



The Children's Crusade

By Ben Amato

His grandson sprinted ahead, down by the surf where the sand was hard. The old man stayed towards the dunes, avoiding the few remaining rays of blazing sunshine. His slow steady pace varied only between the low crests, where the bright light gleamed over every crease in his weathered, tanned face. It was then he hurried into the next hill's shadow.

When they reached the cove, the grandfather lit the campfire and spread out the blanket. The six-year-old acted his age and proceeded to kick sand, collect shells and generally race across the beach for any or no particular reason. In his man's eyes you could see Evan made him feel young.

The quick falling darkness enveloped the beach and the campfire lit only part of the old man's contented face. The boy crashed down exhausted on to the blanket.

"Tell me *the* story." Evan said as he leaned into his pop pop.

"I'd rather not."

"Mom always tells me the story?"

“That’s because she *has to*.” The old man tried to put some iron into his words, but there is no such thing as ending an argument with a six-year-old.

“Well, you *have to, too*. Tell me the story, come on grandpa. Tell me the story.” Evan pitched every word in a whine that even made the seagulls move away. It did not take long.

“We have to lie down,” his grandfather said, “and let our eyes see the stars in the north. Then I’ll tell you the story.”

“Tell me about the gods.”

“They’re not real gods,” the old man said. “You know that.” The boy giggled as his grandfather poked him in the leg.



“Tell me *the* story.”

“Look to the east, down by the shore, just above the waves.”

The boy leaned up on his elbows and squinted into the darkness. He knew exactly where to search. He heard the story many times before.

“That first star, the brightest, is Farther. He knows all and commands.”

Once adjusted to the night sky, the boy easily saw the pulsing twinkle. There were three blue white stars. The trio slowly rose on the horizon.

“The one on the left is Spirit. He sees and hears all. He’s invisible and walks among us.” The old man reached behind his grandson’s head and playfully, secretly, brushed his grandson’s ear.

The boy jumped with a start.

“That was the gods, listening to me telling their story.”

Evan threw his grandfather a look and then laid back down.

“In the middle is the Sun. He is all-powerful. His lessons are hard, punishments harder. He can rain down upon us. Anywhere. Every time.” There was a note of sadness in the way the grandfather said these last two words.

But the young boy did not notice this, for he was rapidly falling asleep. His grandfather paused in telling the story and sat squinting at the three blue white stars that dominated the early winter night sky.





chapter 2

And the Winner Is...

“Your son is special,” said the man in the blue black uniform. He quickly marched up to Joseph Jobs and shook his hand. “Congratulations!” He gave it one more shake and then briskly took a step back.

Joseph was shocked. He looked at his wife Mary and the DJ and then back at this officer. “Who are...”

“You’re in the Space Command.” Twelve-year-old Manny, who was standing between his mom and dad, said this with awe. He recognized the uniform.

“That’s right son,” the officer looked down at the small boy. “We sponsor this competition to find the best of the best.”

“And your son is the champion!” the disc jockey said, still in his booming announcer voice.

The look Recruiter Jericho shot him immediately brought silence. The way he slowly blinked and tilted his head sent the DJ towards the door of the small office.

“I’ll be getting back to the crowd.” The DJ said this in a soft, hallow tone.

“Yes, there’s the future to discuss with the Jobs,” Jericho said.

The only one in family not confused was Manny. He saw it all unfold before anyone said another word.

“You want me to join the Space Command.” The boy did not ask this as a question.

“Excuse me?” his father Joseph coughed out. This was a question.

“Dad, this wasn’t just a contest. Wow, this was a recruitment drive.” There was reverence in his voice as it dawned on him what the Missile Command National Video Competition was all about.

“Yes, son.” Jericho broke out into a huge smile. He never had a candidate catch on so quickly. His grin turned into a slight laugh when he noticed Manny’s parents still did not have a clue. So he began his pitch. It was actually a courtesy. The score Manny achieved was historic and his accuracy left no option but to enlist this kid into the force. He’d be going up in a few weeks.





Chapter 3

Pre-Flight

It was customary for parents to say goodbye to their kids in the Green Room, just before the cadets entered preflight. In each of the four corners, families huddled around their little soldiers in their launch suits.

“You know we are all very proud of you,” Joseph said to his son. He looked down at his twelve-year old, decked out in his blue black uniform.

“I still can’t believe you’re going into space,” Mary said, gripping her son’s shoulder with hands that did not want to let go. “You don’t have to, if you don’t want to. You know that, right?” Joseph gave his wife a subtle, brief poke with his elbow.

“Yeah, mom,” Manny said sadly. He was having a hard time hiding his enthusiasm. He couldn’t wait for the shuttle to take off. Putting on his best pout, he said “I know how much this means to everybody; the money and all, the new house and...” He gave his dad a nod, “the fact that we never have to pay taxes again. Ever.”

“Gunnery mates! Attention! Assemble!” Commander Arnold swung the door open and entered. “Ladies and gentlemen, your sons and daughters are going into space. Be proud of them. Be proud of the United States of America. Be proud of your own personal sacrifices that make this great endeavor possible.”

