

The Battle of Ceres

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Among the many memorial plaques and monuments scattered about on the various bodies of the Solar System, some mark the locations of first landings and other great achievements, while others commemorate disasters, acts of sacrifice and heroism and the like. But there is one such marker that stands apart from the rest. Not in appearance or scale—it's only an understated abstract sculpture with a small and tersely worded plaque attached—but for two other reasons: First, it appears to honor the site of a battle, and second, it seems to be in the wrong place, anchored to the wrong asteroid.

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Jeff was making grunting noises of frustration at his console again. I turned, dimming the display on my own visor so I could focus on him. From the clutching motions of his hands and arms in the air in front of his chest, I guessed that some big chunk of rock was getting away from him, either slipping out of his grasp and floating away, or perhaps crumbling apart in his manipulators. “Sonofabitch, sonofabitch,” he said, his arms tense, fingers rigid.

“Soft hands, sweetie,” I reminded him quietly. And wonder of wonders, he listened to me. Almost immediately his hands relaxed, their twitching movements slowing, becoming purposeful.

“Ha. Got it,” he said a few seconds later, and then, “Pow. In the basket. Four points for the home team.” I gathered from this that Jeff’s remote had successfully delivered another boulder of material to the processing hopper. It must have been a big one, because I could feel the vibration as the crusher began breaking up this latest delivery. The crunch of steel teeth biting into silicates and metallic iron-nickel nodules was transmitted through a few hundred meters of asteroid, filling our work dome with a low-frequency rumble. Interspersed with the grinding hum were occasional pops and thumps as the crusher ran into tougher inclusions within the boulder. These noises were more than a little reminiscent of the sound and feel of nearby impacts, and I could see the similarity registering on Jeff. His eyes met mine through our visors, and he gave me a nervous smile before looking away again. He pulled his visor off, and keeping his feet anchored in their straps, let himself drift away from the console, tilting his head to look up toward the fabric roof of the dome. Stretching his body out to its lean and gangly full length, he threw his arms over his head like a child stretching after a nap. Then he unhooked one foot from its restraining strap and used a bare toe to trigger the “park and stand by” command on his console.

He looked out again at the roof of the dome that stretched over us. “You know, in World War I, there were times when the soldiers in the front lines would know—I mean know for *certain*—

that they were going to die in an upcoming battle. Year after year, the war on the Western Front was just one suicidal charge after another, and the soldiers knew it. They'd seen it happen over and over, and when a man was rotated to the front lines he would know it was his turn. There would be an assault scheduled for such-and-such a time, and when the whistle blew, the men would be climbing out of their trenches and charging into a wall of machine gun fire. So they would sit there waiting, thinking, 'In thirty minutes I will be dead. In twenty minutes I will be dead. In ten minutes . . .'"

I had my own visor off and was stowing it. "If you're trying to set a note of good cheer and levity here, it's not working."

Jeff grinned apologetically. "Sorry, Kat." I glared at him, and he corrected himself. "Katrina. But at least we're better off than those guys, right?" He was still floating stretched out, and the posture was pulling his coverall up tight between his legs, pressing mysterious lumps and bulges into the cloth.

"Oh, absolutely. We don't know when we're going to die, and we don't have to worry about trench foot either." I didn't really know what trench foot was. No doubt Jeff could tell me. This man, this *boy*, who was helpless with horror when Molinski's suit was holed on an EVA, who had cried in front of everyone when he heard that Jenson and Morrow had been killed, he had a bizarre fascination with all things military, and in particular he knew his military history frontward and backward.

I finished parking my remote, then nudged myself away from my console, twisting as I drifted over to Jeff. I snagged him at hip level between my open legs, and, with a little wriggling, brought our bodies together at a ninety-degree angle, my crotch to his belly. "Pow," I said, reaching out and pulling down the zipper at his chest. "Four points for the home team."

Jeff snuck a glance in the direction of the console screens, and I stifled a smile. As many times as we'd done this, he still felt qualms about playing hooky from his duties during work hours. But soon enough his eyes were back on me, and he was grinning, and his long, boney fingers were opening my coverall and pawing gently at my breasts. "Aw, Kat," he sighed, pulling us together for a kiss, and for once I let him get away with that damnable abbreviation of my name.

