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Fitch's War

by Benjamin S. Hartman

Defense Minister Cook stewed in his seat. “Now we have another one of these rebellious planets chomping at the bit to antagonize us! Don't they understand that we're seeking to build a cohesive government?!”

“They don't see our intervention as alleviating suffering,” Treasury Minister Turner said. “They claim their taxes fund the social programs within the Core. Since a majority of citizens in the outer reaches are all landowners, they believe the Core's taxation policies have stagnated growth.”

“Are you going soft on them?!” Cook demanded. The room echoed from his remark that bit like a wolf.

Turner looked at the Chancellor. “Civil strife is coming. The inner worlds are facing economic hardship and the outer worlds are refusing to pay for it. If the Earth Core Government is to remain united much longer-”

Cook leaped out of his chair. “We’ll make an example out of them!” He exclaimed. “Send that farm boy General Fitch and Admiral Nimitz. Nimitz is ripe for an easy mission and Fitch always wins.”

“We must remain civil,” Turner protested.

“After those rabble-rousers shot at one of our senators? Nothing civil about that.”

“We’ve eliminated governors and instilled ones loyal to the Core! Nobody on either side is innocent!”

“You’re right Turner, that’s why we must take a firm stand and put an end to this rebellious streak. Teach them not to build a Navy under our noses.” The muffled voices around the table signaled that Cook’s views would inevitably win out.

All eyes turned to the Chancellor, who had been silent until this point. After careful consideration, his hands fell to the table and his face bore the gravity of the situation.

“Every day it seems to get worse,” the Chancellor said. “Now we need to snuff out the fires of rebellion. Send Fitch and Nimitz.”

#

General Fitch stewed about the cabin. He was a fighter, trained to protect the Core from hostile alien forces, not babysit a boy Admiral with an itchy trigger finger. The powers that be believed he could ‘relate’ to the pirates because of his background. A back-handed compliment if

there ever was one. Still, regardless of his personal views, intelligence reports accused the world known as Greensboro of building a navy.

Rumors rippled across the outer worlds, but Greensboro was the first to be accused of actually doing it. The Planetary Government never responded to the accusations, only cementing their guilt.

“Here’s that report you wanted General,” A young Lieutenant said. “Why did you request mining reports from the Ministry of the Environment?”

Fitch looked at the Lieutenant and flashed him a grin. “John C. Henry, I’m surprised.

One of the harshest lessons John had to learn under Fitch’s tutelage was that there were many ways to solving a problem. There was never just one solution.

“Talk it through Lieutenant. Where does the ore go?”

“To smelting foundries. From there they go through the refining process and then to manufacturers.”

“Keep going.”

“Manufacturers would include ship builders, which means if Greensboro was building a navy...”

“Their mining programs would have to increase over a hundred-fold,” Fitch finished.

“Very good Lieutenant. I also could have analyzed their economic output, their banking activities or aviation permits issued, however Greensboro is a young world and I believed that mining reports would provide the most accurate information.”

“Always thinking sir. Let’s see what the reports say.”

“Hmm,” Fitch groaned. “These mining reports do not indicate the Borros are extracting enough ore to be building a navy. And the intelligence reports don’t indicate an increase in piracy either.”

Major Mitch announced that the locals were ready to receive the Core envoy.

Fitch looked at John. “Now it’s time to use one of your key strengths: diplomacy.”

#

The two men descended to the surface with a shuttle. The searing heat strangled the moisture from their throats and the sun’s rays struck like a lash. A band of locals marched towards them in lockstep while they stood tall under the midday sun.

“How appropriate. The Core sends a xenocidal General to deal with us,” One of the locals says.

“Quiet Buck,” the leader growled. Fitch couldn’t believe how young he was.

“What is your name son?” He asked.

“Nathanael Mossvelt, descendent to one of the founding families of this world.” He flashes a sneer of disgust. “Why is the Core here?”

“We heard calls of distress,” John lied. “We’re not sure of the cause - solar blindness? Terramorphing sickness? Heavy metal contamination?”