Four kids stood at attention before the huge figure of Shuttle Commander Steward Arnold. The assorted families retreated back and milled together at the rear of the room. Fathers smiled and stood straighter. Mothers heaved sighs and tried not to think of the dangers to come. Brothers and sisters were a mix of loss, jealousy, sadness and envy. Arnold filled up the front of the room with his sheer size, confidence, purpose and direction. For all of his life he was one hundred

percent sure of everything he ever did. And this morning he was sure that he, his co-pilot and these four children were going up into space.

The side door of the Green Room slid open, revealing a long white winding corridor leading to the launch pad facility. Lights dimmed and the crew of the space shuttle Atlantis began to march. Commander Arnold was the first to round a corner and disappear, followed by Sally Brennen, tall and thin for thirteen, and Brenda Sider, the most serious and dark of the group. Billy Hannon was so excited he almost bumped into wall. But when Manny Jobses walked away, all his parents could think of was how he looked so serious, yet twelve at the same time.

Just before he turned the corner, he swiftly turned his head, gave his mom a dad a quick smile and a slight wave. Co-pilot William Dewey saw gunnery mate Jobses' unauthorized actions, grinned, turned, and gave all the families his own smile and a huge wave.

The technicians watching on their monitors noted on their consoles Jobses' break of protocol, but didn't smile. They did laugh at Dewey's actions. They always did, since he started doing that several launches ago. Even launch director Simon enjoyed Dewey's goodbye and noticed how it loosen up the families and lightened every ones' mood. But mates were supposed to follow orders and Jobses just had his first official mark against him.

Boarding went quickly. The launch team strapped in first and began their pre-flight procedures. The mates were packed behind and below the flight deck, in seats attached to huge equipment bays, touch pads, computer consoles and monitors.

Once the airlock of the space shuttle pressurized, the commander threw a half dozen switches to make the shuttle come alive on its own power.

"We're single and separate," he said to the crew on the internal com link. For the first time this morning, took a deep, real breath. "Dewey," he said and turned to his right, "did you do that silly wave, again?"



"Naw, sir," Dewey replied. He turned his helmet to his captain but his eyes back to the cadets.

"You bet he did, captain," Manny giggled into his intercom.

"Keep quiet, cargo," Dewey shouted into his headset. "Sir, which switch turns off Jobses' oxygen?"



The first hour of the launch sequence went quickly, with each cadet and crewman being directed through computer diagnostics by their handlers at Mission Control. The second hour was all waiting. The flight directors and Dewey brought the boosters and main engine to start. Arnold monitored guidance and ground communications. Brenda accessed the aft cabin com link through her wrist console and set it into diagnostic mode.

“Billy?”

“Yep,” he replied as he threw up his thumb even though she couldn’t see it. She was sitting in front of him.

“Sally?”

“You’re so melodramatic,” she replied in a sarcastic tone. “We worked it out in simulations. Of course I can hear you.”

“Manny?”

“Are we there yet?” he whined.

For a brief second, all four cadets turned back into kids and giggled. Their laughter was muted from the flight deck, the mission control handlers and anyone else listening in on the shuttle communication channel.

“I can’t believe we’re here.” The other cadets could imagine Billy’s eyes rattling around inside his helmet. “Four months ago I was my bedroom nailing aliens in Space Invaders.”

“Figures you’d play that game. Lame.” Sally was nasty. She had been that way for the last three weeks of training. Everyone knew more of the same was coming this next year of service. “I can’t believe you’re here, either.”

“Excuse me, Miss Pacman. You came in second, right? Second in the Nationals. Right?”

Even strapped in her launch seat, Sally tightened up on Billy’s reminder.

“Manny?” Brenda whispered into her headset. She never trusted the security of the secret channels she discovered. “Look up left, at the power / heat sensors. How’s the system?”

“You’re so paranoid.” Manny leaned out and read the displays above Dewey’s head, on the right ceiling of the shuttle’s cockpit.

“Launch windows are all green and level across the board. Fuel cells and cooling system are a little hot. The data stream is steady, communications open...”

“Except for in here,” Billy threw in. “They can’t hear us.”

“Big deal! And we can’t hear them and they’re the ones flying this rocket. I’d rather be listening to them.” Sally said. “I’m going back into cabin mode. You guys keep playing your silly spy games.”

There was silence on the kids’ secret channel.

“Bitch.” Brenda whispered.

“I didn’t switch over yet.” Sally said dryly.



Manny and Billy broke up laughing. The girls went silent and then broke out giggling too. The movement of their arms and torsos, even though strapped in for launch, caught Dewey’s attention and he turned to look at his crew.

Brenda and Sally knew that Dewey was saying something but they couldn’t toggle their com links open without being seen. Dewey fixed his gaze on Manny and that gave both girls the opening to switch to cabin mode. When they did, Manny was

already on the channel repeating over and over “*Are we there yet? Are we there yet?*”

“What are you kids doing?” Dewey’s voice reminded all of them of Sunday afternoon drives they had with their folks.

“*Are we there yet? Are we there yet?*”

Billy switched his channel open and whined, “Dewey, please make him shut up!”

Dewey turned back to his computer console and raised the volume of his audio link. On the com control panel he highlighted Jobs' headset and set it to maximum. "Cadet Manual, we'll be there soon." He knew added decibels would rattle Manny's brain a bit.





