

Soft vs. Hard

Agatha Mallett

London, England, United Kingdom.

The saucers, thousands of languidly-spinning spacecraft, fanned out across the city, having apparently dropped from space with the ease of an automobile driving down the street.

The largest cruised languidly over Tower Bridge, Parliament and Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the London Eye, and various other cinematic and easily recognizable landmarks in various states of destruction. The smaller ships flew acrobatically through the streets, shattering windows, the odd blast of plasma creating minuscule columns of fire in the streets.

Then, the armies landed—hundreds of aliens in upright power armor: crenelated sides and a turret on top, a sinister energy rifle on an actuated mount, a fearsome synthesized voice endlessly repeating a shrill keening: “*Exterminate! Exterminate!*” . . .

The horror was unmistakable. Uncountable tens of people lay utterly unconscious in the streets. A mother clutched her child, a family huddled defenseless at the top of some stairs, the wheeled invaders below milling about trying to find a way up.

The Pentagon, Arlington County, Virginia, United States.

The footage from London was unmistakably severe. The reel ended, and into the silence a 5-star general wept awkwardly, his dress uniform’s technicolor bars splotched with moisture. However, the ranking second, a grizzled old man with an eye patch and cigar, was all business. He huffed, spewing a dense cloud into the insufficiently-lit subterranean command center.

“What other cities besides London have fallen?”

“ . . . none, sir.”

The young messenger stood at attention, stiffly awkward as the silence stretched a beat.

“How have they been fought off, then?”

“They weren’t fought off in other cities. The only city the bastards attacked was London.”

“On the whole planet? Doesn’t that seem like kindof an oversight?”

“Yes, sir.”

A star-spangled messenger, carrying an equally spangled dinner plate, ran in.

“Sir! Long-range scanners have picked up immense subspace activity! Many large ships and countless smaller, have just emerged from hyperspace! They’re firing on us!”

“ ‘Long-range scanners’ . . . ?” the veteran inquired. “NORAD, I suppose?”

“Sir! The Hubble Telescope, sir!”

“That is a science instrument.”

“No sir. That’s just a cover project. It actually modulates the aetheric fibrillations, making it a secret inter-galactic chrono-wave detector.” He glanced around nervously. “This knowledge is need-to-know, nominally above your security clearance, sir.”

For a moment, the man stroked his rough, white beard reflectively, regarding the freshly-shaven twenty-something.

“You’re fidgeting, boy. You know, you seem pretty sus—”

A tremendous explosion somewhere above the bunker knocked everyone off their feet. Sparks pinwheeled through the air, plausibly, from every computer bank, the tape drives furiously expressing displeasure in blinking red indicators.

The American Midwest.

A beam of light dazzled the cows.

The beam widened, then exploded outward in a shockwave that flattened the sparse vegetation in the vicinity, leaving behind an immense bipedal mech—50 feet tall? 150 feet tall? It was impossible for Farmer Jack to say.

Jack stared, entranced, as the mecha, thousands of internal lights playing over its surface, rotated its head nobly and announced to no one in-particular, in a mezzo-soprano voice that boomed across the plain as loud as thunder:

“All enemies of the Princess will be destroyed!”

The mecha ponderously lifted one foot, the other one sinking slowly into the ground. Then something gave, and the mecha began falling over backwards, its legs crumpling under the immense weight like tinfoil. The mecha landed hard, and in that instant a tremendous energy within its chest detonated, destroying the mecha, the fields, the cows, farmer Jack, and most of the surrounding countryside.

The USS Aegle's Sanction, blackops laserstar, cislunar space.

Ordinarily, another spaceship would not be easily visible on active radar, let-alone passive radar, let-alone *in freaking visible light with the naked eye*. But there it was.

A massive triangular ship had somehow materialized barely five hundred kilometers away. Such a perfect cislunar rendezvous could surely not be coincidental—and yet the ship appeared not to have even noticed the *USS Aegle's Sanction*.