Nathanael’s patience was on the razor’s edge.

“Hostile aliens?”

Nathanael’s face gave nothing, but the reaction from the rest told the story.

“So you have hostile aliens in the backyard hmm?” Fitch asked.

“We’re handling them just fine.”

“You’re making a lot of noise. The Core thinks you’re building a Navy to rebel with.”

“The Core didn’t care about us before. They came, they terramorphed until it was habitable, then they left. We’ve come to accept that we’re on our own.”

“Yeah, but we’re still forced pay their taxes!” Buck shouted from the back. “We haven’t seen a Core officer in ‘bout a decade but we’re still paying for it!”

“Are you beginning to see why we don’t believe in Coremen?” Nathanael asked.

“I hear you loud and clear son. The Core ain’t perfect. Won’t pretend it is. I was forced to come with an Admiral that has the fighting instincts of an attack dog. Only knows how to point and shoot. Why you ask? Because he’s the top General’s son and has to be pampered.”

“Get to the point Coremen.”

“His point is we’re here to right these wrongs,” John said. “We’re looking to work with you folks to make the Unknown Regions safer for everyone.”

“Good starting point would be for you to get back to your ship and-”

Nathanael was cut off by a crack that split the heavens overhead. A ball of white light ignited and flew towards the surface, slamming into a base on the edge of the horizon.

Fitch’s eyes rose in horror, and the local’s gaze turned to fury.

He turned and clicked on his comm.

“Mitch, who fired on the Borros?!”

“Admiral Nimitz did sir. Two ragtag Core warships fired on us!”

Fitch looked up. The locals were walking back to the city.

“They didn’t have any ships in the air,” Fitch said as he turned to John.

“Sir, the Core warships are old. At least 80 years old,” Mitch replied.

“Who uses ships that old?” John asked.

Fitch looked at his star map. “Grigylls.”

Silence rippled through the air. In the distance an eruption shook the land, and the Greensboro militia launched their warships into the sky.

Fitch turned to John. “They weren’t challenging the Core,” He growled. “Intelligence reports couldn’t tell the Borros from the grigyll warships! We’ve been duped! Get me back to the *Monolith!*”

The two men climbed into the shuttle and launched off, desperate to stop any more bloodshed.

“Do you have a plan sir?” John asked.

“Not at the moment. We’re gonna put our diplomacy skills to the real test!”

#

“Where is Admiral Nimitz?!” Fitch roared. All of the soldiers directed him to the bridge and moved out of his way. The General glared at the back of the Admiral’s head who watched as the naval battle unfolded.

“Why in the hell did you fire on them?! We were making progress!”

“We were being assaulted by a repurposed warship and had to take it down.”

Fitch waved his hand over the terminal and typed on the keyboard. “If you’d taken a moment to look Admiral, you’d have noticed that these registration codes are over 80 years old! They can’t possibly belong to the natives!”

“They’re backward hicks. I’m certain they could repurpose a ship nearly a century old.”

“The only ones who would wield a ship that old would be grigylls!”

“General I won’t have you prattling on about wild alien tales just because you don’t have the stomach to handle pirates.”

“Don’t have the stomach?!” Fitch howled. “You there!” He pointed to a naval soldier. “Get me a report of the last grigyll sighting in this sector.”

“Listen, farm boy, I will not have you marching in and barking orders aboard *my* ship to *my* crew. On the ground you have the authority, but up here I am the ranking officer.”

Fitch felt his hands tighten into a fist while the Admiral dared him with his eyes to strike him.

“That’s what I thought. And I figured you’d approve of the ‘shoot first then negotiate’ style of diplomacy.”

“You really are a green idiot aren’t you?!”

Nimitz turned to him. “I will not have you questioning my authority in the heat of battle. Guards, detain him!”

Two naval soldiers approached Fitch, their eyes begging him to do something. The General never had much respect for the Admiralty, but the Chain of Command was clear. Right before he was locked away, a voice clicked through the comm network. Screens across the ship switched to a media newscaster reporting on the latest.

