

Forerunner

by J. E. Cammon

Morning time had come again. Kojo felt the beginning of the day, but couldn't know it yet. Awareness came first: the temperature of the room, the light behind his eyelids, how much of him could feel a draft. Then, before it was taken from him, he recalled the memory of a pleasant evening racing among the stars with the thrusters set to maximum and not a care in the galaxy. Kojo had half a mind to regret before the seizure ripped through his thoughts.

"Try to focus on keeping your tongue in your mouth, and away from your teeth," the doctor had said. There was no cure, after all. The best thing to do was ride it out and keep sharp things away from where he usually landed in the floor. Things always happened during the mind storm that he could never remember.

Morning time had come again. Kojo felt the beginning of the day, but couldn't know it yet. Awareness came first: the chill of the floor, the hardness pressed against his back, the tangle of sheets grasping him tightly, which parts of him ached from bruising.

From experience, Kojo knew there had been a seizure. Short-term memory was affected, but the disease had been with him for a long time. Years. He wiped a hand against his shirt and checked his tongue for lacerations. He slowly twisted himself free from the sheets and stood. Rather than struggle with what day it was, he went to his desk, where he knew he had a calendar. The top sheet of the thin sheaf of papers was covered in boxes marked with dates, and lines within each for scribbling. Someone had struck through each previous day with thick, careful lines so there'd be no mistake of what today was. Sitting on the dark lines covering the date previous, Kojo found a piece of folded, yellow paper. He picked it up in his hand, and inspected it mechanically. It didn't mean anything to him, but he knew that it had meant something to some other Kojo. Before showering, he went to his closet and fetched a plastic tub. Opening the top revealed the contents within: movie tickets and trinkets playbills and baubles and pictures. He found a place among

the unknown things and sat the slip of paper. From the top down, it might have been a crane.

After showering and brushing his teeth, using the bathroom and taking his medication, he sat at his computer for a time. A helpful program played recordings of his voice back to him. He wrote down the pertinent information from the list of instructions. For certainty, he went back and listened to the recordings again, examining his notes. Those important things on the folded slip of paper he stuffed into a pocket. Then, he logged on.

Port 42 was a busy hub of interstellar commerce, as usual. People bartered for weapons, raw materials and everything in between. Even Kojo briefly examined the day's prices at a hovering kiosk, not for things that he needed but for things that were generally good to have and whose worth was more constant than credits like the rarest ores and most widely used ship components. While shopping, a message flashed across his information cipher.

Fiyin-5: Righteous morning, brother. It is a beautiful day in the Republic, wouldn't you agree?

Kojo: Righteous morning, to you, brother. And I would agree, though admittedly I have not been out of the port yet to confirm that.

Fiyin-5: Well, you'll just have to take my word for it. Although, word has spread of a Marian battle fleet amassing in the contested sectors.

Kojo: They never have enough.

Fiyin-5: Never. Word was sent through the Republic's consulate for a confirm-or-deny, but there's been no word. I'd stake my sixth iteration that they mean a raid. And they never raid the Gallante.

Kojo: Oh, I see. I'm sorry, it's still a bit early for me. Why didn't you just say that you wanted someone to go and have a look?

Fiyin-5: Because we're not barbarians. A certain modicum of formality must first be observed in all interactions to maintain civility.

Kojo: Understood. You'll have word within the hour, my friend.

Fiyin-5: The Republic is in your debt yet again.

Kojo ceased interfacing with the kiosk and set a vector for his ship.

M'Tauren Sabre-class ships were the fastest in the galaxy without question, a design that took after the class' name, all sleek lines with no snatching angles, despite the extremely low drag in space. Generally, the model's transcendent speed was always mitigated by the fact that it had to be bulked up with armor and weapons for survivability in combat-heavy sectors, and if it was used for mining, it had to be constantly weighed down with harvesting equipment and additional storage space. But Kojo didn't use his ship for either of those things.