Chapter 4

Real Play

With a flash of bright light and a whoosh, Manny's entire control panel went to black. One moment he was targeting two ICBMs and the next his entire weapons pod was as dark as the backdrop of space.

"Captain Dewey, why did you bring us up here?" he calmly said over the station's com link.

"Mate Jobe, why do I *have* to hear that same question every time you botch up a simulation."

Manny knew the others were listening. Observing the tactics used by the other gunners was almost as important as pressing the trigger yourself. Captain Dewey knew this too. That's why he switched off all power to Manny's weapons pod as soon as the cadet deviated from the computer advised targeting pattern. Dewey did not want today's lesson to be on what a gunner should **not** do. Things below were too tense for that.

"What's the best your auto-gunner can do, Dewey!" Manny knew the answer but this was what he always said when he got caught experimenting and changing the script. "If you trusted the computers to knock down all of the birds, why did you bring us up here?"

There was silence on the com links. All the others were sitting in their pods, listening and watching the little drama being played out 2,200 miles in orbit above the West Coast of America.

"Station Sun, stand down!" Commander Arnold's voice bellowed across all the open communication channels. "Gunnery, power down your pods. Dewey, write a report on the

incident and forward me the simulation files. Jobs, re-run the exercise until you get it right and then send me the log. Show me you can knock down those missiles by the book, before you freestyle.”

Arnold was angry. He was barking. Even without the video link open all the kids could imagine the scowl on his face. “And everyone, shut down your com links. Let’s sit in silence for a few minutes, it’s getting too hot up here. Run the “Silent and Deep” simulation. Check in at 19:30 hours.” With that he shut down the main communication channels.

Manny powered his weapons pod back up and reloaded the Asia scenario. He saw the blue com link on the simulation program light up. He switched his headset over to the game channel and heard Billy’s laughter.

“You noticed he always tells you to shut up when you hit him with that question.” Billy was all the way at the other end of the battle star but Manny could see him making the choke sign, bringing his gloved hands to his neck. “93%. That’s the best the Macs can do. They say.”

“But when we target the missiles it all runs faster,” Sally broke in. “We get them the final 7%. Us. That’s why we’re here, you jerk.” She was pissed too. For two weeks this drama has been center stage. She was next up on the simulation and it was her turn to be star. But as usual, Manny’s screwing around meant she’d have to wait, again, while everyone calmed down.

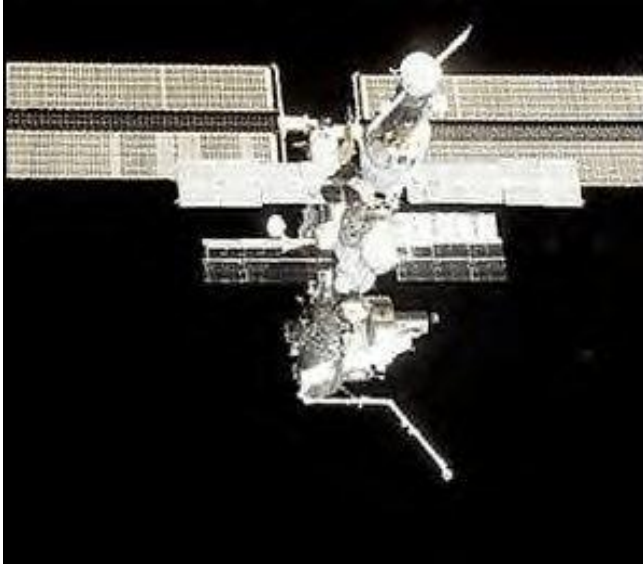
“Sally, I don’t want to do what they do faster. I want to do it better.” Manny was actually confronting her on this. No one really ever did that when Sally was in a snit. “Come on, you’ve played the game. The missiles near the cities launch first, then the deserts and the coast.”

“I saw your play,” she replied in a very snotty tone. “You froze. Right at the start you just sat there on the first wave. You didn’t even target until the second and then you went after the coast launches first.”

“I got them all down, or would have if Dewey didn’t knock me off line.” As soon as his words reached the open com link, Manny realized where he had gone wrong. There was a prolonged silence after that, with no one talking.

Brenda was the first to speak. “You know why he shut you down? Right?”





“Yeah, I know,” Manny hated to admit to the adult reasoning being applied to this situation.

“41%. That’s all you knocked down. If your pod went dark, if we took a hit or the power from the whole station drained, 46 missiles would have gotten through your quadrant by the time the simulation was stopped. The rest of us couldn’t handle that many extra.”

Brenda did not like being the one to say what everyone knew.

If Manny had stuck to the book, over 70% of those rockets would already be destroyed. At

least some of the West Coast would have survived.

“You have to plan for the instant. Play in the moment. You may not be here for the next.”

Brenda spoke in a flat, somber tone. “You can have the greatest plans for tomorrow but if you don’t get through today, they’re nothing but a dream.”

“From a nap you ain’t gonna wake up from,” Billy added in. “Shoot ‘em fast. Hit ‘em low and go after as many as you can. Pow, pow!”

With that, the gunners switched off their links and went silent. Though the adults used this quiet mode as a punishment, everyone enjoyed it. Who wouldn’t, sitting atop the world, gazing down at the blue jewel of the planet turning slowly below.