"I wonder if someday they'll call this a war," he said later as he was zipping up again. "I mean when it's over and it's a part of history. Will they call it the Asteroid War? The War of the Asteroids?"

I was at our little bathroom with the door open, sponging what I could of the his/mine/ours off of myself. "Calling it a war would be a little grandiose, don't you think? All that's happening is a few megacorporations trying to vandalize each other's mining installations. There are no soldiers here, no battles, no generals. No guns, even."

Jeff's face did that odd thing it sometimes did: looking suddenly old, gaunt with age and experience instead of skinny with malnutrition and youth. "We fight," he said. "They shoot at us and we shoot back. We try to kill each other. And hundreds of us have died, haven't we?"

I'd finished my washup and was drifting across the dome, waiting for my slow trajectory to bring me within grabbing distance of my floating underwear and coverall. Something about that "haven't we?" hit me with a little skewer-stab to my gut, and I shut up, staring down at Jeff until my head bumped the soft barrier of the dome fabric.

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Yes, hundreds of us have died, maybe thousands. Probably somebody somewhere was keeping count, but the information wasn't publicized. Out of all the underfed billions of Earth, who would miss the odd hundred or thousand? The boundless abundance of the asteroids was up here waiting to be taken, and all that immeasurable wealth was enough to dwarf other considerations. Platinum-group metals and gold, iron and aluminum, oxygen and hydrogen for fuel that doesn't need to be hauled up from the gravity well of Earth. Even plain old water and regolith-dirt are pearls of great price to the ultra-wealthy inhabitants of the L-colonies.

The fly in the sugar bowl came in the form of a simple fact: Abundance is the enemy of price. When there were only one or two corporations mining the asteroids, the commodities they provided could be sold at a fabulous profit. But with three, four, half a dozen entities involved, the

market price for all the asteroid-derived resources began to sink. And since the up-front investment needed to start a mining operation was enough to make paupers of a roomful of billionaires, any threat to the reward from that investment was not something to be taken lightly. So one day, in some anonymous boardroom, it was decided it would be a good thing if a competitor's mining operation suffered an unfortunate accident or two. A few meteoroid impacts, for example.

Objects in intersecting solar orbits can have relative velocities of dozens, even hundreds of kilometers per second. With speeds like that to play with, guns, bullets, cannons, shells, missiles, bombs . . . all are unnecessary. All you need is a bucketful or two of gravel, gently accelerated into the right orbit over days and weeks. Best of all, bits of stone tell no tales. They carry no rifling scratches or chemical signature to point an accusing finger back at their place of origin. There's nothing to distinguish a naturally occurring shower of meteoroids from one that was deliberately aimed. Such things happen in space, after all. No one said it was a friendly place to work.

And so it happened that mining installations began to suffer unfortunate accidents. Meteoroid impacts, against the laws of probability, became more and more frequent. Further, these impact events usually came in the form of loose clusters of pebble-sized impactors—a configuration that theory predicted should be almost unknown in nature. In time it became evident that these accidents were anything but accidental, but still the polite fiction was maintained. As loudly as the various corporations involved would wail and proclaim themselves victims of deliberate attack when one of their installations was hit, none of them ever admitted responsibility for launching an attack.

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"But you're right that we don't have any real battles," Jeff said. "Wars should have battles. Gettysburg, Cannae, Midway, The Battle of the Somme . . . battles with names. It's too bad we don't have battles with names out here. Like 'The Battle of Ceres.' That would be a great name for a battle, eh?"

"Jesus Christ, Jeffery," I started. "Jesus Christ . . ." But he gave me that damn toothy grin of apology again, and I paused, dropping the tirade I'd been putting together in my head. "Anyway," I said instead, "Ceres is millions of miles away from anything. No one's doing any mining there."

"But you have to admit it sounds good, right? I mean, it has a ring to it."

"Yes, definitely. Much better than 'The Battle of 2021 GJ₁₄,' or even worse, 'The Battle of Eros.' I wouldn't want to die in a battle with a silly name like that. That wouldn't be any fun at all." That got me another toothy grin, this one overlaid with something dangerously fond. "We should get back to work," I said.