He set drones at the dock to empty his ship of all excess weight and put it in his storage container, and double-checked on a number of repairs that he had put into the queue. In the cockpit, he powered up all the systems, working from right to left. Kojo always saved the visual displays for last: the blast paneling lowered smoothly, exposing the cockpit to the soft light of the space port. As he reversed, he turned his head in his chair, the metrics of the ship being fed to him through the voluminous instrumentation. On the galactic map, he put a node on the spot of which Fiyin-5 spoke. Charting the distance, he planned his jumps in advance. Kojo's fingers made a constellation with a rounded shape as he connected the dots of his path to the Marian edge of contested space. He was late, which meant that any Emyreal expecting forward scouts would already be in place to intercept.

Casually, Kojo ramped up the thrust as he shot away from the port in the direction of the first jump gate. During the first legs of his journey, he checked and answered a few emails. He paid down his credit card. He entered the last jump gate cautiously, powering up his scanners. The huge floating ring resembled a gear, indelible and benign. It accepted his tiny ship like a hungry mouth. Complicated technologies within, believed to have been constructed by the ancestors of the M'Taur before they had been enslaved by the Marian Empire, augmented the power and speed of an entering ship a thousand times. One moment he was there, and then he was gone.

It was just one fantastic invention among many that was at the heart of the galactic conflicts between the M'Tauren Republic, the Marian Empire, and the Gallante Federation: artifacts left behind by dormant gods.

Coming back to sub-light speeds was always unsettling, and a bit tragic. Kojo sat forward in his chair, as if feeling the lag, or maybe on the look out for enemies. Kojo scanned his controls while turning the nose of his ship and increasing his speed. Most ships hit jump gates at common velocities, but his Sabre could surpass those marks, however those were well past the safety rating. Kojo flitted about at first, turning his ship so the distant stars spun like in a slow blender, pulled up so they appeared as a fast snowfall, then he rocketed off toward the jump gate that invaders taking a more direct route would enter through from Marian space.

Within the hour, he made his discovery. Kojo found the Empyrean battle fleet the same time one of its scouts found him. The individual in question had gone with a load out that used long-range, computer-guided missiles. Kojo smirked and banked hard. As the caravan of aggressive-looking gunners and frigates panned across his view screen, Kojo used a pen and paper to write down their number and dimensions. The other scout closed dangerous as Kojo turned and by the time he was headed away from his pursuer, one of the missiles streaked past him while a second slammed into the rear of his ship. On a green diagram dominating the center of his instrument cluster, the aft paneling flared a damaged red. Kojo kept his eye on the missile turning back into his path while rapidly setting several drones to do what they could for the damage.

The missile seemed to anticipate his evasive tactics, its front exploding open and yellow lasers spitting from its exposed end. Kojo's interface shook under the duress of the damaging impacts. Somewhat sadly, he closed the blast shields, changing his instrumentation to run sightless. Behind him, the Marian scout had launched more missiles but wasn't going to catch him. His only hope was that his missiles could fly far enough, fast enough and empty their payloads of punishing lasers before Kojo was out of range. Kojo

increased the thrusters to maximum while he diverted energy into a rarely-used device mounted on the bottom of his ship. His eyes were scanning two meters. One measured the distance of the missiles and their threat range; the number was decreasing quickly. The other measured the time it would take to charge his personally contrived burst thrust. Kojo's stomach rumbled, and he decided it was lunchtime. Three seconds before the enemy scout's missiles came into range and blew him into nothing, he activated the primed burst. One moment he was there, and then he was gone.

Fiyin-5 and the others belonging to the Republic's military were as appreciative as they always were. Philanthropy was forwarded into one of his accounts in the form of credits. Whistling, Kojo logged off and left his apartment. The little sheet of paper in his pocket told him where to go and what to do. Along the way, he stopped to eat at Waffle House.

"You mind if I ask you a question, cuz?" the cook asked him. He was wiping the counter down because the place was otherwise empty and the waitress was in the back with the manager being yelled at. The man's nametag said Detron, which Kojo didn't know how to pronounce.

"Sure," he said, a little wary.