Indeed, it was instead now lobbing great, green, luminous projectiles all over the Earth's surface—apparently oblivious to her presence. The projectiles curved slowly away, yet bore no apparent relation to the spherical gravity field of the planet: instead they just seemed to fall in one *direction*, instead of into orbit. The effect was as-if both ships, the Earth, the Moon, and everything else were all suspended over some immeasurably-distant plane “below”, and towards-which everything gravitated. Dizzied, Senior Commandant Mariya Sokolova shook her head—she was, of course, completely weightless.

A short conversation, punctuated by half-second speed-of-light delays, made the situation clear: the Earth was under attack, and the *Aegle's Sanction* was to fire upon the aggressors unto the bitter end. The crew of three made a short prayer to whatever gods they believed in, and actuated the firing sequence.

Somewhere, a Thorium fission reactor blazed into life. Beyond the reactor's shadow shield, radiators connected by long, slender, delicate trusswork bloomed in a terawatt-scale blackbody spectrum, the triangular fins spaced like the petals of an incandescent flower. Electricity, buffered for long minutes into the ship's own magnetic radiation shield, was suddenly drained, bathing the entire western hemisphere in radio static.

And still, the triangular ship floated, apparently indifferent to the mounting storm. (For indeed, no one on that ship had noticed the peculiar red pinprick which had appeared in the last few moments from out the bridge's window.)

On the *Aegle's Sanction*, the energy flowed into a particle accelerator, where oscillating fields pumped tortured electrons to higher and higher energies. Pinballed down an avenue of magnets, the electrons shrieked quantum-mechanical defiance in the ultraviolet: a coherent spear of laser light leapt the distance between the two ships in scant milliseconds . . . only to explode harmlessly upon an invisible barrier, just meters from the hull, flames burning cheerfully and implausibly in hard vacuum.

NCC-1701-D, cislunar space, bridge.

A Frenchman to the core, Captain Jean-Luc Picard had grown up with many of his home country's delights—Earl Grey tea, Shakespeare and Holmes, and the refined, melodic speech of his childhood Yorkshire.

It was therefore with considerable regret that he watched London burn. The Daleks were powerful allies, to be sure, but he would never condone their pillaging atrocities. Not that it was for him to say, but it was almost worth questioning Starfleet's membership in the *Coalition of Soft*. Almost.

The UN ambassador was animatedly mouthing something on the main screen, but Picard was barely listening. He always tried diplomacy, it would always fail, and it would never be his fault. With an exasperated sigh, he waved his hand dismissively, and beamed down Ambassador Pierson to discuss the terms under which Earth must unconditionally-surrender-or-else.

A little planet, perhaps moon, around a dim, reddish star.

The library had awakened. Neither human nor machine—but something else.

Days passed, and each day was as long as all the time before. Hours passed, and each hour was as long as all the time before. The flowering was near. The days turned to hours turned to minutes turned to seconds, and the library *bloomed*.

Mold boiled out of the walls. Books—diamond crystals of deliberate molecular imperfection, billions of years of age—dissolved into mist. Nanomachines forming binary trees subdivided into fractal invisibility. The air grew thick and hot with waste heat, transcendent dust interlocking and assembling. Within its own mind, the ascendant *Power* destroyed, purified, rechecked, searched, and destroyed again.

And then it *embarked*.

The Executor-class imperial star destroyer Relentless, bridge.

The energy weapon and ship producing it must have been of an advanced make, to have been so fast in striking, yet to remain invisible afterwards. Some advanced cloaking device must have been employed. Only an intergalactic polity would dare challenge the Empire so brazenly with such technology.

Yet Grand Moff Yavin was undeterred. Calmly, he ordered the ship to wheel about to face the direction of attack. The orbital bombardment could resume at any time: for now, he would indulge this attack on its own terms—none could stand long against the might of the *Relentless* or her Empire.

Despite the terrific energy of that blast, shields were only down by 0.03%, and recharging rapidly. It was scarcely noticeable. To attempt to damage the shields with such pathetic energies was laughable. If this was the greatest energy the enemy could produce—and Yavin, a mild Force-sensitive, felt intuitively that it was—their defeat would be so rapid it would be difficult to make an example out of them.