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A few weeks later, we were rotated back to Base Station with its centrifuge gravity, hot showers, hundreds of inhabitants, and best of all, the randomly varying trajectory that, in theory at least, kept it safe from any carelessly arranged accidents with space gravel. I was walking the main corridor, trying to get my gravity legs back, when Ramirez caught up to me from behind.

"Welcome home, Katrina." He put a hand on my back and swept it briefly up and down. "You heard about LN₇₆? A shower came in while they had a crew setting up a new processor and dome. No radio contact since the incident. Probably the whole crew is gone, or will be by the time a relief ship can get there. Could be twenty personnel, maybe more." He made a sickly smile with the last sentence.

"I heard," I said.

"The good news is that it was an Asteroid Resources crew. Fucking A.R.I. bastards. They've been the biggest killers out here since this all started. They say the shower that killed our guys on AS₈₂ can be traced back to an A.R.I. ship with 85 percent—"

"I heard."

Ramirez looked sideways at me for a moment. I could see the small wheels turning in his mind as he decided to switch tactics. "Come to my quarters after shift today?" he said. "I've got some Scotch. Good stuff, from Earth by way of L-2. We can celebrate your homecoming."

"No thanks."

"No?" He smiled with one side of his mouth. "You used to like my Scotch."

I'd never liked Ramirez's Scotch, or any other Scotch. But there had been times when I'd wanted a drink, had *badly* wanted a drink, and I had drunk Ramirez's Scotch, and had given him what he expected in return. It had been a stupid mistake, just as signing up to be a miner had been a stupid mistake. Sometimes I spent idle moments wondering what it would be like to live in a world where there are choices in life that are something other than a selection of stupid mistakes.

By now I'd walked the ring around back to my quarters, and I turned away from Ramirez to thumb my door open. He reached around me, slapping his palm against the panel and stopping it from sliding open. "What's the matter, Katrina? I would have thought you'd be happy to be back with some grown-up men after spending six weeks with a sniveling puke like Sukenik. Or maybe you've gotten used to little Jeffy? Did you two play mommy and baby up there? Did you like having him suck on—"

That was as far as he got before the heel of my hand came up against the underside of his nose. While he was busy squealing and swearing and cradling his nose between his fingertips, I stepped into my quarters and closed the door. Ramirez was management—director of mission logistics or some such title—so probably I'd just made another stupid mistake.

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The death toll from the impacts on LN₇₆ turned out to be thirty-one, a new record for casualties from a single "incident." Asteroid Resources executives held a press conference accusing the South Pacific Consortium of engineering the strike, and the S.P.C. fired back with a barrage of colorful charts and diagrams showing that a transport shuttle owned by Off-Earth Technologies was the probable source of the impacting space rubble. New heights of saber-rattling rhetoric were scaled, with poetic phrases like "the icy-cold necessity of retaliation" and "the perpetrators will find they have awoken a sleeping giant." That last one was a reference to something from World War II, Jeff told me. And amidst all this quivering excitement, everyone, at every possible opportunity, talked about "protecting the innocent workers." That was me, and Jeff, and all the other diggers in the dirt like us. Everyone seemed to be desperately eager to protect us and to call us innocent. I'd never had so many important people falling over themselves to call me innocent before.

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The fuss and chatter was beginning to die down by the time Jeff and I were rotated back to our station on GJ₁₄; back to our little dome and our various machines for biting off mouthfuls of asteroid and chewing them into their constituent valuables. The shuttle trip out was the usual long, boring business: Weeks and weeks of nothing to do as the faint but constant acceleration of the engines took us on a wandering path through our swath of the Solar System, dropping off and picking up other crews at various rocks, making grazing flybys of other rocks to get a bit of a gravity assist to our trajectory. And quite possibly, at certain precisely calculated points in our flight, a hatch would open somewhere in the hold of the shuttle and a few kilograms of gravelly asteroid rubble would be ejected. This little cloud of murder would continue on its own flight path, probably making a few fly-bys of its own to curve its trajectory and make its origin less obvious, more deniable. And some weeks or months in the future, depending on certain variables and the vagaries of luck (good or bad, depending on your point of view), this load of debris would come raining down on some other company's installation, punching neat little holes through pressure domes, through machinery, through people.