"How come you always eating in here? Like every other day. I mean, I don't mean to get all up in your business, but they payin' me, and you up in here almost as much as me." As the man talked, he decided he was on break and stepped out from behind the counter, removing his hair net to reveal an impressive fall of locks. Some of the bits of twisted hair ended in shells. Looking into his mouth, Kojo could see that he had several teeth framed in gold.

"Hm, well," Kojo said slowly. Kojo had practiced the face he made when it was pointed out to him that his disease made his life more difficult than anyone else's. He stared straight ahead indifferently. "I just like it, I guess. It's familiar," he said. The cook nodded his head then jerked it backwards, causing his hair to fly up and fall behind his ears. Pinned behind his head, he smoothed it with his hands, and tied it with a rubber band he took from a wrist. He had archaic-

looking tattoos up and down his forearms. Deftly, he produced a cigarette from behind his ear.

"You got a light?" he asked. Kojo said no, but when invited, went with the cook outside after paying to talk some more. Detron was curious about Kojo, but never said it, and Kojo never explained why he seemed foggy on the notion that he ate more WaHo than he was aware. So, he talked about school. Then, when the cook asked about his hobbies, he inched into an explanation about the M'Taur, their Republic, and his place among them.

"You didn't react like I expected," he said to the cook. Detron breathed through the cigarette for a moment. He had a neat, alien way of holding it.

"Man, I'm a damn cook at Waffle House. Honestly, that shit sounds pretty cool. Would be nice to just jet, space ship or no space ship," he said, making his free hand look like it was swimming through the smoke coming out of his nostrils. Then he pointed at a wide sedan sitting on chrome wagon wheels. "I'ma take mine one of these days, and never come back," he said, and went to inhaling on his cigarette again.

"Cool," Kojo said, thinking of the medicine bottles he had at his apartment that insisted he not operate heavy machinery. He wondered if his Sabre counted.

"I heard somewhere that space goes on forever," the cook said, breathing out again. "On one of those shows."

"Yeah," Kojo said.

"Is this thing like that, or does it have walls?" he asked.

"What?" Kojo asked. The man made his hands look like a cage.

"I mean is it a box?" He used the orange end of his cigarette to point to the inside of the tiny prison and inspect its dimensions.

"Nah, forget it, I prolly don't understand," he said. Kojo watched Detron finish his break and drop the smoke on the ground. He stepped on it while fishing the hair net out of his pockets. His shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly as he resumed the aspect of yet another uniform behind yet another counter.

"Bye," Kojo said.

"Yeah. Be good," the cook said, and went inside.

Kojo thought about Detron's query all the way to the grocery store, through every item on his list, and all the way back home. Then he logged on.

Kojo: Is the afternoon as glorious as the morning was?

Fiyin-6: Slightly diminished, but I suppose no less wondrous, objectively. We were able to turn them away. Today.

Kojo: I get the impression that you rushed to the front as usual.

Fiyin-6: My blood does run too hot, sometimes. In this regard, I think we're similar.

Kojo: Truly? How so?

Fiyin-6: We both like to test the boundaries. You with your audacious load-out and me with my always needing to be in front, despite wisdom's advisement.

Kojo: Touche. On that note, I have a question.

Fiyin-6, disliked the idea and its implications. He helped where he could though, and the story spread throughout the Republic. Slowly at first. Bits of the cipher reacted curiously, people sending Kojo correspondences and personal messages. Eventually, people caught on that the logical punctuation to his question would imply that after he found the nether end of Republic space, he'd then have to turn around and fly through the contested zone, and directly into sectors that had always been controlled by the Marian Empire: flying from one side of the known universe to the other. Then, Kojo's reckoning bounced its way to the neutral forums and spread like wildfire.

Everyday, when Kojo found his way to his calendar, he discovered Detron's question scribbled under that day's date.

It took long days of buying and trading to get his ship the way he thought he'd need it. Part of the problem was credits, but also only the most elite crafters made the ship parts he needed. Some were custom, and others were out of his ability to purchase. To that end, Kojo called in half a dozen favors. Towards the end, or rather the beginning, people were donating credits, parts, and goodwill. But not just.

