

## The Match By Tom Hudspeth

It started, as these things often do, as a drinking bet. Two testosterone filled drunks, each claiming to be the best pilot in Starfleet. With no way to prove who was better, they made a bet. Loudly proclaiming it throughout the pub, afterwards, they found that they couldn't back out. They were stuck. Not that either of them really wanted to back out. The match had been brewing ever since they had both reported to duty on Starbase 410.

John Borda, the youth with cunning. He had his own customized shuttle, the Laika. He was considered inventive and unconventional.

Brian Starr, he played by the rules. He had what Avalonians call, the "One". Some strange mystical power that sped up his metabolism, allowing him to take in vast amounts of data and act upon it unconsciously, leaving his conscious mind free to see grand strategies. He would use an unfamiliar Klingon fighter on loan to him from General K'batlh.

On the day of the simulated combat, both fighters had their weapons powered down and sensor gear attached to the outer hulls. Their ranges were severely limited and they only had enough power for a few shots. Hits would randomly cause system failure, as if they had been real. Quek had positioned cameras outside the station and tapped into the station's sensor grid to enable viewing of the entire fight. He claimed exclusive rights and set up a large holo-projector in the middle of the station pub. He had also rented every available holo-deck, where for a price, one could stand in the middle of the action or fly with them. Most of the station staff watched on the holo-projector in Ops. While the competition wasn't officially sanctioned, Admiral Jat and General K'batlh were hiding in Jat's office watching on a monitor.

"I wager that Starr will win." Said the General. "His fighter alone is more than a match for any Federation shuttle.

"I happen to know that most of Starr's experience has been on capital ships. I've seen Borda in small ship action." Jat replied.

"Very well then, put up your stake. I've got a case of rare Blood wine, over 50 years old, that says Starr wins."

"That swill? I can put a case of pure Scottish Mead that is 100 times better than that on Borda."

"Done!"

"And done!"

In his office, Ambassador K'Hellenbek tapped a control that recorded the coming duel in as many angles as Quek could provide, plus a few the Feds didn't know about. This was an invaluable chance to gauge the capabilities of the Federation and Klingons. He had also wagered a little on the side. What Romulus didn't know, they didn't need to know.

On the promenade, half way between the locations of the two ships, Brian and John stood on a raised dais with Quek.

"You all know the wager announced. The first ship to register no independent movement loses." Quek's augmented voice rang out. "You can get the best views in the pub right here courtesy of the Ferengi Trading Company. Only one bar Latinum each cover charge."

The two combatants shook hands and ran for their ships.

John reached his ship first and shot out of the launch bay without dropping the force field. Hugging the station, he raced around its broad bulk.

Brian leapt into his Klingon fighter and pulled down the canopy. Once outside, he sped away from the station, getting as far away as he could. By the time John's shuttle had rounded the station to view Brian's launch point, Brian was safely hidden behind a junk freighter's shadow.

John figured Brian would take more time, and had hoped to get him as he launched, but failing that, knew Brian would seek out more open spaces where his "One" would give him an advantage. John hoped to lure Brian in close to the station's obstacles, which he knew intimately. He changed course towards the top of the station where numerous spires could act as trees in his woods.

Brian tracked John's movement. "If he gets in there, it'll be tough to flush him out." Brian said to himself. "Well, we'll just have to catch him before he makes it."

Brian's fighter swooped down toward the station. Soon he was zigging and zagging in an attempt to catch John's Laika, but John knew the outside of the station like the back of his hand. Brian had lapsed into the "One" and could react to each obstacle, but John already knew where they were and was leading.

John raced for the spires, one directly ahead. If he turned right, he would face into the nebula and be blinded. If he turned left, he would go into the thickest group of antennas and safety. At the last second, he turned right on a hunch. Sure enough, an antenna array to his left melted from disrupter fire. John waited 1 second and jiggled left behind a nebula observation tower. There, he came to a complete stop, waiting.

Brian had missed! He had wasted one of his few precious disrupter shots on a gamble that John would head for the thickest cover. Instead, it seemed as if John had read his mind. Brian quickly followed him, but was blinded from the light of the nebula. "I can't see! It's a trap!" Brian thought. He pulled up and away from the station at high acceleration.

John was just about to push the firing button when Brian's fighter appeared before him. At the last second it shot up and away. His finger still poised over the button, John gave chase. He knew he had to be within a certain range or the hit wouldn't count. Now he was hot on Brian's tail, but getting further away from the safety of the station at every second. The Klingon fighter had amazing acceleration. Fortunately, John had tweaked his engines for more short-term output. As long as he only used them briefly, he figured he wouldn't burn them out.