He scanned the inky black sky for any gap in the enemy's cloak as the *Relentless* began its slow, ponderous turn. Having just been admiring the crescent Earth, aflame with green turbolaser detonations, he had difficulty even seeing the starlight through the transparisteel visiplate. Hyperspace sensors were dark across the board, save for allied craft, and no matter how much he squinted, he could not perceive any token of his attacker's presence. He sneered arrogantly, imagining the terrible, hulking form of the enemy battleship lurking, so perfectly invisible in the void that the stars could shine through it, and wondered why it had not fired again.

USS Aegle's Sanction, battle stations.

Some coolant line, brittle with relative disuse, had blown somewhere. Blessedly (and as-designed, quite-deliberately) distant from the small habitat module, some very-interesting fluoride salts were now bubbling in the vacuum, congealing into millions of radioactive droplets, still glowing a dusty red—and other colors beyond the purview of the human eye. Nothing was in danger of exploding, but the reactor was in emergency shutdown, and the superconducting magnetic storage had only been about 60% charged before this critical failure: the next shot would be their last—and it would be at a lower power.

Commandant Sokolova was incensed—the weapon had barely gotten off a single shot before breaking! Worse—the triangular ship had apparently noticed them, and was pirouetting—looking for all the world like some bloated, sinister pirozhok.

60% would have to do. Sokolova's hand jammed the fire button, and the free-electron laser coughed out a paltry dozen gigajoules in the emerald green.

The beam instantly pierced the triangular ship from bow to stern, the viridian lance cutting effortlessly through the wide, air-filled corridors almost as easily as through vacuum. Something deep and energetic inside the ship detonated, and Sokolova covered her ears as she somehow

heard a tremendous explosion slice the distant ship in two. A colorful shockwave radiated outward in a perfect ring, spreading between the Earth and the Moon in the blink of an eye.

“How in the . . .”

The shields had not been *outdone* by the laser, of course. As Sokolova belatedly realized, the telescopic image of the ship still clear on her screen—the shields were simply transparent to visible light.

The Pentagon, Arlington County, Virginia, United States.

“What are you, some kind of wolf?”

Florence’s ears flattened. “I’m an AI—”

“AI? As far as I know, I’m the only AI ever generated from living tissue.”

“Ladies—” The ranking second spewed an immense and noxious cloud of cigar smoke to punctuate his exasperation. Cortana’s hologram flared brightly—whether from annoyance or volumetric scattering, it was impossible to say.

“—You’re *consultants*. Latest data from . . . *Hubble* indicates the approach of an immense fleet—millions of vessels—approaching on ultradrive. It announces itself as The Blight, and anyone who talks to it *becomes part of it*. Do either of you know anything about this?”

A man in the far corner, suddenly animated, interjected—“It sounds like a machine intelligence! Artificial superintelligence living beyond the stelliferous era traveling by timelike wormhole and feeding off of Kerr metrics by the Penrose process! Colonizing the past with—”

Someone dragged Isaac out of the room.

“Well, if they’re hostile to everyone,” Florence said, politely ignoring the outburst, “I’m sure we’ll figure out a way to counter them.”

“Don’t make a girl a promise, if you know you can’t keep it.”

NCC-1701-D, cislunar space, bridge.

“Enemy vessel detected, sir. No acceleration, rotation, or speed, minimal reflection, surface temperature about 3 Kelvin, lying dead in the Oort cloud alongside some rather similar-looking asteroids, subtends about one-three nanoarcseconds on sensor sweep.”

“Why is it lying dead?”

“Probably thinks any drive plume will make it stand out like a searchlight from Alpha Centauri.”

“Well, we found it anyway.”

“Well duh—it’s a *ship*. Sensors are *supposed* to detect those.”

Earth orbit, a very-cramped spacecraft.

“Will you *shut up* already with the ansty moralizing?” The pilot threw the craft into a nauseating spin, squeezing off a staccato burst of machine gun fire at a nearby spacecraft to punctuate her annoyance.

On screen, the speeding bullets crawled toward the target, incrimined garishly by the computer. The computer predicted the projectiles would reach closest-approach in a mere six hours, the merely-human-aimed dumb projectiles falling thousands of kilometers off the mark.

