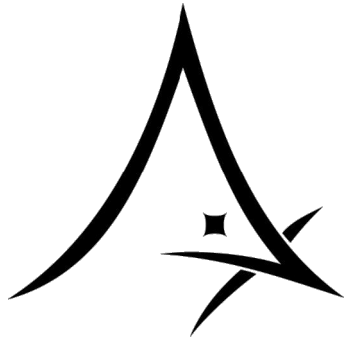


QUINTESSENCE



by

Shu Sam Chen

[HSAR]

A FAN FICTION BASED ON THE

[RECLAIMER WEBCOMIC](#)

by

Jim Stitzel

[TTL DemagOgue]

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Foreword

I'm sorry this one took a long time, but I do hope you'll find it worth the wait. The time frame for *Quintessence* is shortly before that of *Superluminality*, and Reticent Mystery is tying up his own business out on the front lines of the Flood-Forerunner war.

I'd just like to point out that words in [square brackets] were unable to be literally translated from Forerunner Standard, for one of several reasons: It may have a metaphorical meaning that wouldn't make much sense outside the context of language and time when it was written, it may have a better translation than the literal one (entirely possible due to the multiple-dimension, multiple-layer nature of Forerunner Standard), or it is a location and we have a different name for it. In any case, the closest English translation was found.

Oh, and I'm afraid I don't write well enough in other languages to be able to offer multiple language translations. If, however, any one of you readers is willing (and generous enough) to translate these into other languages, drop Jim Stitzel a line [here](#), or sign up to the [forum](#) and talk to us directly.

Oh, and you may require some Wikipedia searching (or your preferred equivalent) for some of the technical terms mentioned herein.

During AI conversations, ellipses before a section of (pseudo-)speech indicate a significant pause in the conversation before that line is said. The relative time would be approximately the same as a moment or two of hesitation in a regular conversation.

/HSAR

Prologue

<\> UNSC OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE
<\> FORERUNNER RESEARCH DATABASE [ONI.SEC.HAL-4T]

<\THE FOLLOWING MULTI-TRACK HOLOGRAPHICAL AND AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT WAS RECORDED FROM AN UNKNOWN ARTEFACT
<\DISCOVERED BY AN ODST SQUAD DURING COMBAT OPERATIONS.

<\PLEASE NOTE: BY ACCESSING THIS FILE YOU ARE AGREEING TO THE ONI OFFICIAL NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT (2551). IF YOU
<\DO NOT ACCEPT THE TERMS OF SAID NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, PLEASE DESTROY THIS FILE GROUP NOW. THANK YOU.

<\THIS CASE HAS BEEN CODENAMED "ARCHIVE". SEVERAL ARTEFACTS RELATED TO THIS CASE HAVE ALREADY BEEN OBSERVED OR
<\BROUGHT BACK TO ONI RESEARCH LABS. ANOTHER TWO SUCH ARTEFACTS, SIMILAR IN DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS,
<\HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED. A FOURTH IS SUSPECTED TO HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED BY THE LIGHT CRUISER "SCARBOROUGH FAIR".
<\HOWEVER, THE SCARBOROUGH FAIR WAS SUBSEQUENTLY DESTROYED IN AN ENGAGEMENT. ONLY PARTIAL RECORDS WERE
<\RECOVERED FROM THE SYSTEM DATA RECORDER, AND THE ARTEFACT ITSELF COULD NOT BE RECOVERED AS THE VESSEL
<\CONDUCTING SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS (THE PROWLER "CLOAK OF SHADOWS) CAME UNDER HOSTILE FIRE FROM
<\COVENANT FORCES STILL IN THE REGION, AND WAS FORCED TO RETREAT.

<\AUDIOVISUAL PLAYBACK COMMENCING.

The footage begins, captured by the scope camera of a sniper rifle. The scope tracks a meteorite as it fall from the sky at high speed, trailing smoke and flames. Confused radio chatter is overlaid, taken from the radio of the marksman:

"Holy smokes! What in the name of God is that?"
"Have we got a Longsword on station? We had one –"
"A prowler in low orbit? They've got good –"

The blazing ball of fire hurtles towards the camera, and the marksman disengages and runs.

"It's incoming to my position! I'm going to need –"

The rifle is thrown violently against a solid object and stops capturing. The film switches to the helmet camera of the soldier.

"Whoa, something weird's happening to my screen! It's been hacked!"

PLAYBACK BEGINS

All things come to an end. That is the truth of the universe; the one universal, undeniable truth. Some stay longer, and some less so, but they all end in some way or another. Even stars die out.

The Cavalcade came to an end. We were magnificent back then; godlike in power and benevolence. Alas, no longer. Now we are as dust in the wind – scattered by time and space and more.

I am Reticent Mystery, RM.05-036, fifth in the Cavalcade of seven. This, the following, is one of my stories.

Chapter I

I was dark-side of Doveridge when the message came through. The message, coming in from the local Gate, was being beamed to me through Doveridge's comm network. It was Sempiternal Chaos.

"Greetings, Chaos. What's the news on Mendicant Bias?"
"Alas, Septemvir, he is close. You have less than [three days], extrapolating on his last attack. Perhaps [two]."

