

## The Burning Dark by Adam Christopher

“**You ever seen a** chick from Polaris? I mean, holy schnikes. You need level-ten protective eyewear just to look at them. Naw, seriously, they radiate UV when they get turned on. Some kinda survival mechanism. So yeah, it’s risky and you need to prebook yourself ten weeks in a class-three ICU afterwards to get your DNA rebuilt, but man, what a rush. What a *goddamn* rush. There was this one time—”

Ida flicked the volume of the radio set down by half. It was Clive’s Friday night. Let him have it.

Clive was a pilot orbiting a lump of ice near Polaris. In a few hours he was due to break cover from behind his asteroid and spearhead a lightning strike on the hidden Omoto base on Polarii Inferior. Chances were this time tomorrow Clive would be a patch of brown radioactive dust drifting in the Polarii solar wind, the residue of his beloved Polarii women with him. Because no matter what the outcome of the attack—be it Fleet victory or a successful defense by the Omoto—there wasn’t going to be any sentient life left on the planet afterwards.

So, let him command the air awhile. Ida felt bad and hoped Clive made it, but he wondered if perhaps he should stay off the radio in the next cycle or so, busy himself with those damn checklists he’d let slide. As boring as Clive was, he wasn’t sure it would be the same without him, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear about the outcome of the Omoto sortie, good or bad.

It was a waste, one that Ida objected to. Strategically important but ultimately futile. The universe was a big place and maybe the Omoto could keep their base. The Omoto weren’t even the Spiders, and wasn’t the Fleet supposed to be fighting those mechanical creeps instead of starting little wars over lumps of ice? Given how the war was going, Ida wondered if maybe the Fleet wasn’t focusing on the right thing sometimes.

A little interference on the line was obscuring select moments of Clive’s monologue.

Ida flicked through a set of diagnostic routines on the space radio’s three-dimensional interface. What was a hobby for, if not to present a series of tiny challenges that needed to be overcome, one by one? Talking to others out in space was only half of it.

The white noise of interference spiked. Ida leaned his chair back to the upright and cast an eye over one of the screens that hung on an arm over the desk. It wasn’t part of the radio set, it was just a display from his cabin’s computer, but he’d patched it into the solar observatory located at the very top of the station’s spire. He found the data useful. It had been ten cycles since Ida first turned the radio on, and he’d quickly discovered that the physics of Shadow frequently threw a spanner in the works. And tonight it was no different.

But he had to admit it was really quite a fascinating academic study on the interaction between the star’s strange light and the station’s own artificial magnetosphere. As the amber glow of data flowed across the screen, he noted a few spikes of stellar activity that corresponded to the static on the set. He could try to retune, or perhaps, given an hour, come up with an algorithm to work

the mess out of his signal. Ida poked at the screen, the amber of its data tables and the blue light of the radio the only illumination in the cabin.

Clive kept talking. Castle, a civilian mining engineer whose job supervising the construction of a drill head on one of the moons of Arbitri clearly left too much free time on his hands, butted in occasionally to express his satisfaction with the juicier aspects of Clive's adventures in Polarii love and to ask respectfully for more technical data on the difficulties of human-Polarii anatomical interaction. A newcomer too, calling himself Captain Midnight—Ida wasn't sure whether this was his rank and name or some kind of superhero identity—seemed to be enjoying the chat. Ida didn't quite believe he was calling from inside a black hole, but, hey, the radio hams of the galaxy were a bunch of sad, lonely losers with nothing better to do. If Captain Midnight wanted to be inside a black hole, then let him be inside a black hole. On the radio you could be anyone and anywhere you liked.

Ida wondered whether he should tell them about his adventures over the skies of Tau Retore, and whether he'd get a better reception here than among the jarheads that inhabited the *Coast City*.

DeJohn had been quite right about Fleet service being an honor. In the middle of a difficult, decades-long war against an alien machine intelligence, a citizen could do no greater service for humanity than enlist in the Fleet. And Ida knew full well how he would feel if he came across someone claiming a heroic action that they had no right to.

But was he really so far out on the edge of Fleetspace that the news about Tau Retore hadn't made it? He'd saved a planet and seen off a whole Spider cluster—including a *Mother Spider*. Why else did they think he'd been awarded with the Fleet Medal?

And, he thought, an artificial knee, an enforced honorable retirement, and a final posting to one of the most remote backwaters in Fleetspace. To oversee the decommissioning of an unremarkable space station well past its use-by date.

Ida absently flexed his robot knee, which had grown stiff as he sat at the desk.

He sat and thought.

Something was well and truly FUBAR, and not just on the *Coast City*, but at Fleet Command itself.

Something that, maybe, he should look into.

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