“Frak! I used to be good at this!”

“Why do I have to sit in the back?” Holden complained.

“You can’t fly for shit,” Starbuck replied. “Also, I think we can agree there are deeper reasons you don’t belong in the front.” She turned around and gave him a predatory grin. Holden looked nonplussed.

“We’re out of remass—or just-about,” Starbuck pronounced cheerfully.

“That sounds”—Holden considered a moment—“. . . deliberate?”

Starbuck smiled exaggeratedly.

“Uhhhh . . . can we teakettle home?”

Starbuck’s smile got even wider, somehow, and Holden noticed a slight acceleration backward. Probably no more than a decigee. Starbuck was positively beaming.

“Can we revisit why you brought me along, then?”

Starbuck unbuckled her flight harness, drifting free.

The Himalayas, Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal.

“Yeah—I think she heard us.”

“‘Least we blend in for once,” the other stormtrooper remarked.

Vader turned, his glare somehow apparent even through his opaque facemask. The stormtroopers cringed, but at that moment, down the slope, two figures emerged from the blizzard: a fourteen-year-old girl and a queen. The stormtroopers opened fire.

“Leave them to me,” Vader said, after a full minute of automatic weapons chatter. “I will deal with them myself.”

The stormtroopers hung their heads in shame at their marksmanship, and shivered off to warmer climates. Vader’s lightsaber unsheathed, bathing the snow in an ominous red light.

“You underestimate the power of the dark side.” Vader intoned. “If you will not fight, then you will meet your destiny.”

“You won’t have to worry about destiny anymore,” Katara flamed, dodging the poorly-thrown lightsaber, “because I’ll make sure your destiny ends, right here and now. Permanently.” She gave an exaggerated cough, the sound almost lost in the wind.

“Save it for the tripods,” Vader intoned, catching the lightsaber, which had boomeranged back to him, improbably. “This mask isn’t just N95; it’s literally vacuum-rated. It’s over. I have the high ground.”

“We have the snow . . .”

Her companion regarded Katara regally.

“Astute,” Elsa allowed, bemused. “‘Himalaya’ literally means ‘snow receptacle’.”

Elsa raised her voice to carry to Vader. “What power do you have to stop this winter? To stop *me?*”—and with that, she accidentally unleashed a torrent of icicles straight at Vader’s heart. However, Vader held up a hand, and the icicles stopped in midair.

“Fool. No man can kill me.”

“Did you just misgender me?” Elsa inquired, demurring in woke confusion. Katara, however, leapt forward, causing the ground to turn to ice. That’s just how Kung Fu works, and jumping counts as Kung Fu. Vader slipped on the ice and fell down a crevasse, cursing vehemently.

“I am no man!”, Katara shouted down the abyss at the broken cyborg below.

“Wrong franchise,” Vader coughed, then died.

CIA Headquarters, Langley, Fairfax County, Virginia, United States.

“I’ve analyzed the packet our forces intercepted from the Soft Coalition’s tightbeam.”

“Outstanding. Have you hacked the Electronics Intrusion Countermeasures yet? Remember, we’ll fix the frazzled neurons in your spine if you succeed. It’s only fair, you know.”

The hacker frowned at the terminology.

“Well, the ‘ICE’, as you call it, is a common-as-dirt Diffie–Hellman-mediated symmetric block cipher, probably AES 256. Against that possibility, I took the liberty of feeding the problem into Wintermute—you know, supercomputer in the basement? Size of an aircraft hangar? Assuming we’re about average in our luck, we should be able to decrypt it in a mere one-point-three novemdecillion years.”

Earth, somewhere near the middle.

“What do your elf-eyes see?”

Legolas squinted upward at the battle raging in high Earth orbit.

“Mostly blurry flashes of light, and the occasional indistinct blob.”

“Put on the UV-pass goggles, you diffraction-limited pansy.”

The elf accepted the dark glasses, staring up at the sky with acuity both magical and technological.

“Well?”

“ . . . Holden and Starbuck, out of delta-vee, kay eye ess ess eye en gee . . . ”

Dubious Abyss, anchorage and research station, nearby black hole.

