

The Thin Edge

Contributed by Duncan Day
Thursday, 15 December 2005

The C-Space alarm startled Serran so much his entire body jolted. He dropped the data work pad and knocked his elbow against the scanner control board hard enough to make him wince with the pain. "Damned stupid of me," he said aloud to the solitude of his control centre. "Careless". It hadn't occurred to him that the audio alert for the new sensor suite he'd just purchased would be different from, and much louder than the old one. More to the point, he didn't expect to be hearing it indicate a positive find so soon after turning it on here in the deep dark edges of the Bedalov system. He had spent the last of his cash reserves and even borrowed to get the upgrade hoping it would give him that competitive edge over Davies and her crew. She had beaten him to the last three viable Lagrange point registrations he'd been investigating this year, and now she had taken to sniffing around the same sector he was exploring in her quest for that next big find. He definitely needed a competitive edge, even if it was a thin competitive edge. Otherwise he would be out of business in a few months. {mospagebreak }

Carelessness was rare in a veteran like Serran. Carelessness out at the edge of a star system was akin to disaster. No one in this biz took chances...at least none of the old-timers did, and Serran was an old-timer known for his careful calculations. That and playing his cards close to his chest. He had been making his living in space long enough to know that the most important skill for an explorer wasn't navigation or combat, but careful planning.

Sometimes a calculated risk was necessary, though. This new rig was a gamble that seemed to have already shown its worth. It was more than a simple sensor; it was a Capsule space threshold detector. He didn't understand the physics of it completely, but he knew that he had to be on top of a known LaGrange point in the local gravitational field, while the device reached out and tickled the hidden universe that permitted faster than light travel. If the energy plane was right, and it looked like a directional capsule universe could be formed with acceptable stability, the sensor would pick up a little giggle. Finding a stable entry point to capsule space; one that might lead to a useful system could mean a comfortable retirement for the scout who finds it. Most of the time, scouting for new LaGrange points meant looking very hard at nothing at all, and registering unstable whispers of capsule space that couldn't be exploited.

The display in front of him was showing a stability rating for this L-point that was better than most he'd run across lately. It looked like a good one. He'd beaten Davies to it, but he knew she was out there somewhere, hungry for the same kind of find.{mospagebreak }

The prudent or careful thing to do would be to drop his beacon and go back to base to register it. Later on, another

explorer could come out and take the extremely high risk of test-jumping it. Sure, they'd get a huge sum for making the blind jump and leaving a marker at the other side, but he usually preferred to leave that to someone younger, riskier, or more desperate than he. He would still be able to collect his smaller but decent finder fee if it turned out to be a good one.

He launched his beacon and watched it float at the exact location he'd logged, blaring out his claim and I.D. tag for all to hear. The trouble is that these were lean times, and even careful practices came with risks. Some explorers were desperate enough to destroy a competitor's beacon and to jump the claim. He'd seen it happen before and he sure as hell didn't trust Davies to leave his beacon alone. Equipment was known to mysteriously fail before a find could be registered, and he couldn't afford a loss like that right now.

The more he thought about it, the only way he could really protect his claim was to add a jump marker code to his beacon, make the registration call, and blind jump it himself. Serran didn't like that kind of exploration. It was just too risky for his taste, but it was a thought that wouldn't leave him alone. It just kept coming back as the only sensible answer. He was in debt, his competitor was ahead in the game, and his operating margin had grown to a very thin edge. He needed this claim, and a blind jump bonus could put him back in the black. {mospagebreak }

Before he had really given it due consideration, he had calculated the jump parameters to match the L-point's characteristics, and positioned his ship at the correct angle. His beacon was modified and operating perfectly. The registration call had just been sent. What am I waiting for? he asked himself silently.

He double checked his systems and activated the capsule drive. No problem he thought. Even a long jump should be fine with the fuel in the reserves. Before he knew it, he accelerated into the anomalous LaGrange point and flashed out of this reality into a small encapsulated universe that was never the same twice, but always stunning in its brilliant beauty.

The capsule space ride on this particular blind jump was like nothing he had ever experienced, taxing every piloting skill he had to keep his ship safely within the node path chosen for him by his new equipment. Transiting capsule space was usually uneventful, even smooth when it occurred between the larger, well-defined LaGrange points. These smaller unstable routes were a definite chore to traverse. By the time the clock was counting down the final seconds of his time in capsule space, preparing to re-insert him into normal space, a thin layer of perspiration had collected on his brow, and his hand felt cramped from having to continuously change vectors to keep his ship within 'the slot'. Exiting would be a relief.

The return to normal space was uneventful, but any feeling of relief he might have had was short-lived. He had emerged in the heart of a dense asteroid field within a large gas cloud; possibly in the vicinity of a young proto star. The light and colour of this region of space were spectacular, but rocks of every size careened about dangerously close preventing him from enjoying the view.

He dropped the exit marker and recorded what he could, but there was no way to get a good fix on where he was in all this mess. If he wanted to get that big bonus, he needed some solid coordinates. The excitement of his find was finally hitting him, and he was in the process of trying to determine which direction to take to get a better view of the stars when he saw the sensors highlight the hulk on another ship drifting nearby, eerily silent and cold; looking for all the world like another rock.

"Damn!" he said aloud. "So much for being the first to get here." "Wherever 'here' is, he added silently in his thoughts. It was an older ship, maybe a Puffin-class tug, but he couldn't be certain. It had been pretty battered in this rocky grinder. A large hole showed clearly on the side of the habitation section. "What a horrible way to go." He muttered as he inspected the derelict in his optics. "But hey, salvage is salvage, and I could use the extra cash."

He piloted his ship closer to the wreck for a more detailed inspection. He had just placed his ship alongside and was preparing his vacuum suit when his sensor suite jangled his nerves again with their blaring alarms. This time it wasn't a capsule space anomaly. These were contacts; more spacecraft. The contacts were active and heading his way. The moment the contact registry finally resolved their identity, Serran felt the surge of panic-fueled adrenaline flood his system. The blood drained from his face in an instant. His space helmet clattered onto the floor plates as he dropped his suit, vaulted back into the command chair and slapped his seat restraints closed. He muttered "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God," repeatedly as he desperately tried to get his ship turned about and headed back into the LaGrange point.

"How in the hell...this can't possibly..." He said shaking his head as he drove his ship headlong toward the entry point to capsule space, heedless of the rocks that hurtled past the forward viewport. His attention was more intently focused on the sensors showing four armed vessels approaching him rapidly from behind.

"I'm in Ripon!" he exclaimed as a weapons lock klaxon signaled his doom if he couldn't make that LaGrange point in time. His new advanced sensor suite granted him the gift of identifying the missiles that could bring him his death momentarily if he didn't make the jump: Mark IV Seekers. He continued to push his thrusters beyond the red line, hoping that his last thoughts wouldn't have to be how impressive it was that his new sensor suite could provide him with the model number of the missile that killed him.

He knew who was chasing him. He knew how few lived to tell the tale. The L-point was rushing up at him now, but so were the missiles. The sounds in the cockpit were deafening. Over the roar of his engines he could hear proximity warnings, missile lock klaxons, overtaxed drive system alarms, and the odd bone-jarring banging sound of a rock bouncing off his hull. It all seemed to vanish into the background the moment he heard the terrifying message scratch through the static on his comms:

"Blessed are the cleansing fires of God's messengers! Blessed are the Brethren!"