

All The Stars That I Can See - Disasters

Chapter 1 Beginnings

Scene 1 Departure Control - Centre For Advanced Scientific Studies

Even through the thick window the noise overwhelmed Joseph, only his determination allowed him to stand. The giant ship roared by, streaking down the launch ramp. “Fly fast, luv.” he whispered under his breath - not that anyone standing near him could have heard anything above the noise.

Barely had the first ship reached the end of the ski-jump shaped runway when the second’s engines roared to life.

“Shit, someone’s in a hurry!” Joseph said. He turned his back on the sight and went to the data terminal. Immediately he saw the reason for the rush - two unidentified blips closing at high speed from the south. “Shit, shit, shit! Why didn’t they allow me to install defences? They knew these idiots were crazy!” Joseph said.

Logging into the control systems, he activated a set of systems that the leaders didn’t actually know about. He remembered the conversation when they’d almost been discovered and the fast talking he’d had to do. “Well,” Joseph mumbled, “strictly speaking they ARE fire suppression systems, just not the kind of fire they thought. “Good, they’re coming in low.” Joseph had congratulated himself at the time for the plausible explanation he’d given about being able to remotely monitor and extinguish any fires caused during launch operations. Joseph set the systems for “last minute” and switched the external tracking cameras from the departing ships to the incoming jets. All he had to do was distract them - two or three minutes more and the ships would be well away.

Nestled in a north-south running valley, the Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies looked like a child’s toy set. The large administration building looked completely out of place - a large, featureless box unceremoniously dumped at the base of the valley with the road snaking in from

the south-east. At the rear of the building, the large runway ran down from the crest of the western wall of the valley, across the bottom and climbed up the shallower eastern side. A large building followed the runway from the administration complex to the western wall, completely engulfing the crest of the hill. The recovery airstrip stretched away out onto the plain to the south, with the wide, straight road leading from there to an entrance in the base of the western hills. Originally, the complex had been built to allow for only one launch at a time. With the current crises, this had been hastily augmented with a second launch platform behind and above the first. Six months of frantic construction had completed it just three weeks ago. With these two ships launched, the facility was already automatically moving the third vehicle into position. This would be completed in just a few hours' time.

Scene 2 Alpha-charlie Flight

Approaching low and fast, a pair of YK-60 attack fighters were heading towards the Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies. In the lead aircraft was Squadron Leader Maria Nu, one of the most experienced fighter pilots in the defence forces. Her wingman for the day was Flight Lieutenant Nick Vlahos, a pilot she had casually met a few times but this was the first time working with him. This was another minor annoyance in a day full of major ones. Her normal wingman was fine, but the higher ups had selected a stranger that morning for some reason - probably another sign of higher ups not trusting anybody. Her instruments had registered the facility when all of a sudden they detected a low flying object. As the object began a rapid ascent, the profile quickly settled down into something similar to one of the "ballistic objects" that she had been briefed about. "Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-4, I confirm a valid launch from the Centre, over." "Roger, Alpha-Charlie, ETA over?" replies the calm and slightly cheerful voice over the comms. A smile creased her face as she remembered the conversations over the mess table. How they'd joked about the training or drugs the controllers must get to be able to use that tone of voice. The real explanation she had finally got from her friend Nalini was a lot more prosaic. Nalini revealed that controllers like herself typed in the message and a computer generated the voice. The smile disappeared as she remembered her mission, it seemed a lot less funny now. At thirty-five, Maria was one of the oldest pilots still on active duty. Her career was unblemished from when she first signed up at age nineteen. She'd married at twenty-four and had twin boys two years later. Between her husband, children and career she had considered herself as blessed as any person deserved to be.

That had all come to an end twelve months previously when the puddle jumper her family was on had crashed on the way home from a family holiday. She had been required to fly back two

days previously, but had convinced Steve, her husband, to stay on a couple more days. The guilt from that had devastated her. Two days later the nightmares started. In them she was somehow on the plane as well but was ignoring the cries from her family to save them, playing cards with her pilot friends instead. After two weeks of these she had come apart. The nightmares had taken two months to ease off. After six months she had finally come back to active duty.

All of that recovery had fallen apart on the previous night. She couldn't believe the report that she had seen. It described how the plane had been purposely crashed to dispose of some 'undesirables'. Her Steve and beautiful twins Rohnan and Wesley all dead - as 'unfortunate collateral damage'. Then there was the second report, the one that detailed the crimes of these 'evil enemies of truth and right'. They had been involved in some 'unfortunate incidents' suppressing 'religious fanatics'. Some secret surveillance had caught them talking to each other, asking if what they had done was right.

