotating images.

“These ships can carry five hundred single-manned fighters, fast enough to slip past our patrols, with enough fire-power to level an entire city. We estimate there are fourteen of these carriers just beyond the moon’s orbit.”

The room was silent for an entirely new reason. Grieves cleared his throat and continued.

“The US Space Corps is coordinating with our allies to prepare defensive measures. However, with the British Empire’s fleet largely beyond the Solar System’s edge and China’s recent defeat at the Belt, it will be days before an adequate force can be put into place. So, our only option—for now—is to send a

small team to disrupt the enemy's convoy any way they can. The carriers are not yet in position. Their fighters are most likely not ready for flight. Now is our one chance of delaying their assault. A fleet will be assembled within three days time, though we are taking volunteers."

No one spoke. Pilots with years of experience looked at the floor, stared at their fingernails, or quietly edged towards the door. They knew the reality of the mission. The carriers were not defenseless. Scores of warship were undoubtedly guarding the convoy. A petty team of ships would barely make a dent against them. Everyone involved would surely die.

"Alright," Henry said. "It seems no one else wants a go at it. I guess it's up to me again." The entire room turned and stared at the smirking captain.

Brigadier General Grieves exploded. "Captain Brillson you're in no condition for flight. What are you doing here anyway? You should be in Medic." He scowled at Rebecca. "Miss Sorenin, please take him away."

Rebecca nodded sheepishly and pulled at Henry.

"None of these men are willing to commit suicide," he said, refusing to move. "I doubt most of them can even devise a strategy that'll work!"

"Captain if you don't leave now, I'll have to remove you by force."

Henry glared at Grieves before finally relenting to Rebecca's persuasion. He spent one restless night at Medic before returning to his quarters—the medical staff unable to stop him.

The Corps had trouble assembling the team, but by the day before launch they managed to pull pilots from each fleet to partake in the assault. The engineers gathered in the observatory to prepare. Rebecca was given the list of pilots—she was responsible for charting their flights. She scanned the list for the types of ships that would be flying. Her eyes froze on the one name:

Captain Henry Brillson: Forward Guard of Cruiser Fleet

Rebecca threw the list down on her desk and rushed from the observatory. She reached Henry's room in less than a minute.

"You're leading the cruisers?" Her anger and fear wrestled with each word.

"Would you expect anything different?"

"How?"

“Come now, it’s not hard swapping places with someone on *this* mission.”

“There’s no way Grievus would have allowed it.” She was on the verge of exploding.

“Grievus doesn’t have the last word in the matter, or did you forget he’s just a Brigadier?”

Her anger gave way to frustration. “Hank, you can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?” he replied in offense.

“Putting yourself in reckless danger.”

“I’m sorry, I thought there was a host of ships ready to invade the planet!”

“That’s not why you’re flying,” she said. “That’s never been why. I’m convinced you won’t stop until *you are* dead.”

Henry did not reply. The certainty of her words grew in the accumulating silence.

“Killing yourself is not going to bring her back...” Her voice was small and desperate.

“I know,” he finally said. “But staying alive won’t either.”

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An eruption of yellow and white flooded the launch grounds as ships from the various fleets flew into the sky. The momentary blindness caused by the sight faded and all that remained on the ground was a sinking cloud of smoke. A score of glistening crafts pierced through the atmosphere. After a minute’s time the clear blue of earth’s sky was peeled away, revealing the endless black of space.

The ships took their positions. The swift cruisers formed the outer ranks. Behind them were the heavy-hitting bruisers and warships. A voice squawked over the pilots’ com, directing the fleets and reminding everyone of their mission.

“Cruisers will engage the escort. Bruisers and warships will hold their positions and intercept any that attempt to evade us. Remember: we’re there merely to slow their progress. We can’t expect to take them all out. Once it gets too hot, we’re pulling out.”

Henry clicked on his mic. “Sir, why don’t we just engage the carriers? If we strike preemptively, we might draw out all those little fighters. With luck, their numbers will be too low for the assault on earth.”

“Because *captain*, this is not a suicide mission. We don’t have enough ships to engage all their fighters. Besides the carriers aren’t equipped to fight. It’s best we focus on their escort.”

Within fifteen minutes they passed the moon and saw the first of the enemy. They were massive crafts, more like floating cities than transports. Five of these carriers were closest, with many more behind.

A voice piped up over the com. "Sir, I don't see any accompanying ships."

"There has to be," came the commander. "Carriers can't maneuver well enough to fight."

"I hope you're right," Henry added. "Because the cruisers are about to engage."

"Dammit Brill--" Henry turned off the main com and switched to the cruiser fleet's channel. "This is Captain Brillson. We are engaging the carriers. Cruisers follow me."

Henry's ship dropped out of formation and banked right. The cruisers followed. They approached the nearest carrier, forming into the usual attack formation.

"On my mark..."

