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## BEING IN THE RIGHT PLACE IN SPACE

“Permission to come onto the bridge, Sir?” asked the officer who had collected Marcus and Grand Alf from the shuttle bay.

“Granted,” replied the officer of the watch.

Marcus and Grand Alf stepped onto the bridge of the battlecruiser. Marcus had anticipated a spacious, comfortable chamber with wooden trim, designer colours and carpeted softness.

His expectations collided heavily with reality. The actual bridge was a good deal smaller and more functional. Solid in construction and practical in design, the bridge offered a spectacular 180° view through heavily protected windows. On every surface were levers and buttons, communication equipment, flickering screens and computer links. Everything was encased in thick, gun metal grey panels.

A mixture of species in different coloured uniforms stood in front of instrumentation, their attention fixed on screens glowing out constant data streams about position, speed, elevation, direction and nearby craft. Marcus was surprised to see physical maps spread out on a metal table, with junior officers carefully drawing pencil lines to indicate

possible flight paths.

“We’re about to get underway, which can be a tricky manoeuvre,” explained Mhat, the well built, sandy haired navigation officer who had been reassigned as their guide for the day. Apart from the Captain he was the only human on the bridge. “We use all forms of navigational tools, traditional and cutting edge, so we always have a back up if one is compromised.” Mhat stepped further onto the bridge, “Let’s meet the Captain.”

Mhat, Marcus and Grand Alf advanced a few paces and came alongside the Captain, who was sitting in a well worn, elevated chair. Marcus could see by the Captain’s body language that every fibre of his being was straining with quiet concentration. Mhat spoke quietly, “Begging your pardon Captain but may I introduce our guests?”

The Captain swivelled his chair and broke into a warm, if somewhat restrained smile. He was not remarkable in stature or appearance but there was something special about this man. His eyes conveyed a quiet intensity and his bearing suggested he would not hesitate to give you a command - and if he did so you would obey without question. His whole demeanour sent the message he knew what he was doing and he was comfortable with himself and in his role.

Above all, the Captain was a man around whom you felt safe. Which was a good thing, really, when you were in a top-of-the-line battlecruiser about to patrol one of the darker portions of inner space. “It is a pleasure to welcome you aboard. We are about to get underway so forgive me as I will be busy for a while. I will have the opportunity to spend some time with you later on today. Mhat has the itinerary for your visit and he will take care of you until then.”

Marcus opened his mouth to ask a question but the Captain had

redirected his attention to the task at hand and they were clearly dismissed. What led them to a position at the side of the bridge.

“Pay attention to everything, particularly the Captain,” counselled Grand Alf. “Very few get selected to command a vessel like this and they’re all life forms of exceptional ability.” Marcus let the scene unfold in front of him.

“Ship’s released from the anchor buoys,” confirmed one of the officers on the bridge.

“Engage engines, starboard shafts,” instructed the Captain, a command which began the most thrilling and informative journey Marcus had ever experienced.

The battlecruiser began to glide forward and took its place in a busy shipping lane. Even though space is infinitely big, this close to the planet there was a buzz of crafts of all sizes piloted by Captains of every level of skill and shade of foolhardiness. In addition to these were the ever present dangers of space debris, satellites and the occasional asteroid. There were many opportunities for a big battlecruiser to tear a hole in its hull, which is as expensive as it is embarrassing.

Marcus listened to the sounds that filled the room. From the other side of the bridge a speaker relayed the chatter of conning instructions from the other vessels in the shipping lane. To Marcus’ right a young Reptiloid was tracking their hazard status, and announced, “Clear space to 3000 metres and deepening to port.” To his left, a Pyroidian called out their chart position, “Fix at six minutes is good, putting you 15 metres starboard of track and safe, estimated time to wheel over is five minutes.”

The Durassian navigator at the centre of the bridge called out the steering directions at a volume louder than the background noise, “Port

one five, steer one six five.”

“Port one five, steering one six five,” confirmed the robot quartermaster on the wheel.

“Increase speed to impulse five,” commanded the Executive Officer, a battle scarred and impressive looking, broad shouldered female Bhaargwarrior with thick features, pock marked skin, and a tumble of grey hair. In recognition of her species’ customs, she was allowed to wear a heavy, metal studded leather battlecoat over her uniform.

“Aye ma’am, increasing to impulse five.”

The navigator half faced the Captain but kept his eyes on the instrument panel. “Now on track sir, with 50 lengths to run before next wheel turn to starboard for new course of two one three. Course is visually clear and when the green marker is on our beam that will signify 20 lengths to run sir ...remaining on track sir.... now 40 lengths to run ...”

Through another speaker Marcus heard a complete replica of the navigational commentary, “On track with 40 lengths to run ...” echoed a voice from this unseen source. Marcus pointed to the speaker and Mhat answered as if Marcus had verbalised the question, “That’s the blind pilotage officer in the operations room 10 decks below us. There’s a duplicate set of controls down there and she’s tracking all the instructions and manoeuvres. If something happens to the controls on this bridge the duplicate can take over without interruption.” Images of a dozen grizzly circumstances that might render the bridge inoperable flashed through Marcus’ imagination.