Manny started up the Asian simulation and he was well into it, when his com link went blue again. He hit pause and opened a channel. It was Sally.

“You didn’t freeze.” She said softly, almost in awe. “You changed the pattern to save lives.”

“Yeah,” he whispered back. “About 4 million if you add in the fallout and cancers.”

“But why didn’t you say that.”

“When did you want me to explain? How about right after Dewey shut me down and everything went black.”

“Tell them during post op, when you go over your targeting and scores.”

“Come on Sally. When you change the script just a bit, they shut you down. They talk, we listen. You’ve been there.”

“How did you figure 2 million?” Brenda’s voice popped into their conversation. Both Sally and Manny shot a look out their portals towards her weapons pod. She tapped her headset and added, “Come on, we all are listening.”

Manny threw his targeting joystick hard right and aimed a red targeting beam across the huge space station and on to Billy’s forehead.

He smiled, waved and said, “Hey, I like your way. Life wins. Less death. Cool.”

“If you blow up the missiles near the cities in booster stage, the fireballs will kill a few hundred thousand. If you get them last, they’ll be in orbit and you can melt them down. They burn up during re-entry. The coast you have to hit first. You know they are coming so you hit them on the pads.”

“And you move to the desert ones. You get during the boost phase. They’ll just melt the sand into glass.” Sally completed his logic. Nobody lived out there.

“No blood, no foul.” Billy said.

Manny switched off his com channel and said to himself, “Unless you want blood. Theirs.”



In the command module, Dewey and Arnold were going through their reports and forwarding downloads through Station Farther to Mission Control.

“Are you comfortable with him,” Arnold asked.

“He’s the best I’ve ever seen,” Dewey replied, knowing they both were talking about Manny.

“But he always deviates, every time.”

“And he always does better than the computer. Always.”

“Right until you shut him down.” Arnold added.

“It’s like trying to break a wild horse.”

The Commander changed the subject without changing the subject. “Are we ready?” Dewey noticed the confidence he always heard in his Arnold’s voice was absent. “We’re in good shape... Really. Do you know something I should...”

“No. But things are getting hot down there. North Korea and China have exercises going on. They’re fueling up their birds and sending out their subs.” Arnold was glancing out their portal and absentmindedly checking the power grid. “We’ve seen this before.”

“Too often.” Dewey said in his characteristically upbeat manner.

“But something’s up with up with our side. Look at the heat scans of the West Coast. Every one of our missiles are fueled and ready too. That doesn’t happen often.”

Dewey’s quiet confidence was a bit shaken. Something was up. He played with a few dials on his terminal and threw an image up on his monitor. The entire eastern Pacific coastline was dotted with Minute Man Missiles, loaded, locked and ready. They glowed blue on the thermal scans because of the liquid hydrogen cooling the shell of their boosters.

“Is that why we’ve been playing the Asia simulation all week?”

“And next week too,” Arnold replied.

If there is one, Dewey thought





Chapter 5

Two Minute Drill

Why did you bring us up here? That damn question kept going through Commander Arnold's head. He hated it when the kids acted up and Manny was the sign the whole crew was going to act their age.

"Why does he always ask you that?" he asked Dewey.

"It's a by-product of their training," Dewey replied without turning from his console. "They make the difference. We taught them that. They're the difference between unacceptable casualties and survival."

"I know that, Dew."

"Commander, it's not really a question. Sir, we're asking these kids to save the world. The lasers, the targeting computers, this entire trio of space stations can't react fast enough. These kids can. That's why we brought them up here."

"So?"

"Manny likes to remind me of that, every time I shut his ass down. He's playing games, sir. He's trying out scenarios and strategies that just won't work. He's our best gunner but he thinks he knows better."

"Can we count on him?" Arnold asked but the bigger question was can America count on any of these kids to stop doomsday?

Mission Control was wondering about that too so their answer was to drill. And drill and drill. Each week they pitted one gunner against the rest, in network wide competitions and simulations. BattleStar Sun always won and Commander Arnold shined. Every one knew it was Manny's intuitive vision that brought home the prize. He would run through his simulations with a speed even the other kids envied.

But Dewey was never satisfied. He saw constant reminders that Manny never reached his full potential. He saw the kid always screw up with his targeting. Manny would fire through the textbook choices, picking off each wave of missiles, some on the launch pads. But then he would freelance, just a bit.

Dewey saw in this kid something special, a talent that could make this shield impenetrable.

"On every team I ever played on," he'd told Arnold, "there was always one player who led the team. He was the best and we all knew it. He knew it too. These kids used their talent, brains, size, or just brute strength to make the team their own."

"And?" Arnold wanted an easy answer on Manny's abilities, not a sports story.

"There are two types of leaders. One wants the ball. He takes the last shot. Fourth and goal. Bottom of the ninth, two outs. The point is that if you want to win, you give him the ball. He takes the shot. You win and all get to celebrate."

"And?"

"The other kind makes the team better. He never leads the league in scoring. Always in assists. In one-on-one you beat the man but you need a team to defeat a team. These leaders know their team and create an atmosphere of confidence that lifts everyone."