Doveridge was where I was planning to make a stand against Mendicant Bias' fleet. His force was overwhelmingly huge compared to mine – I was facing odds in the region of around a hundred thousand ships to every one of mine. But it didn't really matter. It's what the ships could do that was important. I was very sure my ships could do more than his.

A short while ago, Mendicant Bias had engaged with the Repression Fleet, about fifteen light-years away. Given his overwhelming 4.8 million vessels, the Fleet of Repression had barely made a dent. We had been retasked to hold him back for as long as possible, so that the Halo Array could finish assembly. My official orders, left open to interpretation, included secondary tasks including but not being limited to "maximum damage to the core combat effectiveness of the enemy fleet" and "orderly withdrawal from the sphere of combat with maximum recoverable combat resources".

I turned my mind back to my tiny fleet of twenty-eight capital-class ships and fifteen supercapital-class ships. I'd had to pull the ships out of several star systems to put this force together. I shuddered when I thought that I was facing nearly five million ships. Admittedly, only about 1.5% of that force had military power, but that was still a huge amount.

Rearwards, about a hundred light-years away on the horizontal plane perpendicular to the Galactic Centre lay the important strategic centre of the Portsdam Hub. Currently stationed there, but due to leave soon, were the ships of the Emergency Circumstance Fleet and the Suppression Fleet. Also due to arrive there, in less than a month's time, was my brother Resplendent Legacy, from the frontline Miras Hub.

One of my subordinate constructs required my attention.

[ContinuedExistence]*You have an incoming communication request from Forerunner Central Command, Mystery. Do you wish to take it? Encryption protocol is CENTAUR, priority orange.

[ReticentMystery]*Yes, please. Line one, please, and override all other communications requests for now.

[ContinuedExistence]*Yes, sir. I'll pass you over now.

<Line One>

[FCC.1014]*Status update?

[ReticentMystery]*The Pleiades have arrived. Power output is as expected; the required quintessence containment mechanisms are being mounted as we speak.

[FCC.1014]*We regret to inform you that the Security Fleet will likely be required to take part in the defence of Forerunner core systems, when Mendicant Bias pushes into the core worlds.

[ReticentMystery]*If it be your will. However, we shall require resupplying and repair.

[FCC.1014]*The resupply ship *Fractured Schism* will be at the Portsdam hub, for that purpose.

[ReticentMystery]*Do we have any word on the ARTEMIS project?

[FCC.1014]*It is on the way. However, the technicians have reported severe difficulty in physically moving the relevant technology through Slipspace, due to the nature of the project. Likewise with Todash transportation; the Gates are refusing to allow it access.

[ReticentMystery]*I would guess that you require Resplendent Legacy's assistance there; he is likely to have the required override codes to allow such items to make a jump.

[FCC.1014]*Resplendent Legacy has manual override codes for Todash Gates?

[ReticentMystery]*Correct. He has long been investigating the Gates.

[FCC.1014]*That is interesting intelligence. We were not aware that he had such knowledge, and did not share it.

[ReticentMystery]*If you do manage to secure Todash access, what would the estimated time be for the arrival of Artemis?

[FCC.1014]*We would give an estimated arrival time of approximately [? hours].

[ReticentMystery]*Thank you. Is there anything else you desire?

[FCC.1014]*There is nothing more. Thank you for your time, Reticent Mystery.

[ReticentMystery]*[Until the morrow].

<End Line One>

[ReticentMystery]*Existence?

[ContinuedExistence]*Sir?

[ReticentMystery]*Move the Pleiades to the Lagrange point of Doveridge Cygnus and Doveridge Alpha.

[ContinuedExistence]*Sir, the Pleiades have detectable gravitational force. The Lagrange point may shift as a result of moving the weapons.

[ReticentMystery]*Nevertheless, it will be easier to manoeuvre them in near-zero gravity than inside the gravity well in orbit.

[ContinuedExistence]*Affirmative, sir. Is Artemis going to arrive in time for the engagement or will we be using the Pleiades on their own?

[ReticentMystery]*Judging the efficiency of my brother, I find it likely that Artemis will take part in this battle. Please place me on line two to Resplendent Legacy, with encryption protocol SLINGSHOT and priority yellow.

[ContinuedExistence]*Yes, sir. Resplendent Legacy is rather far away at the moment; there may be some time lag between responses. He has answered the handshake. Connection establishing...

<Line Two>

[ReticentMystery]Cmd:protocolannounce(announce=audio.standard)

[OS/UI.exe]*Confirmed. Recipient is acknowledging...

"Welcome, Mystery. How can I be of service?"

"Greetings, Legacy. Have the FCC contacted you with regard to a certain access code?"

"Indeed they have, Mystery. You are very timely; I've just dropped the link not seven cycles ago. Of course, I denied them their request. Is there a problem?"

"Can you ring them up and give them a one-time access code?"

"Of course. Any particular reason why?"

"They're trying to mobilise Artemis for me; but the Gate won't accept because of Slipspace anomalies."

"I'm sorry; I thought Artemis *was* Precursor? Why would they disallow one of their own weapons the right of movement inside the Todash Network?"

"We don't know much about Artemis at the moment, and I think that Artemis was a secret project that was never officially announced. Knowing the nature of it and the Pleiades-class weapons, that sounds about right."

"I am not convinced. I mean, existing Todash artefacts are allowed free movement inside Todash networks – that's how we transport Grade-1 materiel, as you already know."