It was the eleventh hour of his flight, and Kojo had already found the end of the Republic. Then he had turned around and happily jumped back. On the periphery of contested space, in a location unknown even to Fiyin-6, Kojo was saying his goodbyes before he was out of relay range for instant communication.

Fiyin-6: You really flew for seven hours straight?

Kojo: Yeah. Easy part's done.

Fiyin-6: I don't understand how you do it, man.

Kojo: What do you mean?

Fiyin-6: Well, I mean, you told me about your... disease or whatever. Don't you forget... everything everyday?

Kojo: Heh. I haven't forgotten you.

Fiyin-6: Right, well. The Marians have been all over the boards, flaming you. Alexander-29 says he's going to zerg you at the first jump gate.

Kojo: I read the post.

Fiyin-6: And Zoe-10 says you won't even make it across the contested sectors.

Kojo: /shrug. And before you say anything, I saw Declan-X' post, too. Doesn't think I have the rocks.

Fiyin-6: I was getting to that... I think you're plenty brave, if that makes a difference.

Kojo: Yeah.

Fiyin-6: Was it true, by the way, what you said on the forum. You've really never been killed?

Kojo: Never.

Fiyin-6: You mind if I ask about your iterations? I noticed you've been spending credits like a madman. Did you save any for Kojo-2?

Kojo: Nope. It's just me.

Fiyin-6: ...

Kojo: And for the record, it's less like I'm doing this in spite of my disease and more like... well... I forget some of the good stuff, but I forget the bad stuff, too.

Fiyin-6: ... I'll see you when you get back.

Kojo: May you always know freedom, brother.

Fiyin-8: And may freedom always know you.

Kojo increased his thrust. The barrier was invisible, of course, but suddenly, he knew he was alone.

Predictably, Zoe-10 had anticipated that he wouldn't use a jump gate, sacrificing time for safety. She and several dozen of her friends were buzzing within an asteroid cluster she knew he'd have to pass. Boredom is what exposed them, some of them impatiently flying in and out of the endless network maze of tunnels. With advance notice, he was only in range of their weapons for a few minutes. Someone had told them about his weakness to laser damage. But, the information was old; he had long since fixed that problem.

Luckily, the scouts chasing him had not thought to network with any other Marians, namely the fleet waiting with Alexander-29. So, from a distance, using his very expensive, long-range sensors, Kojo could pick his approach well enough that they couldn't bring their overwhelming firepower to bear in time before he had needled among them. He angled between two freighters burdened down with frigate-smashing plasma cannons. When he was in sight of the gate into Empyrean space, he activated the burst, hurtling towards the glowing tunnel at twice the safety-rated speed. One moment he was there, and then he was gone.

When he lurched from the vast decrease in speed, he was face to face with the reddened diagram of his ship in his instrument display. But what was most worrying was the space station filling his view screen. Rather than pull up, he banked hard, spinning. The new repair bots went to work quickly without prompting while he prayed. There was no impact, no zoom-out image of his death and failure to eject his escape pod, so he breathed easily. Until a blinking display indicated that half a dozen ships had taken notice of him and were targeting him with lasers and missiles. Kojo pointed in the direction of the fastest way to get out of their ranges, deciding not to bother with scans.

His ship vibrated beneath the heat from lasers and the impacts from missiles. Only his repair drones seemed unworried but then

again, they weren't programmed to emote. The burst recharged just in time to save his life.

Then, the sectors of the Marian Empire opened out before his vision as his long-range sensors worked to keep him out of danger against the flurry of correspondences sure to be preceding his coming. Kojo yawned tiredly, glancing at the clock and then off towards his bed. A different person would have broken the journey up. Kojo shook his head. No, a different person wouldn't have even attempted it.

Kojo shifted in his chair as he thought about the cook at Waffle House. It was coming upon the 17th hour. Kojo banked as his sensors detected a fast-moving scout ship entering his range, then he dipped as a similar ship also entered his range from a different direction. They were testing his scanners, maybe even subtly steering him into something impossible to avoid. Kojo felt the onset of a yawn and bit down, pulling up hard. While he was pointed back the way he had come, he quickly pushed a loveseat so it knocked his desk chair out of the way. In more comfortable seating, Kojo banked back towards his goal, watching the distant ships weave in and out of his sensor range.