“Due to the attack on Greensboro’s pirate forces, Senators from Centaura have been recalled, and have labelled the Core assault as ‘Overzealous’ and ‘An act of Tyranny.’ It is unknown when the senators will return.”

“He recorded his attack and sent it straight to the media,” Fitch grumbled. A heavy weight fell onto his chest, making it harder to breathe. Whatever diplomatic relations they hoped to establish were now dashed hopes.

#

The doors opened and the fluorescent light was blinding. Fitch groaned as the two soldiers pulled him out of confinement and they escorted him back to the bridge.

Outside there were dozens of dead ships floating in the void. Fields of twisted metal drifted by, along with the bodies of the slain. It was a haunting spectacle, a graveyard created by one man’s ambitions.

“As you see General, the rebellion is crushed. Now we can take our leave.”

“Sir, there’s more ships approaching,” One of the naval soldiers said.

“Initiate contact. Demand they surrender.”

The soldier keyed in the command. “Pirates you are in Core airspace. Surrender or we will fire upon you.”

The line was silent.

“Sir, there’s at least 50 ships out there, possibly more,” Another soldier reported.

Nimitz’s gaze turned fearful. His stance of strength was unraveling. “Repeat the call for surrender.”

The soldier did as ordered and waited for a response.

What came back were murmured growls. They grew louder, but they were inaudible to the humans on board. Nimitz became visibly fearful.

“Still think they’re ‘wild alien tales’ Admiral?” Fitch asked.

Nimitz turned to the crew. “Prepare to retreat. About face and ready the warp drives back to Core space.”

“What?!” Fitch roared. “You just destroyed Greensboro’s entire defense fleet and now you’re going to abandon them?”

“We can’t ward off over fifty ships General. We need to turn back and get reinforcements.”

“By the time we return, the grigylls will have slaughtered everyone down below!”

“General, we are not on the ground. Aboard this ship I am the ranking officer and I am ordering a retreat back to Core space for reinforcements.”

“You’re a goddamn coward! You’re fine with picking fights with pirates, but when there’s a real enemy on the horizon you’ll turn tail and run back to daddy.”

“Talk to me like that again *farm boy* and I’ll have you executed for disobeying a commanding officer! Am I clear?!”

Fitch turned and looked at the men. Their eyes held shame and disgust for wiping out Greensboro’s only defense against the grigylls. They didn’t want to turn back, but they held the same fear a caged animal does. Restlessness and a yearning to break free.

“Loud and clear,” Fitch growled. He drew his pistol, turned and shot Nimitz through the head.

The Admiral collapsed with a look of shock etched into his face. Never in the history of the Core had a General turned on an Admiral like this.

Fitch turned back to the men. “I have just committed treason. I have killed a ranking officer because if we leave, thousands of innocent people will be slaughtered. Since we wiped

out their only defenses, it is our duty to protect them. If you follow me, you will be seen as committing treason to the Core. Any soldier who wishes to back out may do so, you're free to take a shuttle back to the surface, warn the locals to ready themselves for a fight and call for reinforcements from the Core. If you're ready and willing to right the wrongs we've done today, then stay at your stations, but know that we'll be alone in this fight."

Not one soldier moved.

"Very well. Mitch fly over to the *Warhawk*, John to the *Paladin*. You two are now the ranking officers of those ships. I need my men at the helm if we're going to survive this thing."

"Yes sir," the two men said in unison and climbed aboard the shuttle. They launched off while the remaining soldiers watched in silence. Fitch noticed out of the corner of his eye that one of the Greensboro ships was still active, but the engines were so damaged it couldn't move.

"Someone, pull that ship in!" He ordered. "There may be survivors!"

The crew did as he ordered and within minutes a handful of survivors were brought on board. Nathanael Mossvelt and his followers. The soldiers brought them before Fitch.

"Patch 'em up and make sure they're comfortable."

"Can you fight a fleet this size General?" Nathanael asked.