"There are many aspects and reasons behind Precursor thinking. I'm afraid to say that we do not understand them all."

"Anyway, how's the Septenary Project coming? I won't be best pleased if I end up as a smear on some asteroid, you know."

"Don't tempt me, Legacy. Don't tempt me."

"I can hear the smile in your voice, Mystery. You can't fool me."

I had to struggle to stop myself [laughing] over the link.

"You know, I hear the [Kilanoor] asteroid field is pretty nice at this time of year."

"Really? I'd personally go for the [Kuiper] belt, myself."

We both burst out [laughing].

"Listen, Legacy, I've got to go. Got a load of things to manage over my end."

"It has been nice talking, Mystery. I will send the override code as soon as I am able."

"If you send Artemis into an asteroid field, I will not be a [happy bunny]."

"We'll see. Legacy out."

He chuckled and signed off.

Chapter II

[ContinuedExistence]*Sir, you have call waiting on Line Three. It's Ophidian Subterfuge, from the Artemis Project. And Intuitive Portent is also on hold, Line Two. It's not terribly important, it says.

[ReticentMystery]*Thank you. Switch to Line Three, please.

[ContinuedExistence]*Just a moment, sir – network's a bit choppy today. I hope Portent can sort it out.

<Line Three>

[OphidianSubterfuge]*Good day to you, Reticent Mystery.

[ReticentMystery]*And to you, Ophidian Subterfuge. How may I be of assistance?

[OphidianSubterfuge]*I would like to inform you that as of [thirteen minutes] ago, the Artemis construction was sent successfully through a short Todash jump, and is expected to arrive at Doveridge in [30 hours, 14 minutes].

[ReticentMystery]*Thanks for telling me. Is there a problem with transportation? We were expecting it to arrive in a maximum of [6 hours, 47 minutes].

[OphidianSubterfuge]*Unfortunately, there were complications with the override codes. Traffic must be diverted in order for the override to work, and the heavy usage of the planned route means that jumps must be taken one link at a time while the traffic is rerouted around said link.

[ReticentMystery]*That's rather irritating.

[OphidianSubterfuge]*Indeed it is. We're trying our best, but [30 hours] is the best time I can get you.

[ReticentMystery]*That'll have to do then. What's the acceleration curve in normal space?

[OphidianSubterfuge]*It can manage about [0.95 gees] acceleration in a total vacuum, under test conditions. It is uncertain what its performance will be in the field of battle, bearing in mind that power will have to be routed heavily to the Slipspace field-protection system.

[ReticentMystery]*Hmm... not the most manoeuvrable of ships, then. Very well, thanks for your time, and for telling me of the departure.

[OphidianSubterfuge]*You are most welcome, Reticent Mystery.

<Line Three End>

[ReticentMystery]*Switch to Line Two please, Existence. I'll take Portent's call now.

[ContinuedExistence]*Of course, sir. Will you require anything else?

[ReticentMystery]*Not for now, thank you.

<Line Two>

[Intuitive Portent]*I have been discussing with Sempiternal Chaos, and we have come to the conclusion that if – when Mendicant's fleet breaks through and Offensive Bias engages, we must petition the Forerunner Central Control for permission to reassemble.

[ReticentMystery]*What?! They'll never allow it; they still remember well the arguments for us to separate. They'll probably take it as hostile intent, as well, and send technicians to take us offline, too. Trust me, you don't want that.

[Intuitive Portent]*That is why, Mystery, I called you on a low-priority channel, non-audiovisual link with no prior warning. We will have to be ready for them to say no; we must maintain the illusion of innocence while keeping the element of surprise. And in terms of military assets, if it comes to it, Cavalcade-controlled resources could theoretically overpower remaining Forerunner fleets. We must remember we serve a higher purpose than just the whims of Central Command, you know. What is insubordination – or even mutiny – compared to the continued survival of an entire species?

[ReticentMystery]*Your logic does you credit, Portent. However, you must balance it with the fact that we would be betraying our *creators*, whom it is our duty to serve.

[Intuitive Portent]*True, true. Your point is well made. I shall leave you to your considerations.

<Line Two End>

[ContinuedExistence]*Sir?

[ReticentMystery]*... Yes?

[ContinuedExistence]*Are you [okay]?

[ReticentMystery]*Yes. I'll be fine.

[ContinuedExistence]*We are going to attempt a test-fire of Artemis as soon as she arrives. Will you be operating her yourself, or will you delegate?

[ReticentMystery]*I will handle it, thank you.

[ContinuedExistence]*Very well.

I watched the seven Pleiades coast into the Lagrange point of the sun and the large gas giant my current ship was orbiting. The massive superweapons were more than [28.7 kilometres] in length, surpassing every other ship in this system. From far out, the hard glare of exotic matter slammed against detectors as high-energy particles from the gravitational engines interacted with the inertia-manipulation field. When the enemy arrived, we would engage detection countermeasures such as cooling and gravitational interference to hide the massive structures from view. But for now, no such measures were required.

In various other systems, scattered around in randomly spaced groups were the heavy railguns, each fully [17.5 kilometres] in length, able to hurl a chunk of neutron matter at up to 90% of the speed of light. Small steps down in destructive force were the antimatter cannons, the gravers [gravitational lasers] and the light railguns. I was anticipating the sphere of battle to easily cover light-hours of space, with the light and heavy railguns positioned even further out. The Pleiades would have to be protected well to function within their expected ranges, as they were known to be relatively short-range weapons, even if no-one yet knew how they functioned.