"Home sweet home," Jeff said as we floated from the shuttle to the two-kilometer lump of stone that was our assigned workplace for another six weeks. We settled into our routine; we worked, we ate, we had sex, we slept. On the third day, Jeff pointed out, as he had several times before, that our sleep-sacks had been thoughtfully designed so that two could be zipped together into one big one, suitable for two occupants. "Maybe we should just try it," he said with a pained attempt at casualness, so we did. As I feared, sleeping with another person in zero G involved a lot of thumping collisions of elbows to ribs, knees to thighs, heads to noses as we drifted unconsciously in the loose confines of the sack. But after a couple of nights, our sleeping bodies got into the habit of holding onto each other in a loose embrace so we didn't float apart. It wasn't so bad after that.

The attack came while we were sleeping. The first we knew of it was the loss-of-pressure alarm blaring in the dome, the lights simultaneously coming on to full brightness. I swore and started pulling myself free of the sleep-sack, realizing as I did so that Jeff was ahead of me, already halfway across the dome. We'd trained for this, and he was following the drill by heading for our patch kit.

The record time for getting sealed into an EVA suit is something over twenty minutes, and that's with an unsuited person to assist. So the standard procedure in case of a dome puncture is not to even try. Instead, we were trained to grab a patch kit and fix the hole or holes. A hole that's too big to patch isn't really a problem, because you'll be dead by the time you find that out. While Jeff was unlatching a patch kit from storage, I pulled myself over to the console whose acoustic detectors would show the location of any leaks.

There were two punctures displayed when I got there, then three, then four. Clutching a handhold, I could feel intermittent pinging vibrations being transmitted through the rock the equipment was anchored to. Meteoroids were raining down all over our asteroid. A projector marked out the interior of our dome with a coordinate grid, so I just had to call out numbers and letters, and Jeff would go to that spot, peel the backing off of a patch and slap it into place. It was kind of like an oversized board game, except for the small detail of our imminent death. At one point, Jeff fumbled while taking a patch out of the pocket of the kit, and all the patches that remained came spewing out and began floating away in all directions. Cursing and sounding close to tears, Jeff threw himself across the dome to retrieve the assorted squares and rectangles. "Leave them!" I shouted. "Just get one. There's only two holes left. You get the one at G-3 and I'll get the other." As I spoke, I nudged myself away from the console to snag one of the drifting patches, then ricocheted myself back to where the puncture was. "Calm down. Focus," I said without turning to look in Jeff's direction. "We're going to be okay."

"I got it," Jeff said. "Any more?" As if in answer, the computer's voice reported that our air pressure was stabilizing, and that no more leaks were detected.

I grabbed one of the dome's aluminum struts close to where it was anchored to the ground and held onto it, staying quiet. "I don't feel any more impacts," I reported after a few dozen heartbeats. Jeff was drifting close to me now, and I reached a hand out for him to take, keeping the other hand on the strut. "I think we're okay," I said.

Jeff didn't take my hand. "Good," he said, his breath fast and halting. "Good. Good. Good." When I turned to look at him, he was in a slow lateral spin, upside-down relative to me, then right-side up, upside down. He was holding one hand to his right side, just below the ribs. Under his hand there was a wide patch of glistening red on his T-shirt, and there were a dozen or so fingertip-sized globules of blood floating around him in an expanding spiral, like the arms of a galaxy.

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We were eight light-minutes from Base Station, so the round-trip signal time was sixteen minutes. After bandaging Jeff up the best I could and giving him some antishock meds, I made my report, describing his entry and exit wounds and asking for medical advice. While I was waiting for an answer, I made a quick check that our life support systems were undamaged, and then I started reading files on the care and treatment of penetrating trauma, abdominal.

"This place has a name," Jeff said as I was reading, startling the hell out of me. He was in our double-sized sleep-sack, holding onto the lip of it with both hands. His face looked like something soaked in bleach and empty of life.