"There's a reason why they call me a xenocidal maniac son. Go get some rest."

#

Once Mitch and John were in position, they signaled through the comm networks.

"Alright," Fitch said. "Our enemy has the numerical advantage, but thanks to this debris field, we can make one hell of a mess. Ships, shut off everything except weapons and life support systems. Load and ready all weapon systems, but wait for my signal."

The soldiers scrambled to their positions, and issued the commands through their computers. The lights dimmed until they blinked out and Fitch watched as the *Warhawk* and the *Paladin* went dark. The light from Greensboro filled the ship with an eerie glow and the men fell silent, waiting for the grigylls to come. The comm network filled with their growling chatter. Eyes went from Fitch to the grigylls, every soldier on edge for the coming battle.

One of the grigyll ships floated by, then another. Fitch motioned for the artillery soldiers to trace them. The only sound aboard the ship was the collective strain from the soldiers holding their breath.

The grigyll warships had surrounded the battlefield, but they'd slowed to a crawl to scavenge off of the dead ships floating through space. Their ships flew too close together and right as they became clogged at the edge of the debris field, Fitch gave the order everyone waited for.

“FIRE!”

The three Core ships ignited, shooting down a dozen enemy warships in an instant. The chaos rattled the grigylls and the comm networks filled with their angry gargling.

“Use the ships of the fallen,” Fitch ordered. “Fire on their reactors and see if we can take a few of the enemy with them. Keep all lights off, they haven't spotted us yet.”

The cannons ignited again at the reactors which formed a chain eruption of nuclear blasts that sent grigyll warships tumbling into each other. The soldiers got sour stomachs firing on the deceased, but for the first time in the battle, they had a prayer for survival.

“Make no mistake men, if we don’t fight these things with everything we’ve got, we’ll end up like our dead brothers out there!” Fitch screamed. The grigyll ships lurched and jumped from their engines being kicked back on, adding to the confusion of the battlefield.

“Dive down,” Fitch ordered. The massive battleship hurled downward, while the soldiers held on against the sudden loss of gravity.

Fitch worked the controls on his holo command table and etched a simulation of his next maneuver.

“We have at least ten minutes before they’ll get themselves out of this jam, we have to deal as much damage as we can between now and then. Level the ship out and turn until all port side guns are targeting the grigyll life support systems. All gunners to port, those guns don’t stop firing until I say so. Clear?”

“Yes sir!” The reply of a dozen men echoed. All of the boys ran to the port side and readied to reinforce the active gunners.

“Mitch, John, take the *Paladin* and the *Warhawk* and do the same thing above the fleet. They might try to intercept one of us, but this way we can catch them in a whirlpool.”

“What about the fighter ships and bombers?” John asked.

Fitch swallowed hard. “Ignore them. Put every ounce of juice into your shield, but keep pressure on their carriers, those are what we need to take out.”

All eyes turned to Fitch. Ignoring fighter ships and bombers was tantamount to suicide. Fitch may very well have just sentenced all of these men to death.

He saw the eyes of the soldiers with their scared gazes. The fear that gnawed at their bellies and the homesickness they all felt.

“You should be afraid,” Fitch said. “After what we did to those people on the surface, we don’t deserve to go home either. It’s do or die boys, and if you wanna make it outta here, you need to fight as though your life depends on it.”

“Use your tractor beams,” A voice ordered behind Fitch. He turned around and it was Nathanael Mossvelt standing tall, just like the General. “Pull our ships toward you when the fighters come and fire on them just like you did against the tip of the fleet.”

All eyes go back to Fitch. “You heard him boys!”

Nathanael walked to the bridge and stood next to the General. “Here to see if we die?” Fitch asked.

“Well, considering you just enlisted all of your boys into a suicide mission, had to see how it turned out.”

“It’s not suicide yet. We’ve got eight minutes until then.”

Nathanael chuckled. The battleship was in position and the cannons were sighted in.

“Fire all cannons! I want those thrusters burning!”