"We don't want him as a leader. I'm the leader and this isn't about a game. I want these twelve year olds doing their job and then hand the ball to me, if God forbid the game gets real."



The game got real first for the fishermen in Quang Tri, when they saw the coastline of North Korea light up in fiery eruptions. Dozens of ICBM missiles began their rise to the heavens, leaving red trails through the pre-dawn gloom.

A few dozen early morning joggers aboard the cruise ship Eden were the next witnesses to the start of World War III. Off port and far in the distance, they saw two rockets burst out of the calm South Pacific. The twin

glowing plumes slowly disappeared into the eastern horizon and the dark blue ocean's surface returned to calm.

Every resident of Israel saw the next escalation. They immediately recognized the horror. When their radars first picked up the Iraqi launches an alarm was sounded in every city, borough and town. They knew this wasn't a drill. In the four minutes they had left, some ran and for their shelters. For months everyone had been hoarding supplies. The smarter ones stored water.

Others strolled through the crowded street, as if this was a Sunday outing, at least like the ones before the suicide bombings put an end to that urban pleasure. They migrated to open high spots, hoping to bear witness to the end of time.

On the weapon pod monitors on the Global Orbiting Defense System, only Manny's console immediately went from simulation blue to real play red. Sally, Brenda and Billy figured Manny was screwing around with the channel codes. He had been doing that a lot since Dewey started shutting him down. Brenda was actually helping him set up over rides which would isolate Dewey's command pod.

Arnold and Dewey were in the control center of Battlestar Sun. They had Manny's simulation exercise on a monitor but when it flashed from blue to red, they shot each other a look. The emergency generators all kicked in at once and gave the entire station a violent jolt.

The thermal sensors aboard the other two Battlestars sounded alarms. Sun was glowing white hot, with power peaking at 110%. Everyone saw the Red Alert was first sounded through Manny's simulation channel. The kids smiled and wanted to figure how he bypassed the Command Systems to fake a real attack. Even the commanding officers on Farther and Sprit snickered. They had been waiting for Arnold to screw up. He would be the butt of their jibes for the rest of their tour.



The mind-blinding flash of Manny's lasers made everyone know this wasn't a prank or a drill. The white beams of laser light ripped across the black of space eastward, high into the atmosphere over the Atlantic and knifing through the Mediterranean. Instantly two of the Iranian missiles heading towards Jerusalem exploded into huge fireballs miles above the dessert.

Before any other gunnery mate realized what they saw, Manny was swinging his pod toward the Pacific. His next two shots were followed by dozens, when Billy and Sally opened up with their cannons.

Brenda was patching through coordinates to the other weapon pods, updating them on Manny's targeting and projections.

Soon BattleStar Farther glowed hot and great beams of light poured out of their four posts, targeting the Korean warheads arching towards Tokyo, the Bering Strait and the Alaskan oil fields. Station Spirit blasted the rest of the Iranian missiles and then send targeting beams on to every know silo in the Iranian desserts. The dozen rockets that were fueled and ready for launch were melted down on their stands.



The start of World War III lasted under two minutes and the command and control personal aboard the three BattleStars almost missed it. Without one direct order being issued, the kids brought back the planet from the brink of a nuclear nightmare. Every BattleStar exploded in laughter. The kid screamed and whooped. In the pandemonium, Billy's voice couldn't be heard, but Brenda and Sally saw him waving his arms. Then they noticed Manny swinging his turrets towards the Pacific.

Dewey leaped on the com console. "What you got Manny?"

"Dewey. The sub that launched those two towards Diego Garcia is still down there."

"We can't hit subs. You know that." Dewey began punching in Manny's targeting coordinates to the Pacific Naval Fleet. "You did your job. The surface will do the rest.

Commander Arnold's voice boomed across the communication channels. "Great Work, Station Sun!" He added 'we saved the world' under his breath.

"Dewey, patch me the sensor array data from Spirit." The way Manny asked told everyone the war was not over.

Brenda locked opened their secret simulation channel through to the gunners on the other stations. Before Dewey could even turn to see if Arnold agreed, the data was flowing to all the weapon pods across the whole array. Billy was already assembling a program to triangulate the sub's position and depth. Manny opened up a utility program and re-tuned the frequency of his laser cannons. Sally realized what Manny was doing and opened her frequency modulator.



Commander Arnold hit the mute button on his com and gestured to Dewey. “Mission Control wants us to power down. Tell Manny to feed the data streams to Naval Command. They’ll send nukes to cover the whole ocean basin.”

Dewey opened his channel. “Manny, Crew, you did a great job but the war is over. Power down.”

Just then Manny and then Sally’s pods glowed and they opened fire on a patch of the blue Pacific below. Dewey and Arnold had no idea what was going on. Brenda and Billy went to their thermal scans to see the stretch of water begin to boil. The laser beams had been tuned to a microwave frequency. In seconds bubbling torrents of water rose from the ocean floor. They tossed the sub like a toy boat in a Jacuzzi. Within seconds the ship violently leaped to the surface, like a lobster in a pot on the stove. Then Brenda and Billy opened fire. They sprayed the ship’s hull with red hot beams of light. Ten seconds later, every hatch and door on its surface was scorched, warped or fried shut.