"Rest," I said. "Try to sleep. You're going to be okay."

"Miners always call these asteroids by their provisional designation—the year of discovery, two letters and a subscript number. But most of them have had real names assigned, like Ceres or Vesta or whatever. But miners only use the provisional designation numbers. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Just tradition," I said. "I guess at some point it was decided it was bad luck to call a rock by its name."

"I can't remember the name of this one. I remember '2021 GJ₁₄', but I can't remember the name."

"Moore," I said. "I don't know what that comes from—probably someone's girlfriend or favorite

musician or something.”

“Moore,” he repeated, listening to the word. “Okay. Moore.”

“Yes, Jeffery, you’ll be able to say you were wounded in the Battle of Asteroid Moore. Are you happy now?”

He smiled at me with white, bloodless lips.

When the call came back from Base, it was Ramirez’s voice. He spewed out a boilerplate response requesting details on the “impactor event,” including a complete inventory of damage to equipment and our estimated output level until our relief shuttle arrived. Then, as if it was an afterthought, he said that the Base doctor would be calling in shortly regarding the “injury to personnel” I’d reported.

When the doctor called in, she didn’t have much to say that I didn’t already know. Based on my report, it was likely that there was damage to Jeff’s liver, but it was impossible to say how extensive the injury was, or what his prognosis was. With the medical facilities at Base, scans and surgery would be options. For the situation as it was, the only option was to wait, and wait, and wait some more. If he got better, he’d get better. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t. “Try to keep him quiet and comfortable,” the doctor said.

He was not comfortable. He drifted in and out of wakefulness, and when he was asleep, he moaned, whimpered, sometimes writhed and twitched. When he was awake, he was still, almost motionless, his face tight as a sheet stretched over bone. “How’re you doing?” I said. “You want more pain meds?”

“Nah. They just make me sleep. It’s not too bad.” Another bloodless, lifeless smile.

“The nearest shuttle . . . I mean the one with the quickest trajectory here . . . They say . . . It’s going to be a while, Jeff. By the time they get here you’ll probably be all healed—back to tossing boulders around with the best of them.”

“Yup.”

He slept, woke, slept. Once, he woke himself up by yelling something in his sleep; something that might have been a word. “Sorry,” he said and was quiet for a time. “They say that wounded soldiers, even the toughest of them, call out for their mothers when they know they’re dying. I haven’t called out for my mother, have I?”

“No, you haven’t, Jeff. Must be because you aren’t dying.”

“Good. I didn’t like my mother very much. I’d hate for my last words—”

“You’re not dying, Jeff.”

“Okay, Kat. Good. Not dying is good.” He smiled again. I wanted very, very much to tell him to stop smiling.

He slept. I lowered the lights and climbed into the sleep-sack with him, carefully pulling him close so I could hear him breathing. His skin was cold and damp.

I woke up to the sound of him speaking. “. . . a hill called Little Round Top . . . defending the left flank . . . their ammunition had run out . . . two Alabama regiments gathering for another attack . . . The colonel . . . he was a professor of modern languages . . . he ordered his men to fix bayonets and charge down the hill . . . A brilliant wheeling maneuver . . . the Confederate lines broke . . . a college professor before the war . . . modern languages . . .”

“Jeffery,” I said, taking his head in both my hands, trying to get him to focus on me. “Shut up, Jeff. Please, for god’s sake, please, please, please, shut up.”

“Sorry, Kat.” His eyes drifted randomly, locked onto mine, then drifted away again. “I guess my mind was wandering.” His arm came up slowly, between mine, and he touched my face, my mouth, with the tips of his fingers. “Katrina,” he said with an odd, restful, finality. Then he was asleep again.

The next time I woke, it was to silence. I held him close to me for a long time, talking to him, murmuring into his ear. I told him I was sorry for yelling at him. I said that everything was going to be okay. Then I said some things about myself, I said things about him, I said things about the two of us. I talked about the future, about our future, about life after our contracts were up. I said a lot of things. I talked and talked and talked, like a little girl.