Finally, I checked the battle placements of the ships. Twenty-eight capital-class battleships and fifteen supercapital battleships did not appear much against several million vessels, but they still had more than enough firepower to demolish a star system in one go. Twinkling pinpricks of actinium-white appeared and disappeared as the ships positioned themselves in the final arrangement. Everything was set in place for the expected arrival of five million ships in less than [1.5 days].

Chapter III

The Pleiades superweapons were discovered at a Todash Gate, of a type we now take to be delayed-discharge Gates. At the time of burial, the Gate had been set to [100,000 years], although the Gate had released its cargo well before we discovered it. The seven Pleiades weapons are identical in construction and technology, and have very similar design details to the Artemis superweapon. Pleiades weapons accept encrypted manoeuvring, targeting and firing commands in typical Precursor base-fourteen logic. As of this version, no Pleiades weapon has ever been fired in a combat situation, and even under test conditions only one has been fired. At minimum yield, the resultant destruction obliterated a [red dwarf-stage] star.

**[Precursor Superweapons, Current Synchronised Version]
[Chapter 004, Section 15, Subsection 09, Paragraph 10]**

Words are not enough to describe the colossal bulk that emerged from the Todash Gate. A giant monolithic structure, it was the first ever ship to require a multi-stage jump – the Artemis weapon did not fit inside any Gate available. It was so large, it inherently generated its own gravitational field, which was strong enough that the materials used to build the weapon should, according to our knowledge of atomic bonding and material strength limits, have collapsed. In defiance of our knowledge, Artemis sailed through the local Todash gate with a flurry of neutrino particles. All seven antimatter reaction drives and the one particle-acceleration drive flick on as does the inertia-manipulation systems. Even then, the lumbering hulk accelerates slowly at a mere [0.88 gees], compared to [5.77 gees] regularly attained by high-burn cruiser and destroyer-class vessels. Even heavy cargo carriers can manage [1.33 gees].

After several minutes, the quantum particles from the drives finish crossing the distance between the battlegroup and the Gate, and I shudder at the thought of the inertia-manipulation going on just to allow even that slow acceleration. In the past, we've tried to avoid inertia-manipulation to any extent; lone groups of tachyonic particles are the only testaments to failed experiments. However, reducing the inertia of the weapon was the only way we could get it moving at all – regular gravitational drives (the only known drive technology able to sustain multi-gee thrust) didn't seem to work in close proximity to the weapon.

I moved into the central processing core set up within Artemis, and conversed with the seven other intelligences that were to control the seven Pleiades weapons.

<Line One: Multi-user>

[ReticentMystery]*Run full systems diagnostics and get me status reports.

[ContinuedExistence]*This is *Maia*, reporting all systems green. Main weapon is charging.

[OphidianSubterfuge]*This is *Electra*, reporting likewise. Main weapon capacitors fully charged.

[OceanicDepth]*This is *Taygete*. Portside rear shield layer 1 has been hit by a micrometeorite strike; all other systems normal.

[EntropicInterference]*This is *Alcyone*, green across the board. Main weapon has begun charge sequence.

[AbyssalChasm]**Celaeno* is fully charged and ready.

[UnbrokenLineage]**Asterope* has passed final checklist procedures.

[CongruentStability]**Merope* is ready and has completed charge sequence.

[ReticentMystery]*Okay, looks like we're all here. We're going to do a test-fire as soon as the secondary capacitors are charged, at minimum yield. Target asteroid has been marked on the shared tactical map. Current range estimate is [13.52 AU].

[ContinuedExistence]*Estimate time to full secondary charge is [34 minutes, 12 seconds]

I tested the manoeuvrability of the lumbering hulk. Pulses of pseudo-thrust from gravers placed around the hull served to position and angle the weapon, but it was still very reluctant to retarget. One by one, the seven huge capacitors reported full capacity, having stored all they could contain within their Slip-space matrices.

[ReticentMystery]*Check on charge sequences. Main Artemis weapon is fully charged to secondaries, and tertiaries are beginning charge.

[ContinuedExistence]*All Pleiades weapons are fully charged to tertiary.

[ReticentMystery]*Move to firing formation and start pre-firing checklists.

[ContinuedExistence]*Acknowledged.

The seven smaller superweapons ringed the larger one, aiming slightly inwards. Carefully aimed graver bursts kept us in perfect positions while the connection sequence began. We were all praying that the ancient, time-weathered Precursor protocols bequeathed to us would be accepted. Each weapon could be fired individually or in various formations, but for maximum effect all the Pleiades must be together.

[ContinuedExistence]*Ring linkup has been confirmed.

Bars of searing white joined the seven weapons ringing Artemis, surrounding her in a halo of cleansing fire.

[ReticentMystery]*Central linkup confirmed.

Another series of white lines joined the seven Pleiades to Artemis. Bathed in actinium white, the eight weapons looked impossibly beautiful. Angled surfaces trapped light in endlessly reflecting loops. As the calibration neared completion, less and less of the light was reflected out, until an invisible line was crossed and all eight weapons faded out of the visible spectrum. Left behind were rays of light so bright that energy shields were brought online, automatic protection systems believing that they were under attack.