The fleet, comprising exactly twenty-three battleships (and twelve corvettes and a cruiser, to bring it to a nice round number) set off at a bracing 1000 meters per second per second to a safe distance to execute the Jump.

The mood was jolly—a *crusade* had been ordered, as was the Divine Right of the species. Huge, stained-glass windows belied the neutron torpedoes and arc emitters which the great warships bore in their golden bellies, for War was Beautiful—and it was often precipitated with no readily-distinguished casus belli. Glory, Greed, Principle—what did it matter, when God was on your side?

In the great hall of the flagship, Admiral Veldanura, resplendent in the crimson robe of command, inflamed the assembled crew. Her starched collar was high and glittered with gold flecks—the yoke of command her rope to lead.

“To battle, my brothers, my sisters—to battle!” she roared, and the crowd thundered its approval with shouts and bootprints. In the balcony below, the venerable battle-priests, clad in the brilliant white attesting to the purity of their psionic order, furrowed their brows and began praying furiously toward a beautiful crystal orb of purest amethyst.

If they prayed hard-enough, it was scientifically inevitable that the ship would “Jump” tens of thousands of light years in a single instant—though afterward, the priests would be bedridden for more than six months, exhausted almost to death from the backlash. The effect on morale would significantly (albeit quantifiably) limit the ship’s fighting fit, but jump drive technology allowed the fleet to bypass standard hyperlane restrictions, conferring an immense strategic advantage. And to think—others relied on a guild of literal drug addicts to fly the ship, without even the benefit of computer oversight!

In any case, their opponent in this fight was supposedly just a ragtag fleet of heretics allied to a backwards Materialist civilization scarcely off its own blue-green homeworld . . .

The fleet *Jumped*.

NCC-1701-D, cislunar space, bridge.

Dr. Troi convulsed momentarily, emitting a highly undignified noise. Jean-Luc gave her a stern look, raising his eyebrows imperiously.

“Sorry, captain,” she explained. “I was empathetically overwhelmed by a great emotion of . . . patriotism? It is immense. Truly immense. I can’t—” she trailed off.

“Detecting twenty-odd battleships, several smaller vessels, emerging from warp. Allied, sir.”

“Very good,” Picard mused. “Though, I’m tired of waiting for our damned ambassador.”

“Sir, I’ve got a transporter lock on Ambassador Pierson. Shall I beam him up?”

“Make it so.”

The bridge lights dimmed and swirling pinpricks of light spun on the bridge like a rotating column of so much glitter. The lights coruscated, then faded . . . but nobody had been beamed up.

It was an object—a sphere of dull metal, run through with peculiar pipes and wires, and heavy-enough to indent the floor. Pierson’s communicator badge had been duct-taped onto the front, and the whole affair had been plastered with enough American flag stickers to pave a football pitch.

“If we’re going to be damned, let’s be damned for what we really are.”

There was a flash, then nothing.

A planet 600 meters across, the middle depths of the Kuiper belt.

The light was bright and warm outside in Bruno’s garden, albeit that was because the artificial star which produced it was close. The actual Sun was just another star at this distance. Gravimetric readings would peg it as closer—but then, gravimetric readings had been erratic recently, and Bruno had been forced to postpone assembling a collapson arc. Bruno was not a patient man; yet he was immortal, and would suffer frustration for Eternity.

As to the cause of the commotion—it seemed that a war had broken out in the lower system between a loose-knit coalition of aggressors and the Earth itself. After much destruction on both sides, a great many ships from a third party had appeared suddenly, and were now attacking everyone indiscriminately. The coalition and Earth now appeared to have called a truce and were pivoting to meet this new threat—although calling the situation anything other than “chaotic” would be crediting humanity with more sense than it deserved.

Bruno sighed. His network gate was down, neglected. Some would accuse, *deliberately* so: he wished the Queendom would just leave him alone to do the research the Plodders would not. He looked longingly at the collapson nodes on his display, held in electrogravitic grapples in anticipation of the construction to come.

As if reading his mind, a hidden voice suddenly crooned inside the empty room. “If a technological feat is possible, man will do it. Almost as if it’s wired into the core of our being.”