“Hey, Dewey.” Manny’s voice popped through the com, “We cooked a fish.”

Just then launch alarms blew in every pod of the BattleStars. The entire West Coast of America was alive with missiles. Station Spirit saw dozens of launches from the Indian Sea. Station Farther sited twenty from Alaska. Manny just froze in his tracks. He threw up his visor and looked with his naked eyes down to the planet below. It was too early to actually see any of the rising missiles but Manny looked for them anyway.

In a flash, he recognized the enemy and his hands flew to his control panels. He accessed the power grid of Station Sun and locked it at full power. He encoded the command and then locked his guns on the American coast. He opened a video link to Brenda and an instant later, his face appeared on every screen BattleStar network.

“You all know why they brought us up here.” Manny said to all his gunnery mates. “Look at what they’re doing. That’s not why I came.”

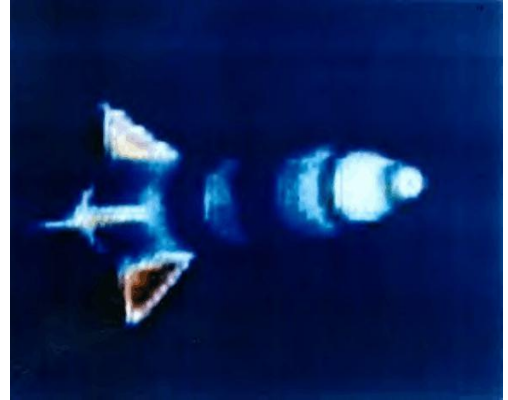
With that Manny set off the second Red Alert and locked all of his BattleStar’s gun stations back into his simulation attack channel.

Commander Arnold was screaming over the Command channel. “Power down! All mates do not fire. You don’t understand the big picture!”

“I’m looking at it right now!” Manual hollered back. His eyes were as wide as the entire targeting dome. He saw the entire West Coast erupt like a chain of volcanoes. Dozens of missiles

launched from the southern deserts. The mountains in the north had at least forty rockets rising from their peaks. His left hand was frozen on the targeting stick; his right hovered over the firing console.

“Don’t do anything,” Arnold shouted into the com. “WE ARE HERE TO PROTECT OUR COUNTRY and we did that. Today. Just now. But we don’t lead this country. That’s the job of the President. It’s not for us to decide what’s best. It’s their decision. Not ours.”



Arnold fist smashed against the bulkhead that separated Manny’s gunnery station and his command pod. “And it’s certainly not yours. You’re a 12-year-old kid, for Christ’s sake. Gunnery Mate Jobe, shut it down!”

“Commander Arnold, report!” Every headset aboard the BattleStar crackled. Mission Control’s more powerful signal muted the rest of the station’s communications. “Commander, why aren’t you powering down?”

A silent hum filtered through everyone’s earphones. All twelve weapon pods across the three orbiting space stations glowed white, powered up, and ready to fire. Against the blackness of space, Manny could see the other gunners frozen, locked, staring down as the American missiles began their arch over the North Pole and the Pacific. They all waited for Arnold’s reply.

Manny wasn’t waiting. “Brenda. Switch everyone to diagnostic.” He knew what he had to do. His hands flew across the terminals, locking systems down into independent modes. He learned on a station attack simulation that the targeting pods could override the command pod’s systems. The scenario was that Command took a direct hit but the pods could continue to defend. Command and Control just did.

“Billy, where are they going?” Sally shouted into the station comm.

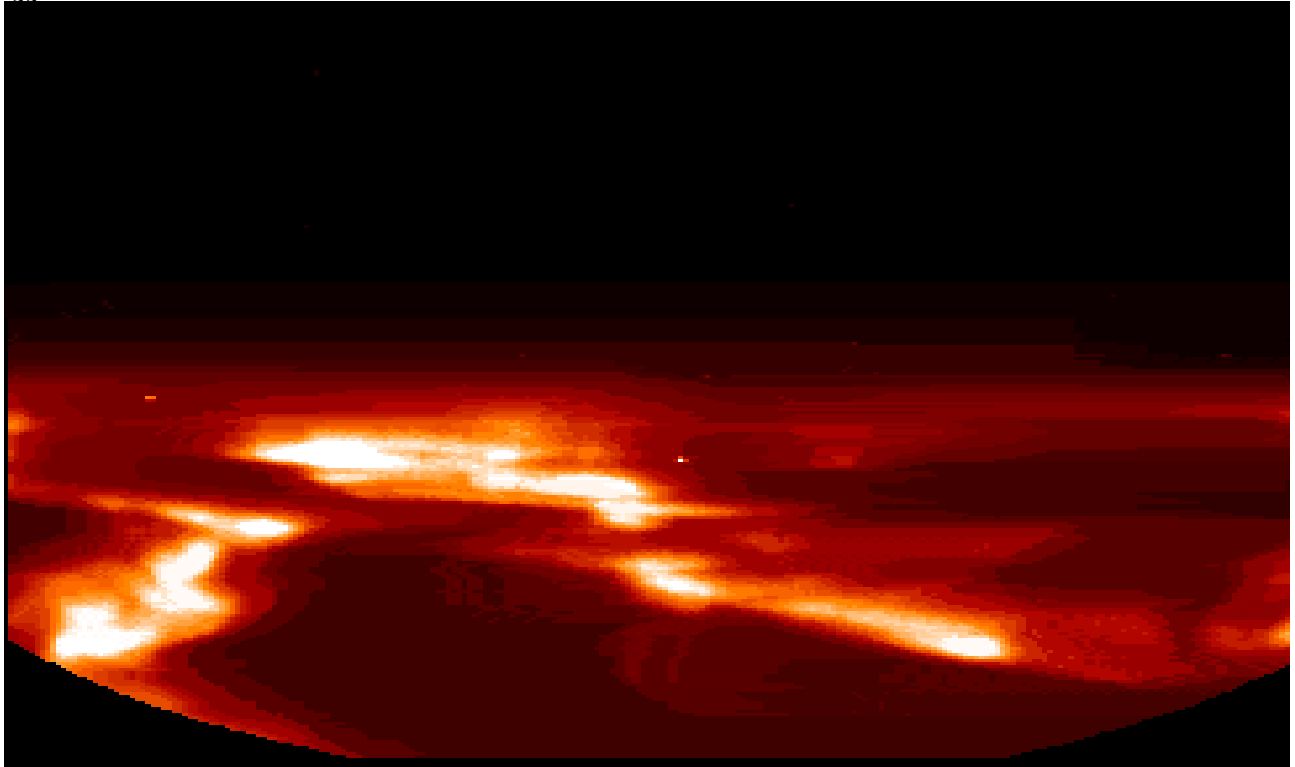
Even posted at the far end of the array, Manny saw Billy’s hands punch trajectories on to everyone’s screen.