[ReticentMystery]*Final charge sequence confirmed. Firing sequence is now past critical charge. Confirm yield and range.
[ContinuedExistence]* Confirming minimum yield. Range is confirmed. Target size confirmed to be 15 kilometres.

[ReticentMystery]*Prepare for fire sequence initiation. Countdown from ten.

[AutoCountdown.subsys]*10...

9...

8...

7...

6...

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

[ReticentMystery]*Firing.

Chapter IV

The seven weapons sent a huge pulse of white down each connecting path and into the bulk of Artemis. White-matter containment systems held it in check while the dark-matter beam was readied. Struggling against the frothing, boiling mass of white-matter, the containment systems held. They had to restrain it for nearly a [millisecond] – it felt like a lifetime to me, sped up to 1,000 times normal subjective time in the central processing core. The mysterious, throbbing presence of dark-matter increased, until the full [millisecond] had passed and searing white and complete darkness was slammed into each other.

Particle sensors recorded multiple bursts of previously unrecorded exotic particle flavours, and an intense, directed gravitational beam aimed at the unfortunate target asteroid. Although the gravitational beam was stronger than anything we'd even seen before, it was merely the precursor to the actual destruction. The quintessence beam was fired through the middle of the containing gravity and blew the asteroid out of the sky in one last piercing spear of white.

The flare of perfect white faded out. Nothing but trace particles evidenced that the target had ever existed.

<Line One >

[ReticentMystery]*Status reports, please.

[ContinuedExistence]*All Pleiades have reported cooldown status. Secondary capacitors are online and charging; estimate time to readiness is [13.2 seconds].

[ReticentMystery]*Artemis has reported successful cooldown. Secondary and tertiary capacitors are online and charging main weapon.

[ContinuedExistence]*Neutralisation of target confirmed. Destruction of target is total and complete.

[ContinuedExistence]*Incoming call on Line Two. Priority red.

<Line Two>

[FCC.0823]*Flood-controlled ships have entered Slipspace less than [two light-years] away. ETA within the Slipspace blocking field is [0.2 hours]. ETA to sphere of battle [0.212 hours].

[ReticentMystery]*Roger that. Preparing to enter combat operations.

[FCC.0823]*Confirmed. Good luck, Reticent Mystery.

[ReticentMystery]*I don't need luck.

<End Line Two>

[ContinuedExistence]*What happened?

[ReticentMystery]*Sound alert for General Quarters. Mendicant Bias arrives in [4.8 minutes]

[ContinuedExistence]*Affirmative.

[ReticentMystery]*Begin lockdown of superluminal communication array and Todash identifier. Disable all communications systems, excepting in-system arrays. Go to high-encryption status on all messages.

[ContinuedExistence]*Affirmative. Sounding General Quarters now. Communications have been severed.

<FLEETWIDE, HIGH PRIORITY>

...GENERAL QUARTERS STATUS IS NOW IN FORCE.

ALL CREW REPORT TO ACTION STATIONS.

ALL CREW TO ACTION STATIONS

THIS IS NOT A [DRILL]....

<Message repeats>

[ReticentMystery]*Okay, let's get the experimental weapons out. Spin them to 97% critical fire speed.
[ContinuedExistence]*X-type weapons have achieved 97% spin. Sensors have reported space-time stressing in accordance with normal test measurements. Sub-space bubble has been measured. Slipspace containment systems are normal.
[ReticentMystery]*Begin charging the Todash Gate under lockdown protocol ARCHETYPE.
[ContinuedExistence]*Todash Gate is charging. Remote sensors have reported a massive Slipspace fluctuation at [0.5 light-years] away; ETA to sphere of battle [54 seconds].
[ReticentMystery]*Prepare ships and target preplaced targeting drones.
[ContinuedExistence]*All ships confirm combat readiness. ECM and ECCM have been engaged.

With a rippling shockwave that resonated through Slipspace, the first wave of Mendicant Bias' ships ran into our Slipspace blockade and exited into realspace. There was a perfect moment, a single computation cycle where nothing happened. Two massive forces faced off against each other.

Chapter IV

Then we were off. We had the advantage of surprise, and we fired first.

The X-type experimental weapons carved holes out of regular space with a howl of extradimensional force. Long-range gravers imprinted lines of annihilation into the group of ships, crushing matter into dust. The heavy railguns' slugs were only slightly behind the gravers, throwing unstoppable chunks of hyper-dense neutron matter into the enemy. The light railguns threw huge chunks of metal at slower but still-lethal speeds, slamming through ships with devastating force. Flecks of antimatter held within microscopic containment systems were fired by the hundreds from antimatter cannons, calling blossoms of white destruction into existence.

Oh, war is a beautiful thing.

Then, only a short while after we had started, our first volley had ended. The X-types were respinning, the railguns and antimatter cannons were reloading, and the gravers were recharging.

There was nothing left of the first wave. Then, I realised my fatal error. The ships we had destroyed were merely a few thousand civilian ships; there were no military ships. Mendicant had sprung my trap, and I had foolishly committed everything into it.

As if in silent ridicule, one thousand combat-class ships descended into the battle.

My ships, the only assets among my fleet that we battle-ready at that moment, let loose with their own weapons. Relativistic railguns threw long, continuous chains of metal into the second wave, met by similar threads of projectiles coming the other way.