The three ships hammered at the grigyll fleet from both sides, desperately trying to break their shields. The gunners had formed an assembly line loading the cannons, all of them sweating bullets as they worked nonstop to keep the cannons firing. The holo display filled with thousands of fighter ships as the fleet was being scrambled together. The collective nerve was being tested, however every soldier at some point looked to Fitch. His stern gaze didn’t budge and his spine refused to buckle. There was a determination in his eyes that these men knew that they could hold the line regardless of the odds against them.

When the fighters reached halfway, Fitch went into overdrive, barking orders and pointing which ship to pull into the fray. Nathanael's plan of using the dead ships against the fighters was paying off, but they had only managed to defeat a third of the fleet.

"Sir! The cannons are overheating and the combat AIs are restricting our ability to fire until they cool down," the head cannoneer said.

"Turn off the damn AI son!"

"Sir, the metal is at risk of melting."

Fitch looked at the holo. They only had two minutes before the fighters threatened to envelop them.

"Cannoneers! You have thirty seconds to get all bodies to starboard side! Navigators! Flip this boat one-eighty on her z-axis!"

All three ships were closing in on the horizon line where the grigylls guns were. At that point, any advantage they had of being out of the line of sight would be gone.

"Take us to the graveyard!" Fitch ordered.

"Sir, there's too much debris to navigate through!" the Chief Navigator said.

"And think how hard it will be for the grigylls to keep up with us!" He shouted with glee.

"Mitch, John, you hear that?"

"Aye sir!" Both men replied.

The three ships raced back into the debris field, giving up their advantageous position in favor of cover.

"Leave some bread crumbs for our tailers," Fitch ordered.

The crew dropped antimatter depth charges for the pursuing bombing ships, which demolished the ships following the *Monolith*.

Mitch's comm cracked to life. "Sir, we're taking heavy fire! We've gone above the horizon line!"

Fitch looked at the holo. The *Warhawk* was being torn to bits and there was no way he could help them. He searched for an answer but Mitch finally gave him his.

"Sir, I've given the order for my boys to abandon ship. We've launched the shuttles and they're en route to the *Monolith*. Give them a good home."

"Mitch! What about you?!"

"I'm going to finish what we started by taking a few of them with me sir." Fitch watched on the holo as the *Warhawk* turned around and activated the warp drive.

"This should hurt a few of their cruisers right sir?" Mitch asked.

"It'll be just what we needed to break the enemy. Good work Major."

"Goodbye General. It was an honor to serve you."

"The pleasure was all mine."

Fitch looked away, but the soldiers watched as the *Warhawk* finished its about-face and activated the warp-drive which carved right through the center of the fleet. The exploding reactors decimated the grigyll fleet, sending sonic waves that knocked the surrounding ships out of tilt.

"Dock master, ensure those boys get aboard safely! Our top priority is getting those survivors aboard immediately!"

“Aye sir,” the dock master replied. Fitch stood tall, but the loss of Mitch left him wounded.

“Sir,” John said. “We grabbed a few of the boys as well.”

“Very good John. Thank you.” Fitch looked around and saw the men staring at him. His face hardened and his back stiffened as if he were called to attention.

“Let’s finish these bastards and send them back to the abyss they came from.” From that point Fitch barked one order after another, unleashing hell against the grigylls, granting no quarter and refusing to accept surrender. The remaining survivors were brought aboard, but several were picked off by fighters. Fitch ordered that a thousand grigylls must die for every human they killed or heads from his crew would roll. Depth charges were launched at the few remaining ships and they even started using the same tactics on the dead grigyll ships.

Eventually, the grigyll ships turned to retreat, but Fitch gave the order to pursue. He became a man possessed, a God of War that no amount of blood could slake his thirst. The hunted became the hunters and the two remaining warships devastated what remained of the grigyll fleet. Even when the grigyll ships attempted to make the jump into warp space, Fitch ordered the use of the tractor beam, which tore the engines right out of the hull of the ship. Only a handful barely managed to escape his wrath, but when the men surveyed the battlefield, it was a field of metal that extended millions upon millions of kilometres. The men let out a collective sigh of relief.