In a second they all saw the target cities and republics. Twenty million people. America was settling some old scores.

“Sally, how many are there?”

“75 doubles and 48 MIRVS. 630 warheads.”

“Target Select!” Billy shouted and whirled his targeting array towards the west.



Arnold's face went white, pressed against the command pod window. He was screaming something but no one could make it out. They were too busy acquiring their targets and swinging their weapon batteries into attack mode. He saw every laser cannon on the station pointed at the American rockets. Dewey was in the background, frantically throwing switches, trying to shut down anything.

Manny toggled open a com line open. "The President obviously doesn't see the big picture. From out here, we do. They want to blow away half the world. We aren't going to allow that. We are up here to protect our planet, even if we have to stop our own country to do that."

Manny hit the trigger and great bolts of light shot out toward the planet below. The whole left side of BattleStar Sun lit up. Blast after laser blast rang down into the Earth's dark clouds. Just as the first warheads started exploding, the right side of the station burst into action, targeting the missiles rising from the mountains of Northern California.

Dewey stopped his frantic efforts to cut power to the kids and just stared out his window. His eye's glazed over as he watched the needles of red, hot light interlace into a brilliant intricate veil. No missile or warhead could get through this protective field of fire. It covered the entire West Coast of America.

Anyone standing on the Pacific coastline would think the sky exploded. There were fantastic firework displays stretching clear across the night's horizon. Ascending rockets were hit and

burst with sparkling fiery plumes. The Pacific glowed red, the clouds stained by the fireballs of rocket fuel.

Warheads already in space were hit by the white hot laser beams. They popped in blue white bursts, their nuclear payloads instantly turned into molten teardrops. These streaked across the night sky like dozens of shooting stars, arching into the ocean below.

Within 30 seconds the entire first wave of American missiles were all blown out of the sky. From above, the crew of the three BattleStars looked down at their planet. A red, bleeding scar stretched from North to South, ripping across the dark, blue Pacific Ocean.



“Jobe!” Dewey’s voice came across the kid’s com channel. “Look to the East! Contact the other stations.”

The morning sun was just illuminating the East Coast and the blue of the Atlantic was shimmering. But further east white plumes spiraled upward.

“Should I cut him off?” Brenda whispered to Manny. But before she could, Dewey barked out new orders.

“Station Spirit. This is Commander Dewey. Order your gunnery posts to acquire those targets. An American sub is launching.”

“Billy, pivot the station East.” Manny whispered.

“Station Sun, this is Commander Shell on Station Farther. Stay on your heading and watch the West Coast. We’re in this together.”

Hovering over the East Coast, BattleStar Spirit burst into action. It looked like lightning just poured down from the heavens in one big wave. The skies along the Atlantic lit up in reds, orange and burst of blinding white blue.

Billy hit the network key and shouted to every gunner across the three stations. “We’ve got launches in the Midwest. They’re headed for us!”



chapter 6

When the Walls Fell

The old man poured a bucket of water over the dying campfire. The hiss of the coals roused his grandson. The young boy sat up with a start, as if forgetting where he was. But then the crashing of the surf reminded him of his afternoon with grandpa.

“We have to get back. It’s late.”

Too tired to argue, Evan picked up the blanket and wrapped it around himself. As usual, the grandfather carried the cooler and bucket of shells and rocks. The flashlight’s tired old batteries dimly lit the sand as the two slowly made their way back to the beach house.

The cold night air eventually had Evan wide-awake and aware of the beautiful world sparkling around him. The cloudless sky was ablaze with thousands of stars. The moon hung like a lantern in the eastern sky. The ocean glistened. The crests of the waves gleamed like white neon against the black sky.