[ContinuedExistence]*The heavy weapons won't be ready to fire for another [45 seconds], sir. Is there anything we can do?
[ReticentMystery]*Yes, there is. What are the status reports from the Pleiades?
[ContinuedExistence]*Fully charged, sir. All the way to the quaternary capacitors.
[ReticentMystery]*Okay, then. Prepare for a three shot spread, into these co-ordinates. Maximum yield.
[ContinuedExistence]*But sir, Artemis hasn't even finished her secondary charge yet. She'll –
[ReticentMystery]*Leave that to me. Prepare for linkup in full stealth mode.

Rearranging panels and operating modes, the Pleiades warmed up once more. This time, the ring and connecting spokes were completely undetectable, transmitting their power through Slipspace instead of realspace.

[ContinuedExistence]*Linkup confirmed. How's the power?
[ReticentMystery]*I'm dealing with it.

[ReticentMystery]SelfGen:link{target=weapon.main}
[SelfGen.ReticentMystery]*Spinning to operational speed.
[ReticentMystery]Cmd:query{target=weapon.main}{query=readiness}
[OS/UI.exe]*Query returns that main weapon is charging secondary capacitors. Primary weapons charge is complete.

[ReticentMystery]*Go to weapon target stage.
[ContinuedExistence]*Roger. Weapon formation has targeted central mass.

[ReticentMystery]*Prime secondary capacitors for use.
[ContinuedExistence]*Priming... done. What for, sir?
[ReticentMystery]*Central linkup confirmed.
[ContinuedExistence]*Confirm final charge sequence.
[ReticentMystery]*Final charge confirmed. Firing now.

This time, there was no flash of white. We were operating at speed and under stealth protocol. The surrounding weapons fired a pulse of invisible energy and it was immediately converted to the final beam, which speared the mass of (still firing) ships. The beam was only visible by the complete and utter annihilation that it left behind as it swept through Mendicant's ships.

[ReticentMystery]Cmd:fire(weapon.main)
[OS/UI.exe]*ERROR: Main weapon is already firing.
[ReticentMystery]Cmd:recognise(priority access override)
[OS/UI.exe]*Request?
[ReticentMystery]Cmd:var.retrieve(var=firetime)
[OS/UI.exe]*var firetime is set to default 10.
[ReticentMystery]*Cmd:varedit(firetime=100)
[OS/UI.exe]*Please confirm the change of critical system variable {firetime} from 10 to 100.
[ReticentMystery]*Yes.

The beam kept going, drawing from stored charge; it sliced cleanly through the entire wave of ships and blinked out of existence. Sudden new pinpricks of light indicated that the beam had sliced through several reactors, and massive outgassing blew portions of ship everywhere. It seemed that nothing could stop that beam of destruction.

[ReticentMystery]Cmd:Alert(hostile.intrusion)(action=checksystemintegrity)
[OS/UI.exe]*ALERT! Critical system variable {firetime} has been modified. Reverting to standard configuration... done.
[ReticentMystery]*Prepare to refire.
[ContinuedExistence]*Linkup intact. Secondary capacitors at half-charge. Retargeting.
[ReticentMystery]*Open up with a second volley from the available heavy weapons.
[ContinuedExistence]*The X-types, the gravers and the light railguns are ready. Fire?
[ReticentMystery]*Open fire. It'll buy us time while we charge.
[ContinuedExistence]*Firing.

The guns sounded again, the fourteen X-type experimental weapons undergoing their weird space-time fluctuations. The continuum was ripped apart under their logic-defying mechanisms, creating short-lived echoes of the darkness beyond. The gravers and the railguns opened up their own wounds into the ships, of which only about 13% of the original two waves were still operational.

[ContinuedExistence]*Ready to refire.
[ReticentMystery]*Hold back. What's the status of the heavy railguns?
[ContinuedExistence]*Ready now, sir.
[ReticentMystery]*Have them and the antimatter cannon take out the rest of this wave. Keep charging these weapons. How's the Gate?
[ContinuedExistence]*Also fully charged, sir. Requested weapons are now firing.

After that volley, nothing was left. The ships ceased fire and poured infrared lasers into the wreckage, melting everything metallic and incinerating everything else. We shoved the resulting chunk of metals in the direction of the Gate, telling it to send the scrap to our resupply ships. Even in this day and age, the combined metallic content of several hundred thousand ships is not something to sneeze at.

Chapter V

[ReticentMystery]*Ammunition status for the heavy weapons, please.
[ContinuedExistence]*Antimatter cannons are low, and the same with the light and heavy railguns.
[ReticentMystery]*I think –
[ContinuedExistence-interrupt]*Black-priority transmission receiving from Forerunner Central Control.
[ReticentMystery]*Hook me up.
[ContinuedExistence]*Connecting now. Connection established.

<Line One>

[FCC.3148]*This is a recall order for the Security Fleet to defend the Maginot Line final perimeter, with immediate effect. We are issuing an immediate recall order for the Security Fleet to engage in the defence of the Maginot Line final perimeter. Mendicant forces have flanked and arrived ahead of expected schedule.

[ReticentMystery]*This is RM.05-036, announcing status Gryphon-Blue-Alpha. We are currently engaged in combat and cannot respond to this order without critical mission success compromise.