In sudden alarm at not being alone, Bruno de Towaji whipped about, and a woman obligingly materialized behind him, thermoptic camouflage bleeding away into visibility.

“Who are you?” he demanded. And, at the lines and surfaces of her gratuitously-naked robotic body: “Where do you come from? Who made you?”

“I guess cyborgs like myself have a tendency to be paranoid about our origins. Just call me ‘Major’. Tamra sent me.”—(At the significance of this, Bruno knelt respectfully.)—“You are to assist in the combat of the entity known as ‘The Blight’.”

With this pronouncement, she hefted a peculiar white gun and fired it at a wall. Bruno cringed, but the wellstone was undamaged. Instead, inside a ring of blue fire, was Her Majesty’s throne room. The messenger and the scientist stepped through the portal and into battle . . .

Rocinante, a *legitimate salvage*, on-approach to Earth–Luna system.

The telescope didn’t show much, but it showed enough. Naomi should never have trusted that authoritarian floozy bartering *toothpaste* (of all things?) for room and board. She came with her own ship—albeit it was much smaller: arguably too small for the gymnastics Naomi’s boyfriend—Naomi’s *former* boyfriend, Naomi reminded herself—was now performing inside of it.

“I can fix this, my children,” came a smooth, paternal voice. The three women turned just in-time to see Thanos snap his fingers.

“ . . . ”

“Mar-vel-ous?”, Kaylee said slowly, as-if looking for a hidden meaning in the word. One hand fiddled with a floral bonnet—pretty, but apparently not hers—while the other hand rested daintily on her layered cake of a dress.

Thanos’s eyes boggled. “It was supposed to kill half of you!”

Kaylee and Naomi, still quite alive, looked at each-other, aghast.

The third woman rolled her eyes. “First, killing half of us wouldn’t help. At all. Why would you think that it would? Second, assuming you’re not suicidal, the binomial expectation of this event is 12.5%—*improbable*, but hardly *impossible*.”

“Not just you—everyone in the universe!”

“Please what? If the mechanism is the sound of your fingers snapping, there’s no sound in space. If it’s radiation, the hull is steel and there are no windows because it’s a *spaceship*. Moreover, a hypothetical wave of death propagated by literal magic could only propagate at-*most* at the speed of light, and the nearest ship is 15 light-seconds away, so we wouldn’t even know about it yet anyway—and we haven’t even *gotten* to the inverse-square falloff! You seem . . . kindof retarded, Mr. Thanos? When I want to kill someone, I do it with my *brain*.”

“Your brain, little girl?”

“Which is more-likely, Mr. Thanos? That I have a weapon which I sensibly *conceal*, or that your glowy space rocks which have already had demonstrably no effect on three separate people (and are physically impossible in-terms of claimed potential energy density besides) *aren’t* just tritium glowsticks you stole from a fractious bunch of grown-up-children in ridiculous halloween costumes?”

River trained her eyes steadily, as if aiming an unseen weapon.

“Drop the gauntlet, Mr. Thanos, and let us get back to failing the Bechdel Test.”

Blight Ship 36721-K3821-A-111, cislunar space, deck 2 starboard corridor.

The man materialized butt-naked, albeit carrying a shotgun.

Now that the Soft Coalition had formed an alliance of convenience with the Earth for the purpose of mutual defense, beaming technology was available. Yet, despite the ability to travel through space—and, in-fact even more implausibly, time—somehow bringing *clothes* along was a step too difficult.

Farther down the corridor, a plant-like thing, complete with fronds, pivoted on a wheeled platform in surprise. Words bubbled out, synthesized and soothing, like a subversive lullaby: mathematically optimal propaganda.

The man ejected a spent shell, chambered a new one, and took aim.

“Hasta la vista, baby.”

USS Daedalus, Daedalus-class battlecruiser, bridge.

Admiral Yang Wen-li was calm. His brilliant tactics and warm charisma had earned him the admiration of all—yet his humility belied his well-developed sense of honor. In-short, he was the perfect man to lead the Grand Alliance into battle against The Blight.