Brian now knew he had just missed falling into John's trap, and that John was right behind him. The good news was that John was following him out into space and away from the station. Brian checked his sensors only to be surprised by the speed of the Laika. "How can he keep up in a shuttle?" Brian wondered.

Brian turned off his engines, allowing his ship to coast. He then turned his fighter on its axis, making it fly backwards. Firing his engines again, he closed in on John head to head. "This is how you joust, John."

"Playing chicken, Brian? That would be your style." John said to himself. When John got in to range he fired his phasers and veered off, around the General's Imperial Negh'Var class battle cruiser, the IKV Hegh qaD, intent on heading back towards the station.

Brian took the brunt of John's phaser blast and plowed on through. The simulated damage took out his medium to long-range sensor suite, leaving him with only short-range sensors. As soon as John veered off, Brian gave chase. The two ships danced around the Hegh qaD's engine nacelles and forward neck support, neither getting a clean weapons lock.

Back in Jat's office, K'batlh wasn't happy. "This is all fun and games, but if they damage my ship, I'll kill them both! K'batlh to Hegh qaD!"

"Hegh qaD here General!"

"Brush those flies away from my bridge!" Looking at Jat, he added, "Use low powered disrupters, try not to damage them."

John's fingers were dancing across the Laika's consoles when he was struck by fire from another direction. His computer concluded that the damage caused his lateral thrusters to go offline. "Oh, the General wants to play too? Maybe it's time to leave." John rerouted the thruster controls and made a break for the station, Brian hot on his six.

But the Hegh qaD wasn't finished. It took another shot, this time at Brian's fighter, reducing his speed. "Hey! You're supposed to be on my side!" Brian screamed.

Just before the cover of the station, John fired all of his forward thrusters. Brian shot past. Brian reversed his vector as he had before and fired his engines. Once again, both ships faced each other, but this time they were at close range. Weapons fired almost simultaneously!

Both ships shook from the blows. Systems failed, real and simulated. Each drifted on their last course, towards Starbase 410! Inside the Klingon fighter, Brian tried desperately to find a control that worked before they both crashed into the station.

One thing about Klingon fighters is that what little redundancy there is, is devoted entirely to the weapons systems. On Brian's console flashed only one operational system, the externally mounted torpedoes.

On the Laika, John was out of options also. One of his few remaining systems left was Laika's enhanced tractor beam. With nothing else to do, he locked onto Brian's fighter.

Inspiration, aided by a desire to live, caused Brian to reconfigure the torpedo. He set it for short range and no detonation. Then he took the torpedo ejection system offline, got a lock on the Hegh qaD, and fired it.

The two ships, locked together by Laika's tractor beam, flew away from the starbase just before impact. On the fighter, the G-forces caused Brian to black out. The fighter had had about as much as it could take and the last of the operational systems went offline.

John was whipped about the inside of the Laika, but his inertial dampeners kicked in to save him from the worst of the buffeting. After the torpedo had run its course, the two ships sat facing each other viewport to canopy. John could see Brian unconscious inside the Klingon fighter and air escaping through a crack in the canopy. His console almost dead, John looked around for anything to help Brian.

Now fighters are built for single purposes, and Klingon fighters even more so. Shuttles, on the other hand, are multipurpose vessels, equipped with lots of extra gear. John quickly fastened on a plan of rescue. Putting on his space suit, he emptied the Laika of all of the air and opened the back hatch. The vastness of space peered back at him. John attached his safety line and grabbed his fire extinguisher. Using the propellant, he maneuvered the Laika around Brian's fighter, until the nose of the fighter looked directly into the Laika's interior. John used to the last of the extinguisher's propellant to place the nose of the fighter into the Laika's small cabin.

"I hope he doesn't fire his disrupters now!" John thought.

John rerouted the remaining power into a forcefield around the nose of the fighter and refilled the cabin with air. He quickly used the emergency canopy open latch on the outside of the fighter, and dragged Brian's unconscious form from the cockpit. With a kick, John sent the Klingon scrap back into space, and closed the back hatch before the last of the power dropped the forcefield.

Brian came to in total darkness. As he moaned from his injuries, John said, "Don't move. I'm sure by now that the station is sending out a rescue party to pick us up."

"The way I feel, moving is the last thing I want to do." Brian said.

Later, in the pub, the combatants shared drinks while Quek battled the losers in the betting.

"It was a tie! Both ships lost their engines at the same time!" Quek announced. "And in the case of a tie, the house wins all bets!"

"No! The Klingon fighter pilot moved via his torpedo! That counts as independent movement by his ship! The Klingon Pilot wins!"

No! The Federation pilot used his fire extinguisher to move his ship after the Klingon ship couldn't move any more. The Federation pilot wins!"

Brian and John looked at each other. "I think we both won."