But finally night shift was over, and there was work to do. I unzipped our joined sleep-sacks into

two separate units and zipped his body up into one of them, closing it up over his head with a piece of cord. Following company-mandated procedure, I anchored the sack inside the airlock and set the lock to drop pressure slowly. Vacuum-dried corpses don't rot, and they have less mass.

I ran checks on all the equipment and systems and cataloged the damage. The crusher and main ore processor were still functional, as was one of the two remote diggers. I anchored my feet at my console, put on my visor, and worked. I clawed loose chunks of rock and fed them into the crusher. I monitored the readouts of the carbonyl processor, made adjustments, replaced parts. I cataloged the output of refined product. I settled into the routine; I worked, I ate, I slept, until the shuttle came four weeks later. Along the way back to Base, Jeffery's body was jettisoned on a trajectory that would take it out of the ecliptic, safe from any collision with anything for any imaginable future. And again, quite possibly, the shuttle was also programmed to release a few loads of asteroid rubble, this time on trajectories carefully calculated to intersect with something, somewhere, sometime. I didn't ask, and no one on the shuttle would have known if I had asked.

Things were buzzing at Base Station. There was a slew of new equipment just arrived from the L-colonies; new mining machines and new shuttles. And from Earth there were some fresh deliveries, too: gaunt, hollow-cheeked recruits with wide, hungry eyes that looked at everything with a mix of wonder and fear. My stomach tightened with hatred for all of them, knowing that those same stupid and gaping eyes had been mine only a few years ago.

The new shuttles needed new pilots, so I applied for training. It turned out to be not too difficult; learning to make a big, awkward, slow-to-respond machine into an extension of one's body, learning to be patient with its glitches, learning to sit with the emptiness of one's thoughts for endless hours of doing nothing, learning to be ready to do something after a long stretch of doing nothing, learning to shut up and follow orders. When my training was done, they gave me a shuttle, and in keeping with merchant marine tradition, they gave me the rank of captain. They told me to choose a name for my craft, and of course there was no question about that. "Ceres," I told them.

The details of the shuttle's hold were none of my business, of course. I would be given an official manifest, and it was not my place to be curious about anything beyond that. If there was some undocumented chamber within the hold, that was not my business. Neither was what went into that chamber, where and when on my flight path it would be ejected, or what and who would be at the end of its trajectory—all of this was information I didn't need to know. Indeed, the hinted-at command was that it was information I very seriously needed *not* to know.

My first mission was to be a cargo run. Hauling equipment and supplies out to mining stations on three different rocks on the way out, bringing processed metals, minerals, and water from those stations on the way back. Most pilots prefer to carry passengers so they'll have someone to talk to, but I opted for a cargo-only mission.

Everything was smooth and peaceful. Days and then weeks of barely discernable acceleration, an occasional course correction, a lot of status updates radioed back to Base. I used the time to tinker with my ship's radar. I'd paid attention during my training, and it turned out there were things the radar could do if you chose to ignore certain specifications. I configured it to alert me of small, close targets with low relative velocity. A radar set of the size that will fit in a shuttle—or in a mining station—isn't much use for warning you about pebble-sized stones that are incoming at thousands of kph, but when you're watching from the other end of things, if you want to know about it when your own ship has just released a load of gravel, it works just fine.

My jury-rigged alarm went off on mission day twenty-two. I did a manual scan and confirmed that a cloud of stony rubble was close by my shuttle and slowly drifting away. As I expected, my flight plan called for a course adjustment in just a few minutes. What had just been released from my hold was to go one way and the ship herself another way, and in the great anonymous bulk of space, there would be no proving that the two things had ever had anything to do with one another. Jeff wanted a name for this war; the War of Deniability would suit, or maybe the War of Lies.

I keyed in an abort to the planned course change and had the computer run a calculation of where my current course would take me, assuming no further corrections. What turned up was an intersect, in thirty-four days time, with a medium-sized asteroid with an active mining installation

belonging to Off-Earth Tech. I calculated a course that would keep me on this ballistic trajectory, but with some acceleration from my engines thrown in. The plan was to arrive ahead of that rubble, and to have time left over to decelerate. It wouldn't do for my ship to become just another object in the deadly rain of impactors, so I would need plenty of deceleration time.