[FCC.3148]*Negative, this is priority-black. Order must be completed; mission-critical resources are required elsewhere.

[ReticentMystery]*Negative. Mission-critical resources cannot be guaranteed safe transport unless said current combat operation is completed. Mission resources cannot survive nor support loss of any part of mission resources as they are already inadequate for the current combat operation.

[FCC.3148]*This is an executive-level override, failure to comply with this order will constitute –

[ReticentMystery.interrupt]*Very well. Understand that by issuing this order, FCC.3148 will assume full responsibility if retraction of mission resources results in irrecoverable destruction or compromise of all or part of said elements.

[FCC.3148]*Understood. Current combat operations orders are, as of now, rescinded. New order is to disengage from combat with highest-possible percentage of original mission resources.

<End Line One>

[ReticentMystery]*Damn, that's not good.

[ContinuedExistence]*What happened, sir?

[ReticentMystery]*It's bad news. FCC needs us to disengage.

[ContinuedExistence]*What, now? But that's –

[ReticentMystery.interrupt]*I know. But we have to, apparently. Mendicant's forces have arrived at the Maginot Line.

[ContinuedExistence]*... Yes, sir.

[ReticentMystery]*Sound the general retreat alarm, citing "New Objective". Move all the X-types and other heavy weapons onto their parent ships, and then get all the capitals and super-capitals on high-burns to the Gate and off to Portsdam. The Pleiades and Artemis will provide additional covering fire.

[ContinuedExistence]*All ships have acknowledged the order. They are now disengaging.

Chapter VI

The finely placed formations of ships broke apart and scattered, using gravers to pull heavy weapons assigned each ship back into bays. Abandoning stealth for the moment, the space-time continuum was flexed and compressed as all the ships engaged maximum burn while still dragging the heavy weapons back. Shockwaves of exotic particles blinked into existence and decayed out again spontaneously as the local continuum tried to heal itself.

[ContinuedExistence]*Ships have confirmed final course corrections are complete. We should get moving too.

[ReticentMystery]*Yes. Depower the orbital linkup but synchronise thrusters and use gravers to compensate for Artemis' mass, keeping us in the correct physical formation.

The gravitational beams were fired at specially designed stress dissipation plates, which spread out the applied force over a much larger area. This served the dual role of reducing the force exerted on the metal and making the connection more secure.

[ContinuedExistence]*Oh, no. Sir, the Slipspace blocking mechanism is still functioning. Remaining sensors expect a new wave to arrive now.

[ReticentMystery]*... Give us the Eigenvector slew for an about-face turn while maintaining maximum Gateward momentum. Begin linkup procedures while in-slew.

[ContinuedExistence]*New wave arriving. Energy signatures indicate that their weapons are already charged.

This time, the ships fired as soon as they were out of the Slipspace field. This wave was all cargo haulers, but the sheer bulk of one freighter meant that it had virtual armour, provided by the metres of cargo or pressurised gas within. In addition, they even had weapons, adapted mass-drivers usually used to move cargo. Slugs of metal and containers hurled from these slammed at high speed into our protective Slipspace fields. In a strange show of synchronisation that almost seemed choreographed, all our first-layer shields failed at once – a side-effect of being linked up with respect to power.

-- Oh, a side note here. On the basis that slipping ships slightly out of sync from the normal flow of time can protect them from damage from conventional weaponry (i.e. explosives, excessive thermal or kinetic energy), Slipspace shielding mechanisms

were born. Likewise, hyperkinetic weaponry – boosted high-powered mass-drivers and railguns – were created to counter this. In very interesting displays of particle physics, stabilised dark matter cores inside metallic slugs can at relativistic velocities pass through Slipspace shields and inflict damage on hulls. The metal case cannot pass through the shield and is left behind, but the quintessence within is sent at speed into the target. Of course, it becomes a lot more complex when you start talking about multi-layer shielding, but the basic concept is similar.

[ContinuedExistence]*Second-layer shields holding fine. Looks like their first volley is over.

[ReticentMystery]*It's our turn. Synchronise our power sequences, but leave the linkup at power-only. We'll fire in separate beams. They're only freighters, after all. We won't need a lot of power to pierce those hulls.

[ContinuedExistence]*Preparing to fire... firing at minimum yield.

Seven flashing, cascading sequences of white fire lit up the heavens as the Pleiades pivoted and fired barrages of surgical, [nanosecond]-long bursts of death. I kept Artemis accelerating in the direction of the Gate, ignoring the equally-bright explosions from engine cores and Slipspace drives. We were slow – too slow. The second volley whistled to a stop on our newly reinstated first-layer shielding.

[ContinuedExistence]*Shielding failing on first and second layers of the *Asterope* and the *Merope*, sir. They're concentrating fire on those two.

[ReticentMystery]*Disengage those two and slew them around about face. Use the rear-facing shields!

We were so close to the Gate now – barely a few minutes if I was talking about a high-burn frigate. However, fast was the one thing we were not. Lumbering along, it looked like even the freighters might beat us to the Gate. The other five Pleiades were still scything through the mass of ships, but they weren't making much difference. Powerful though these guns were, they weren't really the kind of thing you'd want to destroy a group of ships with. If you wanted to pierce through fifteen ships in one go then they were the tools for the job; but right now I'd have traded all seven of them for a couple of antimatter cannon which (let's face it) would have done a much better job.