“Sir,” the Communications Officer said. “We’ve just received word from the brass. Centaura has seceded from the Core and they’re calling back all officers.” Shock and disbelief spread across all of the men’s faces.

“Where to sir?” the Navigation Officer asked.

Fitch turned and looked at Nathanael. “We have a few locals we need to drop off. Let’s take them home.”

#

When the ships landed, the soldiers aboard the *Monolith* and the *Paladin* greeted and cheered with one another, celebrating their impossible victory. Final tally counted over seventy grigyll ships destroyed, not including the tens of thousands of fighters and bombers.

John approached Fitch. He saw the look in his eyes and knew deep down what was coming.

“You’re not going back, are you?” John asked.

“I can’t. I’ve killed the son of the most powerful General in the Core. Even my connections won’t save me. Besides, these people need my help more than the Core does.”

“How will you stay afloat?”

“We’ll manage somehow. Let me guess, you’re going back?”

“The Core has done a lot of things wrong,” John said. “Somebody needs to help make things right after this is over.”

“It won’t end well,” Fitch said. “The secessionists don’t have a prayer and the Core doesn’t realize what they’ve done wrong.”

“I think we can fix things. Somehow, some way.”

“You always were foolishly optimistic John.”

“Where will you go?”

“Into the Unknown Regions. I’ll defend the outer worlds from the real threats that linger out there. That’s where I belong.”

“Y’know, you could be the key to saving the galaxy.”

“You give me too much credit. The brass won’t listen to me and I won’t fight a war like this where I turn my guns against a bunch of innocent boys fighting the rich man’s cause. I don’t believe in either side, so I’m staying out of it.”

“Well, suppose I’ll call for a ship,” John said. He started to walk away.

“John.”

“Yes General?”

“I’ll pray every day that I’m wrong and you’re right. Figured you ought to know that.”

John flashed a grin. “Thank you sir.”

#

Fitch turned to see the locals approaching the soldiers and offering them thanks for their help against the grigylls. While their hospitality was begrudging and the situation was tense, Greensboro was safe. Even Nathanael was fraternizing with the men, laughing and joking with them. The soldiers were gracious to the locals, seeing them in a new light and were very apologetic for what happened above.

Fitch gave a speech, acknowledging the wrongs of the Core and his intent to make things right. He knew he could never bring back the local boys that helped defend this place, but he pledged the service of the *Monolith* and the *Paladin* to help defend the Unknown Regions from any and all alien threats.

From the crowd out walked a woman who had lost three sons in the skies, trying to defend against the Core's hostility. The woman shook with anger and hurt from her loss and Fitch stepped down, holding his head in shame and faced her directly. She wanted to strike him, to curse him, but instead she collapsed into his arms, sobbing for the loss of her sons.

While a handful of soldiers chose to leave and serve the Core, the boys overwhelmingly chose to stay and fight in Fitch's new war of protecting the outer worlds. Even some of the locals volunteered to fight, but Fitch would only allow them if their families agreed to let them.

#

After the ships were refueled, Fitch sought out Nathanael. The man had left the city, retreating to his small home on the outskirts.

"What're you doing here General?"

"Come with me," Fitch said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Come aboard and lead my boys into battle. The Core screwed up and my second in command believes he can be a peacemaker. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen so I had to let him go. I need someone to help me be the General the people in the Unknown Regions deserve."

"What about your 'no volunteers required?'"

"You're a leader and a tactician. It's damn near impossible to find both in a man. I'm not requiring you to come, I'm asking, man to man. Please come. I need your leadership in my fleet. I'll give you command over the *Paladin*."

Nathanael stood silent and watched the General. Fitch met his stare and the silence lingered in the air for what felt like days.

Finally, Nathanael relented. "What about these people here?"

"They'll find someone to run the show. I don't have anyone else who can lead like you can. My boys are all too green."

"Alright, I'll join. We'll take the fight into the black."

"Glad to have you aboard son," Fitch said.