It was a long, quiet flight. I suppose some would call it lonely. I thought often of Jeff's World War I soldiers—"In thirty minutes I will be dead. In twenty minutes I will be dead . . ." But I tried not to think of them. I tried instead to think of the Union soldiers on Little Round Top, fixing bayonets to their empty rifles, charging down the hill in what should have been a useless, empty gesture, another example of life's inescapable stupid mistakes. But it wasn't. It became something else. . . .

"This is Captain Reznikova of the S.P.C shuttle *Ceres* calling O.E.T. mining station on asteroid 2047 LM₇₁. Anybody home?" I started making noises like that when I was a day's flight time away from them. I called and called, but no one answered. It was possible that I wasn't using the right frequency and protocols to trigger an incoming-signal alert in the station's computer, but it could also be that the place was empty. That was a wrinkle I hadn't thought of, and the belated realization made me laugh. If a *beau geste* falls in the middle of space and there's no one there to hear it . . .

When a response finally came in, it was from Ramirez, of all people, calling from back home at Base Station. "Reznikova, for Christ's sake, where have you been? You've been off your flight path and on radio silence for over a month! What the hell's going on?"

My console told me that the round-trip signal time to Base was twenty-four minutes, so I had the luxury of making a speech without being interrupted, if I wanted. If I wanted, if I wanted . . . It all seemed a little pointless now. Is that what those World War I soldiers felt when their countdown reached its final minutes and seconds? Did they use up those last seconds wondering . . .

"Ramirez," I started, "approximately thirty-four days ago, on day twenty-two of my mission, my shuttle released an estimated eighty kilograms of stony asteroidal rubble. This was triggered by an automated system on board the ship that I had no knowledge of"—a bit of dissembling for dramatic effect there—"or control over. I had my instruments record the release of this debris, and that data is now being broadcast . . . well, everywhere. Maximum power, all frequencies, all data links." I took a breath, and it rasped in my throat. *Fix bayonets, charge down the hill*, I thought. "Since the time when this material was released from my ship," I went on, "I have been traveling along its trajectory, first accelerating ahead of it, and then decelerating. I am now positioned over a mining station on 2047 LM₇₁. As near as I can figure, the rubble cloud is now directly behind me and due to reach this point in less than—" Then my console beeped, and the readout told me that a close-by radar was pinging my ship. "Oh," I said, "I think they've seen me." As I spoke those words, an almost musical clang rang through my ship. Apparently, the leading edge of my faithful flock of pebbles was arriving already.

"Shuttle *Ceres*, this is the mining station on 2047 LM₇₁," came a woman's voice. "Um . . . what the hell . . .?"

I started to answer her, and then noticed that my primary transmitter was dead, punctured by that first impact. My career as a broadcaster to the solar system was over already, apparently. I switched to my short range set. "Hello, mining station, do you read?"

"We read, *Ceres*. What—"

"If you've been listening, you may have gathered that you've got some incoming rocks. Rather a lot of them, in fact. I'm going to hold position directly over your dome, but I'm not sure how much good that will do. You'd better get your suits on and break out your patch kits."

"You . . . You're saying that you're going to use your ship to shield us?"

"Yeah, something like that. Not sure if it will make a difference." A second impact hit my ship, this one making a dull thud. "I'm standing off a good distance, so if I blow up or crash, chances are I won't come down on your heads. No guarantees, though. Are you suiting up?" Another thud, then a clang. A loss-of-pressure alarm started to sound, and I switched it off.

"Roger that," the woman said, puffing with exertion between her words. In the background, I heard shuffles and bumps as she fumbled into an EVA suit. "What about you? Even with a suit . . .

ANALOG

your ship will be torn apart, probably explode. You'll be killed."

"Yeah, something like that," I said. "Fix bayonets. Charge down the hill. See if the enemy lines break." *In ten minutes I will be dead*, I thought. Another clang, followed by two thuds. My console lit up with system-failure alerts and the ship went into a longitudinal roll. I grabbed the controls to correct. *Maybe five*.

"What?" yelled the miner below me. "What are you talking about?"

"Talking about? I'm talking about this. The Battle of Ceres."