She remembered the original incident, the death of more than fifty 'heavily armed insurrectionists' with miraculously only one death among the attacking defence forces. She now also remembered the rumours, that the fifty included twenty children, mostly less than ten years old, and that four of the 'heavily armed insurrectionists' were pregnant women. The rumour went on to say that the one fatality was because a soldier had balked at shooting one of the insurrectionists, a young woman breastfeeding her child when they burst in. His commanding officer supposedly shot him on the spot. She had laughed the stories off at the time. She wasn't laughing any more.

She had refused to believe the evidence; there was no way her beloved service would do something like this. Struggling to act normal she had attended the morning's brief, fully expecting to expose Nalini Rodgers, who had given her the copies of those reports, later that morning. She remembered the term from the recent briefings, 'dangerous traitors' spreading 'sedition'.

That briefing, however, changed all that. She could still remember the cold, emotionless 'suit' delivering the briefing. The Centre's 'divisive and socially undermining propaganda campaign' supposedly aimed to 'create a social anarchy' to 'further their own private agenda'. How this had been proved by their recent association with 'dangerous extremist groups' like the Mennonites and other 'religious extremist groups'.

He went on to explain how, for society's own good, no word of this must ever be talked about, even to their fellow pilots. The only thing that had stopped her falling apart at this point was the anger that burned within her at his 'suggestion' that 'for the good of their families' it was important that no rumour of this incident should ever start. "So," she thought to herself, "they don't think we're professional enough to do what they want, they have to resort to blackmail and fear to try and control us. It's a shame for them there was cards left to play against her."

She glanced down at her tactical display and replied "Victor-Charlie, ninety seconds to the Centre, over."

"Negative Alpha-Charlie-4, what is your expected time till launch window for intercept, over?" replied Flight Control.

She went cold. Glancing down she took longer than her training allowed, "Victor-Hotel, 2 minutes, over."

Her instruments recorded a second vehicle rising from the Centre so she said "Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-4, second launch, repeat, confirming a second valid launch, over."

Looking at the flight profile of the two ships - ships that the Suit had described as 'Unmanned secret space vehicles that the Centre had repeatedly refused to reveal the true purpose of to our reasonable requests for information' - Maria realised that the flight profiles were completely wrong. There was only one type of vehicle that would have had that sort of profile; it must be the giant transport ships that the Centre had been building. There would be over ten-thousand lives involved in those two launches.

“Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-4, the flight profiles do not match the expected targets. The profiles are for manned vehicles, over.” she reported.

There was a delay of nearly ten seconds before Flight Control answered. “Negative, Alpha-Charlie-4, the Council has said that these are unmanned probes, your instruments must be faulty. Continue as ordered, over.” That normally soothing sing-song voice the controllers used now grated like fingernails down a blackboard. “How could they be so sure?”, she asked herself.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-4, over.”

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, repeat, authorisation, appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-4, over.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, all systems are green, we can confirm that you can hear us, either respond or break-off and return to base for disciplinary action, over.”

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, you are ordered to respond. Failure to respond will be considered treason, Alpha-Charlie-4. Respond now, over.”

Silence.

Changing band, the controller contacted her wingman. “Alpha-Charlie-5, this is Victor-Hotel, do you copy, over?”

A coldness overtook Flight Lieutenant Nick Vlahos as he automatically responded, “Roger Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-5, over.”

“Splash Alpha-Charlie-4. Authorisation appearing on your screen now. Weapons hot, acknowledge, over.” That sing-song voice had its normal soothing effect on him. It was only as he started to obey that he realised what he’d just been ordered to do.

He feared to glance down, but his training forced him to.

“Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-5, over.” ordered the controller.

“Acknowledged, Victor-Hotel, out.” replied Nick.

Knowing he would probably be facing court-martial, Nick switched to inter-plane comms as he slowed down his plane and slipped in behind Alpha-Charlie-4, “Maria, what are you doing?

Respond! I’ve been ordered to bloody well shoot you down! Dammit, Maria, respond!”

“These aren’t drones, they’re the Centre’s transport ships. Do what you have to, Nick, I’m sorry this will all be on your conscience, I just couldn’t live with it on mine – it’s too full already.”

“Alpha-Charlie-5, fire, I repeat, fire!” ordered the controller.

Nick was torn. He’d heard of Maria since he’d started out in training 6 years ago. She’d been like a hero to him. But his training seemed to have a mind of its own. He slowed his aircraft to give enough separation for the missiles to activate, the finger flipped the selection to air-to-air-thermal and pressed twice “Pickle one thermal, pickle two thermal, over” he said into the microphone.

Mary heard the alarms go off as the missiles launched. She almost flicked her wrist to send the plane off on a wild turn to break the lock the missiles had. Instead she thought, “Why bother? At least this will be an end to the nightmares.” Too late she wondered if drawing it out may have helped the ships escape.