Over the next two hours, staring at a distant smear of purple and gold against the black of space, he tried half a dozen seating positions as the previous one became uncomfortable. After that, every position became amenable as his body fought him for respite. His head bobbed up and down like his ship's nose. Once, the bright light from a dozen lasers streaking towards him was the only thing that kept him from careening head-first into an unsuspecting mining vessel. He skimmed the top of the ship, realizing later that he must have gotten deep enough into Marian space that non-combatants were more populous. That meant he'd have to work harder at avoiding ports.

His stomach growled furiously, almost as if in warning. Then, a cluster of missiles shot in front of his vision. Each missed, almost as if on purpose, and the same went for the erupting lasers. They shot off in all directions, their slicing energy forming a net in his path.

Kojo had heard about the phenomenon. Even a few people had managed to take screen shots before their ships were cut to ribbons. There was a 50-page thread about what number the X stood for in Declan's name.

Quick-thinking allowed Kojo to reverse his burst thruster to stop him from killing himself. He examined the scanners and the breadth of the laser netting as he slowly turned. Declan-X apparently used a heavily outfitted fighter, similar to Fiyin-8. But while M'Tauren ships were built for grace and elegance, Marian ships were constructed for power and strength. Kojo didn't face his opponent. He turned his ship around the laser trap and ramped his thrusters up to full again, recharging his burst thruster. Naturally, Declan-X pursued. He wasn't as fast, but was faster than his fighter appeared at first. Kojo reasoned that like him, he used little to no armor. For once, Kojo cursed his lack of weaponry.

The second volley of missiles looked and behaved completely differently. Kojo's finger hovered over the burst thrust controls and then, rather than decrease, the timer for the next use increased. He frowned as his ship began to slow. On a whim, he swiveled his view to see what was snaring him. The tractor-beam missiles were rarely used and were widely regarded as worthless, because they had to overcome an opponent's armor to function.

In desperation, Kojo reversed his thrust again, and felt the impact of the missiles slamming against his hull and exploding. He didn't bother with the burst thrust then and dipped his nose to fly under Declan-X. As he did so, he watched the Marian eject two of his missile pods and adjust his pitch and direction to follow. Kojo didn't know what else the fighter had equipped, only the litany of stories on the forums. Declan-X could kill anyone, anywhere; he had a completely unique load-out, many of his weapons being custom made. He was the consummate hunter.

Kojo limped along in a sporadic pattern as he struggled to get back up to speed. Suddenly, a steady, thick stream of short-range lasers shot over his hull, and readjusted to rip into the body of his ship.

He lost one engine, then another. One engine was enough to make their speeds comparable but with the second went Kojo's hope of escape. Still, he pointed his ship in the direction he had been going and increased his thrust beyond their tolerable ranges.

Strangely, Declan-X didn't finish him off. Kojo's sensors were still functioning, and he wasn't imagining things. The looming fighter was still there, possibly taking screen shots before he destroyed his prey. Kojo couldn't say what kept him plugging along monotonously; it was like a stubborn dream. Eventually, the adrenaline had worked its way through his system, and the crash, mixed with the accrued fatigue, smothered him into a truer sleep.

Morning time had come again. Kojo felt the beginning of the day, but couldn't know it yet. Awareness came first: the stiffness of his muscles, the desk against his face, the acrid taste in his mouth. Then, before it was taken from him, he recalled the memory of a fearful evening racing among the stars with the thrusters set to maximum and not a friend in sight. Kojo had half a mind to wonder before the seizure ripped through his thoughts.

Later, he was checking the boards when he found a post that had apparently been started by him a week prior. It had hundreds of replies. The last one, surprisingly, was Declan-X. When Kojo logged on, he found his crippled and ruined ship jutting up against the nether edges of a corner space. The thrusters pushed but his ship making no progress; it was like nothing he had seen before. A pop-up message was painted against the stars: Turn back, traveler, for you can venture no farther.