“Where are the gods now?” he asked, remembering how he never heard the end of the story.

“Right overhead” his grandfather slowly replied. “Look straight up and to the north.”

They both paused and looked skyward. Three of the brightest stars in the sky made a huge triangle in the heavens. Moving faster than the rest of the night’s stars, they were visible every night at these Eastern longitudes. Early morning the Midwest sky had these guardians overhead.

Afternoons and evenings in California had these three stars rise first, and then slowly disappearing towards the north and the east.

“How does the story end?”

“It doesn’t. The gods are still with us in the heavens. They watch and they warn. They force us to be good people.” The old man picked up his pace a bit as he neared the porch of his beach house. He sat down when he reached the deck and guided his grandson into sitting beside him. By now the Farther, Sun and the Spirit were noticeably drifting westward.

By the moon’s light, the old man looked into the eyes of this young boy. He saw something in that face that deserved a bit more of the story. He might get him to understand.

“Do you remember two summers ago, when the beach was closed and the forest fires shut the highway?”

“It was scary.” Evan suddenly noticed how cool the air really was. “You came to our house and took us here.”

He was sure the boy’s mother never told him this part of the story. “The base was destroyed. The tunnels collapsed, the bridges were crushed and your house and the rest of Camp Hero were burned.”

“And Dad was in one of them.” Evan knew this part of the tale.

“Yes. In the radar tower, at his post.” There was a tone of anger in his voice, something Evan had never really heard from his grandfather before. “Evan, the gods did that.”



Evan noticed tears welling in his grandfather’s eyes. “They are always watching. They are always there, overhead. Listening. Waiting. They knew what we were doing.”

“But grandpa, they are the gods. They are there to protect us and save the planet from harm. That’s what everyone says.” There was a terrible confusion in the young boy’s face. He remembered his mom warned him about grandpa’s stories.

It dawned on the old man that this part of the story never went well. even with adults, so he put his arms on his grandson's shoulders and gave him a hug. "They do protect us and keep us from harm."

"Come on, bedtime. Your grandmother will have my head if you get nightmares tonight." They got up and went into the house. Evan went to wash while the old man locked up. Before he bolted the sliding door, he stared out at the ruins of the lighthouse, beyond the charred peninsula that used to be Montauk Point..

He thought of the dozens who died, broiled alive in the caves and underground bunkers that made up the old World War Two base. The radar tower where his son was stationed became a funeral pyre, burned by the concentrated laser blasts coming from the heavens above. The beams couldn't destroy the four-story bunker but everything inside was scorched beyond recognition. The remaining steel and the concrete were brittle and spent.

The sounds of the surf made him remember that afternoon when the Nautilus went down. It was hiding in Fort Pond Bay, being fitted with the new missiles built in the caverns and old artillery tunnels of Montauk Point. Just like the thousands of sailors that died before them, they were boiled like crabs trapped inside a giant steel pot. Twin shafts of laser light swept down and reached into the deep bay. Instantly, two huge columns of water vaporized into a churning geyser of steam. The sixty-men aboard the last remaining United States submarine were doomed, trapped between the currents of superheated water. All the retrofitting and research meant they



lasted a few minutes, rather than dying instantly. When the crippled sub finally hit the bay's bottom, it split and spilled its radioactive fuel and warheads into the Sound.

In the first days after the war, every nuclear-armed ship on the planet was either melted into slag or sank like a heated stone. By the end of the week, every army was hit, first the missile bases but then the tanks and artilleries. No nation was spared; America, Russia, China and the Far East. Europe, the Middle East and South Africa had their warnings and meltdowns. Every nuclear bomb was targeted and dispatched.

At first they sent a warning, a message from the gods. They would open a com link to tell people to run. Bases were lost but not many lives. But when the soldiers were ordered to take some weapons with them, the warnings ended. A red targeting beam and then blast replaced it.

That's when he left. He could live with most of the decisions they were making, but too much blood was being lost. When he kept asking about it, he was put on a supply ship and returned to the surface. When the meltdowns continued, he and others realized the gods really thought they were gods and the resistance began.

The fire from sky bought forty years of peace. The nations of the world had no real way to make war. They would build and the gods would burn it all down. On the surface there was calm and a melding of cultures, boundaries and economies. Underground, each government funded a resistance program. There had to be a way to bring the gods back down to earth.

Ex-commander Arnold was in charge of the latest one torched. The Feds were so desperate they forgave his early treason and reinstated his commission when they heard of his plan. That was the plan that ended with the eastern tip of Long Island a charred shard sticking out into the radioactive waters of Montauk Point.

Arnold signed as he flicked off the porch light. He took a sudden deep breath when he saw a small red targeting beam, reaching down through the sky and landing on his picnic table. He exhaled when it slowly faded into the black of the night.

Evan had snuck down the stairs and now was behind his grandfather. He reached up and flicked the old man's ear. Arnold nearly leaped through the sliding glass door and then crumbled into a heap.

"Grandpa! I'm sorry! Are you OK? Grandpa?"

It took a few seconds before he could breathe again. He slowly sat up.

"I know. That was the gods, listening to my stories."