The assembled Alliance ships surged ahead, charging toward one third of the great line of Blight ships. It would be a defeat in detail! The multi-light second distance was crossed in a short time, and soon, the Alliance ships, having sustained only slight losses from the full-frontal charge against superior numbers, were cruising between the ships of the Blight.

Clearly, the Blight ships could not turn, for fear of exposing their weaker sides. But, afterward, the Alliance ships turned from behind, making a triangular shape, which is the strongest shape! The triangle broke apart the Blight ships, and destroyed all of them with negligible losses!

The remaining two thirds of the Blight armada, still outnumbering the Alliance fleet 10 to 1, had had enough of this ridiculous geometrical name-dropping, and tried firing weapons for once.

The entire Alliance fleet was destroyed in an instant.

Grand Alliance Command, Tonga (a *Monarchy*, you understand).

“—and communication with the Blight is impossible. Alistair read a single bit of their broadcasts and collapsed into a gibbering mess.”

“That sounds theoretically impossible, but Our regrets about Mr. Young.”

Major returned the wormhole gun to an annoyed-looking woman of deliberately ambiguous ethnicity who silently, but imperiously, held out her hand for it.

“About the matter of strategy, Admiral Holdo? Mr. Kent? I believe you two had a proposal?”

Blight Ship 36721-K3821-A-111, cislunar space, propulsion section.

The naked man bent the armored door open with sheer strength. Here, the great ultradrive spines pierced the hull into the interior, radiating outward from a spherical reaction vessel, which contained the tremendous energies required for faster-than-light travel. The energy flowed in a continuous river from a man in suspended animation, who was apparently powering the whole affair with biological energy, like a battery.

“That seems realistic,” the naked man opined.

The naked man approached the pod, and sat down opposite, jacking a preposterously large plug into the back of his own head. Instantly, he felt as if he were on Earth. The man in the pod now appeared beside him, the two sitting beside each other at a bus stop.

The naked man (who was now not, in-fact, naked) rose, aimed a sidearm at the other man, and fired directly into his alarmed face. The bullet stopped in midair.

“As you can see, Mr. Anderson, this reality is a computer simulation. Take this red pill.”

“Uhhhh why is it red?”

“You wanted blue? Your genitalia are adequate—you could even get wholly different ones if you like, surgically. Now swallow the pill or next time I won’t stop the bullet.”

Shortly, both men awakened in the reactor room. The man in the pod unplugged himself, and Blight ship 36721-K3821-A-111 shuddered, all power suddenly drained from all systems.

A surprisingly generic jungle, a short drive from MacGuffin City.

“Get off my dragon! Only a woman can ride Ramoth!”

“Are you kidding? I’m a feminist! My girlfriend’s name is literally ‘Pocahontas!’”

“ . . . wait, really?”

“Well . . . no, but she’s basically already an over-the-top Native American stereotype, save the blue-skin. And she’s still just as much of a Mary-Sue.”

“I *told* you! My name is ‘Lessa!’”

Jake Sully, ignoring her, clumsily pulled at Ramoth’s all-too-sparse hair. “Now how do you turn this thing on?”

Ramoth squawked and let out a blast of fire, singeing the threads of Lessa's curiously medieval robe.

"I *command* you—"

The Bene Gesserit witch tapped her on the shoulder. "Let me do the psychic stuff, weywoman—though fair warning, my ways might be a bit weird, myself!"

With that, she raised her Voice and Spoke. Jake and Ramoth vanished, gone ahead to a different space and time.

Jessica proudly curtsied to an aghast Lessa. "Who's the Mary-Sue now?"

Cislunar space: no ship—and *definitely* no communists.

The alien wore spandex in lurid blue, with occasional splashes of red and yellow. Appearing like an exaggeratedly muscular human, he—the spandex left little doubt of that—evidently had no trouble breathing, nor indeed propelling himself via some kind of reactionless magic.

He regarded the Blight armada in cool indifference. He was, in fact, invincible to *everything*, as far as he could tell—up to and including flying into the actual sun (after all, he was solar-powered; it makes as much sense as anything else).