Mhat drew Marcus’ attention to a panel of TV screens showing key parts of the battlecruiser. There was some activity in the shuttle bay displayed on the biggest screen at the centre of the panel. Marcus

could see the shuttle he had arrived in with Grand Alf had been stowed in its docking cradle and there were now a number of small, close range Warbird fighters being grouped in take off positions. One of the officers on the bridge was discussing a difficulty with the maintenance crew in the bay. Marcus noticed the Captain inclined his head to pick up the discussion but did not divert his attention, his eyes still fixed on the traffic out of the windows.

Marcus looked out and saw they were now in the middle of the main shipping lane, with craft visible above, below and directly ahead, some travelling in the same direction, some crossing their path and some oncoming. The Captain flicked a couple of switches on the arm of his chair and received a zoomed TV feed of an antiquated commercial shuttle on the small screen in front of him. “Navigator, I want you to pass down the starboard side of that vessel and move around her stern, coming no closer than 30 lengths,” he instructed.

“Aye sir,” replied the navigator who plotted the new course. This was followed by the back and forth interplay of commands and confirmation as both computers and pencil-wielding life forms redrew the new path the battlecruiser had to follow to account for the variation.

Marcus’ attention returned to the drama in the shuttle bay and it seemed the difficulty was now resolved. The Executive Officer took a couple of paces forward and stood behind the Captain. She said quietly, “Warbirds ready in five minutes.”

To which the Captain replied, “Acknowledged.”

“So, what have you learnt?” asked Grand Alf his voice hushed, almost inaudible so as not to disturb the proceedings.

“Wow, this is fantastic,” bubbled Marcus still finding it hard to believe he was on the bridge of a Star Class Battlecruiser and reluctant

to pull his eyes away from the multi layered activities on the bridge and the sight of the other vessels whipping past.

“That it is, but what have you learnt?” persisted Grand Alf.

Marcus took a moment to make sense of everything, “An error here could mean a collision. There’s a lot going on at the same time so there’s a great deal of precision in planning each step and checking what’s supposed to have happened has actually transpired. As far as possible nothing is left to chance.”

“True,” confirmed Mhat. “Even though we’ve done this many times before we must be careful to get it right. No one will forgive us if we botch up a routine activity, no matter how complicated.”

“Good. What have you learnt by watching the Captain?” continued Grand Alf.

Marcus studied the Captain. He was the only person sitting, yet in the elevated chair he was as tall as everyone else. He was the focus of many of the comments and yet he was not required to reply. He was an essential presence on the bridge and yet he had no need to do anything. He was the only person able to switch his focus from one activity to another.

Marcus spoke slowly, forming his impressions into words, “It would be tempting for the Captain to get involved in any one of the activities taking place, be it determining the speed or correcting a course or intervening with the problem in the shuttle bay.”

Marcus took the absence of a scowl from Grand Alf as a sign he was on the right track. “But he doesn’t because as soon as he directs his attention to one issue he can’t absorb the other data available to him on the bridge. It’s his job to be aware of everything and make sure all the elements are working together. If the ship is slower out of

this channel than he would like or if it takes a course a little different from the one he would plot himself it doesn't really matter. What does matter is not hitting something, not being excessively late and not making some other kind of gross error. As long as there's no indication these are going to happen he's perfectly content to let the crew get on with it."

Grand Alf looked at Mhat for confirmation this was the right answer. "Exactly right," said Mhat. "The only time the Captain spoke was to confirm we can go, to give a dodgy shuttle a wide berth and to acknowledge he knew a vital bit of gear - the Warbirds - were ready."

They paused to watch the battlecruiser pass by the rusted commercial shuttle. Marcus could see white streaks of gas venting through several small holes on its sides.

"We call it 'command by veto'," Mhat continued. "Everyone has the maximum level of authority delegated to them and they're expected to use it. The Captain is in the information stream but, as you pointed out, his job is to aggregate the details and understand the bigger picture. Information doesn't have to equal action at this level and if he interfered all the time we would all gradually lose our confidence and competence. The Captain would then find trivial decisions delegated upwards, the easiest and most dangerous trap for any leader."

"In the information stream but not expected to become involved unless something falls outside wide parameters," Marcus said quietly, organising his thoughts out loud.

"The paradox of being both connected and disconnected at the same time," observed Grand Alf. "It's a difficult art to master. Some leaders are so high level they lose touch with the real rhythms and routines, challenges and changes, deliverables and drivers in their business

and so make unworkable decisions. Others get too mired in the detail and can't see the big picture." He spent a few moments watching the Captain. "This leader has created the right balance. We shall find out how when we talk with him."

"We are in position sir," confirmed the navigator.

"Carry on," commanded the Captain and the Star Class Battlecruiser made the jump to beyond light speed and hurtled towards the outer limits of the border.