The cruisers opened fire. The blasts slammed against the ship's hull. It rocked backward from the impact. The fleet circled around and prepared for a second assault. The carrier responded. There was a blinding flash of white. A screeching sound filled the pilots' com. A wave of energy knocked the cruisers into disarray. It continued until it struck one of the cruisers. It exploded instantly, igniting several nearby crafts.

After the blazing light subsided and the ringing left his ears, Henry regained his bearings. The blast had knocked him further than the rest. In the distance he could see the fleets scattering as the carriers attacked. Their hulls were opened and swarms of fighters had emerged.

He pulled on his thrusters but his ship wouldn't move. A red light appeared on his computer display. His engines were dead. His fingers flew over the keys of his console. He entered every command he knew, but the ship would not kick to life. Another warning light appeared. Ships were approaching from behind. Henry cocked his head around to look. He tried to curse but the words got caught in his throat. Twenty of the massive enemy carriers were moving towards him.

Without thinking Henry unclasped his restraints. He pulled his emergency oxygen mask over his face and made sure his gun was in his belt. His hand moved towards the ejection switch. Floating through space was a better option to him than waiting helplessly for his ship to explode. The cruiser lurched forward and his hand missed the switch. All power left the craft. He sat in the dark cockpit, the only light the flashes of battle miles away.

His ship lurched again. There came the sound of bending metal and he began to move. Henry knew what was happening. One of the enemy vessels was pulling him in. The cruiser was moving backward and he twisted himself uncomfortably so he could see. Through the small porthole in the back he peered out. The largest of the carriers was drawing in his ship. Its great front parted as the little craft was swallowed up into a black maw. Captain Henry sat in the void of light and sound, his hand on his pistol, waiting for the inevitable.

The deafening silence was first broken by the sound of pinging metal. Small particles were pelting the cruiser. Henry was still in utter darkness. After a few minutes he let go of his gun and tried the ship's computer. It came to life. He had no control over the engines, but he was able to activate the navigation maps. The captain stared at the maps in confusion. He was outside known space.

Henry shook his head and closed the console. A light outside the ship appeared. It was a small circle of white that grew slowly, illuminating the entire chamber. He was in a great warehouse-sized room. The walls were of a smooth, dark metal. Shelving lined them and were filled with unfamiliar-looking machinery. Some of this moved off the shelves unassisted, and circled the cruiser. Henry assumed they were scanning him for some purpose.

A current of air that had been encircling the ship ceased. For the first time he realized he was floating in the center of the chamber. Slowly the cruiser began to move. It descended and came to rest on a small platform. The hatch opened and Henry tightened his oxygen mask.

“Please remove the helmet. The air is quite safe.”

Henry looked around, but could see no one.

“Do not be alarmed,” the voice said. “I am projecting my thoughts directly into your mind. This releases us of the burden of translation.” The sound of the voice was calm and soothing. It urged the captain to relax and lower his guard. Henry did not buy it. “You may exit your ship and approach us. We mean you no harm.”

Cautiously Henry removed his oxygen mask and climbed out of the ship. On the floor appeared a trail of light that went down the length of the room. He followed it until it ended at a large, raised dais. Standing atop the dais was a tall figure. Henry could not make out the being. Although the entire chamber was illuminated, the figure seemed just beyond the light's reach, shrouded in darkness. All he could see was that it was draped in a long robe.

“You mind telling me who you are?” Henry said aloud. “And why you're invading my planet?”

“Such a bold species,” the voice said in his mind. “To attack an enemy it knows nothing about. To wage an entire war in ignorance.”

“Hey buddy, you’re the ones who started this war two years ago, when you attacked our space station.” Anger flared up in Henry when he thought of the event.

“Such rage when you think of this!” replied the voice. “But why bicker over the past? We are in the Now and it is only Now that was can possess.”

“You brought me here to philosophize?”

“No.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Ah, a question worthy of asking at any Time. You are a leader among your kind. You were the only one to attack our vessels. Separating you from the rest would assure their immediate downfall.”

“Is that all?” Henry asked. “You didn’t have to bring me here. You could have blown me up—I was dead in the water!”

“That may have been what *you* wanted, but we have **another purpose for you!**”

Henry stepped back, his hand on his pistol. The figure did not move; it seemed to only sway in the darkness.

“We have a *purpose* for you, Hank, and we need your full cooperation if we wish to achieve it.”

“I don’t intend to cooperate.”

“Really?” the voice took on a mock sympathy. “What other choice do you have? Your planet is in grave peril. Your fleets by now have been completely eradicated. We know there are no other forces capable of repelling us. Soon our carriers we be in a position to dominate every city and nation. But you can stop it.”

The words rung in his mind like a gong. Images of his home falling to ruin streaked across the back of his eyes.

“How?”