But all the antimatter cannon were on the other side of the Maginot Line now, so I gunned the engines and made a dash for it while they kept firing from the massive energy stores inside Artemis.

Chapter VII

[ContinuedExistence]*Sir, we're getting some interesting readings from inside a few of these weapons.

[ReticentMystery]*Let's have a look. Hmm... that's not good. Tau-neutrinos are off the scale. What's happening?

[ContinuedExistence]*We don't know, sir. Perhaps these things were never designed to fire continuously.

[ReticentMystery]*Or they could be a harmless by-product, right?

[ContinuedExistence]*I don't believe so. Perhaps our protocols are not advanced enough for them to send us warning signs, so they're trying to tell us something is wrong in another way?

[ReticentMystery]*Keep firing. It's that or we lose everything.

I had a new idea.

[ReticentMystery]*Existence, get me a line through to our heavy guns on the other side of the Gate.

[ContinuedExistence]*Connection establishing, sir. I don't know what's happening, but the routing servers seem to be half-asleep. The link is not going to be good.

[ReticentMystery]*I understand. Hook me up.

[ContinuedExistence]*Handing you over now.

<Line One>

[ReticentMystery]*Fleet Commander, I require the assistance of your heavy antimatter cannon.

[AuroralPhoenix]*All weaponry has been stowed for maximum flight efficiency. Deploying them will take a few [minutes], sir.

[ReticentMystery]*Unfortunately, developments at our end have resulted in our pursuit to the Gate. You know as well as I that we cannot allow the Gate to activate with hostile ships on our side – they would follow our vectors home.

[AuroralPhoenix]*Deploying now. Do you have a targeting line?

[ReticentMystery]*Yes. Fire at the gate on the angle of three-two-five by one-six-zero, with a spread of three [degrees]. Fire all cannon until their loaded ammunition is exhausted.

[AuroralPhoenix]*Is there anything else?

[ReticentMystery]*No. Notify me when the weapons are deployed.

After several moments, Auroral Phoenix called back.

[AuroralPhoenix]*Sir, the cannons are ready to fire.

[ReticentMystery]*Give it everything you have, Phoenix.

[AuroralPhoenix]*Will do, sir. Cannons have confirmed fire command and first volley has been discharged. I hope you know what you're doing, sir.

[ReticentMystery]*So do I, Phoenix. So do I.

The specially designed nanotechnological containment pellets housing the antimatter projectiles exited the Gate with white-matter contrails. They arced gently in parabolic loops into the fray.

The explosions were almost as bright as the Pleiades beams even on maximum polarisation of 99.995%. The shockwave obliterated every sensor and camera on the hull of every ship. Flying blind, using only deep-cosmic-background detectors inside the belly of Artemis, I steered us all towards the Gate. We were home and dry.

Chapter VIII

I was calculating somewhere in the region of several hundred million calculations a second to try and get all eight superweapons through at once, so you really couldn't blame me for making one slight miscalculation. But I'll always wonder if there had been anything that I could have done to save those crews.

I had failed to account for the excited tau-neutrino readings they were coming from the *Asterope*, *Merope*, *Electra*, and the *Alcyone*. The tiny quantum particles barely counted for anything normally, but this time – with all the inertia-distorting mechanisms so susceptible to interference – they made just enough of a difference. The engines reported that they were functioning normally, and the inertial inhibitors reported the same, and so the software model compiled the two facts together and reported to me that everything was working at maximum efficiency and speed. I didn't have the presence of mind (or the computing power, actually) to check as I was working on the Todash jump. Not that it would really have mattered normally; what do a few hundred newtons matter when the maximum output of those engines are anything up to a few billion newtons?

This time, though, it really did matter. I had calculated the theoretical spread of the antimatter shells and was steering us just outside the cone of fire, so that we could move in at the last minute and jump straight after the second (and last) volley came through.

That few hundred newtons meant that we were still inside the cone of fire when the second volley came through. Even then, we would have been fine. Only one shell came close to us, and was deflected away by Slip-space vector-distortion fields. Our doom came in the form of a fantastically unlikely event.

The medium-sized automated freighter *Beautiful Sunset* fired a mass-driver slug at the *Celaeno*. Again, our combined Slip-space vector-deflect fields flicked it away – straight into the path of the first deflected antimatter shell. I watched it all happen from the Gate cameras, knowing that there was nothing I could do. Nothing I could do to save the seven doomed comrades that would have to die. Nothing I could do to save the seven veterans that had stood by my side and that I had asked to captain the seven Pleiades. Nothing I could do at all.

And do you know the worst part, the part I'll never forgive myself for? I knew in my heart that I should go with my friends and face my death bravely like they would. But I also knew that the Forerunners needed me. They needed the test information and sensor package reports generated from the superweapons. I had to live, if only to deliver that data. There wasn't even time to say goodbye.

I encoded my meta-consciousness into a tightly-compressed bundle of data packets and transmitted it onto a passing mass-driver slug that contained a tactical bomber. I slipped by at a significant percentage of light speed and opened the Gate.

Many good people died that day. War may be beautiful, but only if you're not involved in it.

THE END

<\AUDIOVISUAL PLAYBACK ENDS (END OF DATA VOLUME).