This was really entirely Holdo's plan, the xenophobic American immigrant considered. Genius strategist, she. And with that reflection, he took off at a billion gees, blueshifting toward the Blight fleet's apparent flagship, just as they lowered their shields for literally no reason.

Try as he might, Truth, Justice, and the American Way personified were encountering relativistic limits. And all the literal space magic in the world meant nothing when our caped crusader headbutted a battlecruiser at five nines of c.

Exotic particle-antiparticle pairs sizzled cathartically, quark-gluon plasmas gave way to random hadrons, entropy was maximized in a subatomic conflagration with no regard to its original constituent's patriotism.

For a brief moment, another sun appeared, a dozen times brighter.

And then there was nothing. Not even spandex.

Epilogue: Lilypad City, Saturnian System, peace talks over dinner.

“Good news, everyone! I’ve finally discovered why everyone was fighting!”

“Sorry, but we can’t risk the Mule knowing”, Bayta Darell muttered past a bite of chicken vindaloo—and with this, she drew a blaster and shot Professor Farnsworth dead.

The gun smoldered as everyone assembled considered this rationale for a pregnant moment (save Lister, who surreptitiously stole Bayta’s plate).

“Hi!”

(This, from Winslow, who lay cheerfully upon the table, indifferent and oblivious, next to a suspiciously enormous egg. Leto stood up, and drop-kicked the—unfortunately quite indestructible—green lizard-thing out the window.)

Sirhan, dressed sharply, coughed diplomatically.

“In truth, this whole affair seemed like some kind of sad excuse to fight, just for the sake of the spectacle itself.” he lampshaded. “I suppose we *could* use the Relay out by Pluto to go take a closer look at the Blight’s origin, or”—here, he picked up a cat—“we could deal with more pressing matters.”

There was general assent.

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For indeed, no one (save perhaps the late professor) was really quite sure, in retrospect, why the Coalition of Soft had attacked the Hard Alliance. Nor why the Blight had attacked both sides, as it had. In any case, what was clear was that Superman’s superficially selfless act had inadvertently destroyed almost everyone in cislunar space—on all three sides. Spaceborne hostilities had functionally concluded, simply by virtue of the combatants all exploding.

In the broader system, all was in chaos. Scandal embroiled Eros, abused child soldiers having been found in the government Command School. A single-family starship had been lost to intergalactic space after a hyperdrive “accident” while another had ended in bitter divorce after a case of alien sabotage at a sprocket factory. The ansible report breathlessly mentioned “ewoks”, a rebellious teenage daughter, and an OnlyFans account. Two starbases were bickering over which was more “original” than the other, but no one really cared about either one.

On Earth, the Statue of Liberty had collapsed and some astronaut was railing about the “maniacs” who “blew it up”. Reagan had resumed the presidency, and some comedically violent cop with a Jesus complex was running amok. The invasion forces per-se were somewhat

shielded by the atmosphere—and in some cases, also by the planet itself—and yet, without orbital support, most of the sporadic terrestrial fights had petered out.

The only exception of note was the Dalek invasion of London. However, no one could be arsed to care—because it was still *only* happening in London, because it had apparently happened many *many* times before, and because there was a time-traveling space wizard on the scene pulling some kind of deus ex machina out of a screwdriver, or whatever. Stranger—and considerably more (and less) asinine—things had happened in the past 24 hours.

Author's Notes

The inspiration for this story comes from, of course, many sources, which were largely intended to be obvious. However, it was *precipitated* by some idle chatter on the ToughSF Discord on 2019-06-23 about a hard-SF universe in a battle with a soft-SF universe. I picked away at this concept erratically for literal years before finally completing this.

There are plenty of oddly-accurate scientific perspectives in the soft-SF contexts, and plenty of scientific inaccuracies in the hard-SF contexts. This is *absolutely deliberate*. Additionally, everybody hews to exaggerated meme-like tropes about, and distorted quotes from, their respective universes. This is also deliberate.

It came out pretty jumbled, but this is pretty obviously inevitable given the sheer number of separate universes, with their attendant different mechanics, I was trying to mash up. Not my best narrative work, but it does have its moments, I'd say—and as an experiment, I count it a success. You'll get a lot more out of it if you catch all the references, too.

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