For the first time the figure on the dais appeared to move. It was a sudden jerk, as if it was trying to restrain its excitement. “We need a spokesman to your species. Someone they can trust and believe. You will return to your planet and convince them to surrender.”

“Surrender?”

“Your species cannot survive unless it ceases this meaningless warfare. Your planet must submit to our control. You will persuade them to do so. In

return we will reward you with power beyond your imagination. Anything will be at your grasp. You will be able to turn back the pages of time, even pluck life from the clutches of death!”

“Death?”

“Yes...” the voice dripped with venom. “We know her, Hank. We know Samantha. She was taken from you, but we can bring her back!”

“Back?” Henry’s voice grew desperate. “You can bring her back?”

“Of course we can, Hank. She is merely beyond the veil of life and death. Beyond the white stars of our universe. We know how to penetrate this wall. *Nothing* is impossible.”

A play of eternity danced before Henry’s eyes. Exploding suns and spinning galaxies folded back. He saw her. Her raven hair was bathed in light. She twirled around him in a moment that seemed forever. Then she was gone.

“What do you say, Hank?”

For a moment Henry was gripped. The reminder of Samantha’s face nearly sealed the deal. Then he remembered where he stood. Feelings of love were washed away by two years of bloodshed and pain.

“Nothing is impossible,” he replied, “for the ones who took her from me in the first place.”

“Hank...” the voice began, “do not dwell in the past.”

“Had you not destroyed that station, Samantha would still be with me. I will *never* hand over my home to her murderers.”

He turned and began to walk back to his ship. A strange, gurgling growl arose and was quickly stifled behind him. The voice returned.

“Don’t be a fool, Henry!” all kindness was gone. The voice was a creaking, hissing sound. “We know you don’t care about that planet. Your selfishness is what drives you. You’ll never find her after death, we’ll make sure of that! Give up earth and just take what is yours!”

Henry didn’t bother to reply. In a flash his gun was in his hand and he was firing. The shot hit its mark. The figure stumbled back. Smoke rose from a gaping hole in its robe. A harsh and *alien* voice echoed through the great chamber. The docile white light turned crimson. A piercing alarm began as Henry ran to the cruiser. The alien voice growled again. Henry was violently knocked to the ground.

He rolled onto his back and gazed up at the hulking creature that stood over him. Its long, lumpy body was covered in a dark membrane. Countless,



pointed limbs sprouted from its torso. A face that was all too human looked down at him, its eyes seething an incalculable rage.

A single line was screaming in Henry's mind. "You'll never get out of here alive!"

"Well," he replied, "neither will you!"

The captain unloaded his gun into the creature. Its middle exploded as it fell back. The lower half of the body was still twitching as Henry got to his feet and rushed to his ship. He leapt into the cockpit. Whispering a prayer he kicked on the thrusters. The cruiser did not move.

A new voice filled the hall, screeching the same villainous language. Scores of the monsters filled the room. Their black bodies slithered down the walls and made for the ship. Henry closed the hatch as the first of the creatures began to pummel it. The cruiser slid across the room, crushing many of them in the process. They swarmed chaotically over him, the light blocked out by their frames.

Captain Henry turned on the console computer and hastily ran the diagnostics. His cruiser's functions were being jammed by the carrier ship. As he rolled about the chamber he forced the console's power to his weapons. Then he opened fire.

The alien cries were heard through the sound-proof titanium. He cut through the mass of creatures and aimed for the dais. It erupted in a ball of fire which quickly ignited the entire hall. As its light faded the cruiser came to life. Henry slammed on the thrusters.

The carrier crumbled away as he emerged into the familiar black of space. He was still within the solar system, merely miles from the battle. He streaked towards the other vessels, firing at anything that crossed his path. A small remnant of his fleet was still fighting. He flicked on his mic and shouted over the com.

"Fight to the last man! Don't let these bastards near earth!"

A chorus of shouts filled the com. The cluster of cruisers and warships reformed around Henry. At the sight of their flagship in flames, the enemy quickly fell into panic. The carriers began to fall back as the captain led the fleet against the remaining fighters.

A voice piped over the main com. "Hank? Hank, is that really you?" It was Rebecca.

"Yeah, Becky. It's me."

"We had lost contact with your ship. It completely disappeared from our system!"

“You know you can’t get rid of me *that* easily.”

A glint of light appeared across the earth’s surface, as a convoy of ships arrived at the scene of battle. The fleet was gathered and escorted to a base on the moon’s surface. As Henry reluctantly submitted to a scan by a medic, Rebecca stepped off one of the transports. She immediately ran to him. Before she could gather her wits she embraced him.

“Ah, excuse me captain.” She quickly let go, mortified.

“It’s alright, engineer,” Henry answered with a smirk.

“So what happened up there?” Rebecca looked intently into his eyes.

“I was given a choice: life or death.”

“What did you choose?”

“I chose *life*, Becky. I always choose life.”