

Protector of The Source

By Paul Cargile

1. "Paisley" the disembodied voice calls to her.
2. She awakes, eyes wide with alarm and urgent duty....

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3. The thrusters of her lance-like fighter burn in rapid alternating pulses.
4. She sits, wearing her skin-tight counter-pressure suit, in the snug comfort of the control cocoon in the command module.
5. In her POV, there is no cocoon, no fighter, just she in space, englobed with data.
6. A heavy bulker threatens the rubble-pile. Sweeping trajectory lines lead to it. Targeting cues and data surround it.
7. Thrusters fire...
8. ...spinning her craft about face.
9. The four engines of her fighter burn for a brief moment.
10. The dome of the laser turret rotates...
11. ...the laser aperture rolls into view.
12. Paisley's face is grim determination.
13. The bulker is facing her, at a disadvantage.
14. The bulker pilot informs his captain that their rotation rates are too slow, they can't get into position fast enough for a retrograde burn down into the faster orbits...
15. ...and that even so, the maneuver would expose their engines.
16. The bulker's main engines are firing to push it into a higher orbit instead, it's thrusters burning for course corrections.
17. The bulker's railguns unlock and move to get a fix on the fighter.
18. The bulker gunner reminds the captain that they cannot deploy the railguns under acceleration without leaving them behind.
19. The captain realizes his targeting is handicapped.
20. The thrusters of Paisley's fighter pop, jerking the craft in zig-zagging translations to further thwart the enemy railguns.
21. The two craft close.
22. In her POV, targeting cues and data around the bulker indicate effective range and firing solutions.
23. The bulker dispenses defensive blooming clouds to block its vital parts as it struggles to get away.
24. Laser pulses flash from her turret...
25. ...boring holes through the clouds and losing energy on the micro-scale chaff. The hits are only powerful enough to inflict surface damage.
26. Paisley keeps an eye on the turret's thermal loads...

27. ...the four thermal regulators glow cherry red.
28. She scowls at the thought of losing her quarry...
29. ...and pushes the laser to the redline.
30. The bulker can't keep blowing out blooming clouds forever, and a pulse train of laser fire hits its mark.
31. There is a small explosion...
32. ...and two of the bulker's three engines sputter out.
33. She speeds under it, nearly a kilometer away. All indications showing a reduction in acceleration.
34. She targets the closest railgun that can hit her, but she is out of its line of site. That could change if they decide to stick around and fight.
35. That would depend on how bad they want The Source.
36. The bulker lets lose a series of thruster fire for course correction...
37. ...and is sucked up into its own wormhole, answering her question.
38. Below her turns the cratered, frothy rubble-pile of an asteroid. 30 km deep in its core, The Source is secure.
39. Paisley breathes a sigh of relief.
40. She executes commands to send the fighter up to a higher orbital perch.
41. The fighter spins for a prograde burn....
42. Main engine burn is complete and she's hours away from the next one. Paisley pulls herself from the goo of the cocoon. She could go for a good stretch of the legs and some wide open space.
43. She enters the air lock...
44. ...cycles it...
45. ...and departs the command module.
46. The adhesive grip of her boot soles sticks her to the hull, and she walks forward to the dome of the closed laser turret.
47. She gives the weapon a friendly pat in passing.
48. Next Paisley steps between the engine blast diverter shields to one of thermal regulators set between two engine nozzles, all of them tucked in the flared skirt of the hull.
49. She walks up the sidewall of the regulator, to the lip of the cowling...
50. ...up and over...
51. ...to walk down to where the flaring begins.
52. A handmade rack awaits her. It's a non-standard issue modification.
53. She calls up into her visual field the outline of invisible hull panels.
54. The flush panel release button is highlighted in her vision...
55. ...and she presses it.
56. The panel opens revealing a small stowage of hoses.
57. She takes one...
58. ...and moves the end toward the auxiliary port on her backpack oxy tank.
59. The hose connects itself.
60. She opens another panel.
61. Inside are similar ports.
62. She mates the other end of the hose here...

63. ...and switches to shipboard oxy supply.
64. Paisley settles down into the rack.
65. She puts her hands behind her head.
66. The bright yellow sun is shining down upon her.
67. Comfortably sprawled in her “chair”, she opens a cyberscape of a stretch of beach, a roar of waves, cry of gulls, rustle of palm fronds, salty tang of breeze.
68. The sun seems to watch her like a god.
  
69. Later... the fighter docks with one of the thirty perches, fluted stations with one nadir, and six radial arms, battle scarred and repaired, and adorned with Paisley’s creative motifs. There were once thirty-six perches, the others having been lost in battles. They are identical waystations arrayed equidistant around the rubble-pile to save on time and reactant mass when coming up from the low orbits.
70. She ascends through the tube to the common area.
71. There, a cube of fluid-state computronium transforms...
72. ...into a stickman automaton. The Source gifted it with the mind of Zarel.
73. Paisley greets Zarel.
74. She enjoys a luxurious bath.
75. She eats a fulfilling meal.
76. She sleeps in a comfortable bed.
77. Zarel has taken a human form when he wakes her.
78. She allows his intimate passion for her...
79. Paisley shares it...
80. ...their fingers interwoven...
81. ...like the gold strands of their commitment.
82. She is content.
  
83. Paisley eats breakfast, watching the rubble-pile in her visual field. It has a strange equatorial ridge, and polar bowl-like shallows.
84. Zarel, glowing bronze and gold, appears in her cyberscape.
85. The Source summons her. She has only been in the presence of The Source upon her arrival to the rubble-pile.
86. What could this mean?
  
87. Her fighter eases through the passage to the core of the asteroid.
88. The core is aglow, like a white dwarf star. The rock around it glows red.
89. Wearing her counter-pressure suit, she has disembarked the fighter...
90. ...and approaches The Source.
91. She slips through the corona...

92. ...and the light is bearable. Two stickmen guard a sphere 10 meters wide. The stickmen seem to be made of molten glass, their hands rest on the pommels of molten glass broadswords. The sphere seems to be made both of turbulent mercury and glass.
93. The Source...the intersection of the Bulk and the Universe...of Heaven and Earth. A place—a space and time—removed.
94. Beyond the shell of the sphere she can see a world...
95. ...a blue world, wreathed in white clouds that veil land masses of green and brown, capped in ice.
96. Mesmerized, it seems to call to her.
97. She reaches out.
98. The shell is solid...
99. ...but it gives to her touch and she can push her fingers through.
100. She steps through...
101. ...and enters a realm of water.
102. The sun sparkles on the surface above her head.
103. She swims upwards..
104. ...and breaks the surface.
105. Her beach is there, with the cry of gulls, and palm trees.
106. Paisley swims...
107. ...and walks ashore.
108. There is a figure waiting for her. A tall man.
109. She removes her helmet...
110. ...and drops it in the tide.
111. Zarel smiles at her, but he is made of flesh. And something more.

*Storyboard panels 1 through 5 follow on next page.*