He wondered what had happened, what had driven Maria to this extreme? It was only then that he realised what it was she had said. “Transport ships? No it couldn’t be.” He said to himself.

Scene 3 Departure Control - Centre For Advanced Scientific Studies

Back in the hanger, Joseph was intently watching the monitor when he saw the two flashes from one of the jets and realised that it was launching missiles.

“What! They’re too far away!” Joseph said.

Five seconds later the closer plane exploded in the air.

“It’s started. Damn them! Damn them all! Everything they touch is poisoned by their filth.”

Joseph said.

Scene 4 Alpha-charlie Flight

“Alpha-Charlie-5, what is your status, over?” asked the controller.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, repeat, what is your status, over?” asked the controller again.

Shaking himself, Nick said; “Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-5, I confirm Alpha-Charlie-4 has been splashed, over.” Nick surprised himself by matching the even tone of the controller over the comms.

“Roger, Alpha-Charlie, ETA over?” asked the controller.

He glanced down at his tactical display and replied “one minute to launch for target two, two minutes for target one, over.”

“Authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie, over.” said the controller.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, repeat, authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-5.” repeated the controller.

Mentally shaking himself, Nick finally responded in his normal voice, “Acknowledged, Victor-Hotel, over.” It was all happening too fast for him to process. Even with all of his training, he couldn’t skip ahead of the current situation and get the mental space he needed to figure out what is happening.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, this is Victor-Charlie, confirm that there were only 2 valid launches from facility, over.”

“Confirmed, Victor-Hotel, over”, responded Nick.

“Damn this voice!” Nick thought. “Why did they pick that particular voice?”

Increasing speed, Alpha-Charlie-5 turned slightly east and sped towards the retreating targets. “Transport ships? What transport ships?” Nick thought to himself. “The briefing had been about unmanned drones, not any transport ships.”

Scene 5 Departure Control - Centre For Advanced Scientific Studies

Something was bothering Joseph - a nagging little mental itch he couldn't scratch.

Stilling his mind, he closed his eyes for a moment and allowed his thoughts to wander. After a few seconds his eyes snapped open and he when straight to the tactical display. "Of course!", he thought, "The fighter's target won't be the Centre any more." He confirmed on the screen that the approaching fighter was now on an oblique angle to intercept the launched ships.

"Damn it! It's not going to fly over the Centre!" he mumbled out load. "Shit, Shit, Shit!"

Quickly accessing the computer systems, he changed the defence mode from 'last minute' to 'now'. "God, I hope I'm in time." he thought.

From the Centre the flare, chaff and electronic hell-raiser launchers came to life and launched little missiles that immediately started streaking towards their targets. The jammers immediately started analysing the signals they could detect and then started jamming every signal they could find.

The chaff and flare missiles raced to get ahead of their target so they could launch their payloads.

Scene 6 Alpha-charlie Flight

In the approaching jet, Nick was intently watching his HUD. He finally crossed an imaginary electronic line and used his fingers to change his missile selection to “radar” and pressed the trigger twice. “Pickle one radar, pickle two radar.” He reported over the comms link as he launched his missiles.

Nick’s HUD suddenly became very busy as all sorts of warning lights went off. Running on training, his mind prioritised the threats and announced over his comms “Centre launching countermeasures, over.”

The two missiles dropped off the rails and their engines kicked to life, accelerating them away, well ahead of any interference. The pilot saw the tell-tales indicating that both missiles had acquired their target. He automatically switched them to “fire and forget” freeing himself to concentrate on the interference coming from the Centre.

The electronic interference turned many of his screens white. Automatically switching to ‘random agile’ mode, his systems randomly changed frequencies many times a second. This reduced his resolution, but allowed his systems to restore most tactical information.

Scene 7 Departure Control - Centre For Advanced Scientific Studies

“No, No!” Joseph pounded his fist into the desk so hard that he split the skin and started to bleed.

Helpless he watched the missiles streak towards the rapidly departing ships.

Scene 8 Alpha-charlie Flight

Nick gave his attention back to flying his plane. “Another thirty seconds till I’m in position”, he thought.

Twenty-five seconds later, a group of flares went off right in front of his plane. He reacted immediately, but they were just too close to avoid them all, one was ingested into his right engine. Immediately all sorts of alarms and warnings assaulted him. Running on pure training he simultaneously hit the extinguishers for that engine and checked his tactical display. “Pickle three radar, pickle four radar, distance marginal. Mayday, mayday engine two on fire from flare, breaking off pursuit.” The engine was still on fire so he shut it down completely. he realised it was too late as his plane exploded in a giant ball of flame.

His final thought was “What have I really just done?”