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ACE

A large space cruiser appeared, set sharp against the star field on the screen. Carefully, steadily he edged the image of the vessel into the cross-hairs. He fired. The cruiser exploded, dissolving in a flickering white nova.

Another one.

He swept right and left, scouting for more targets amongst the stars.

A fighter flashed down from the top left of the screen. No time for lasers. In another instant it would have him. He jabbed a knuckle down, firing off the last of his photon torpedoes. The screen flared. The fighter vanished.

That was too damned close, Danny thought. If I wasn't so good at this I could easily be wasting my money.

He ducked his head out of the hooded screen as "Replay" flashed across its face. Danny took a few drags on a cigarette, slowly returning to Earth, to the ding-dong of pinball machines and the chink of smacking billiard balls.

Outside in the street were people, traffic, noise. A sunny day. No one pressed against the window, peering at him.

Replay.

Down into the hood again, Danny started firing, racking up the points when . . .

"You're not such a bad shot, kid," said a low, odd sort of voice beside him.

"Eh?" Danny barely heard. Another cruiser was coming into range.

"Reflexes good. Judgement and co-ordination excellent. Ever thought of joining the service?"

"Eh?" Danny mumbled again. "What service? . . . Gotcha!"

Another one.

"Pilot. Fighter pilot. I know places where skills like yours are invaluable. You could easily become an ace."

The machine buzzed. The screen went blank. The words "Your ship torpedoed. Game end." printed itself across it.

Danny swore. "Can't you shut up a minute!" He turned around. But there was nobody there. There was nobody within three or four metres.

Danny didn't let the incident worry him. He just shrugged it to the back of his mind where, all the same, it continued to paw at his concentration.

And so, for the next few games he found himself being killed time and time again. However, he eventually managed to recover his fine edge of concentration, and once more he was dodging the missiles and the rays. He was shooting again like a real ace, and the hologram spaceships were falling like clay pigeons when . . .

"Kid, you're wasting your talents with these toys," said that odd voice beside him. "Your trouble is that you believe what people say about you – punk, no good, irresponsible. All you need is the opportunity to explore your talents, kid. Use them where they're really needed."

"Rack off!" Danny grated between clenched teeth.

He nudged the control, juggling a high-scoring battleship into the cross-hairs.

"Why did you bash that old man last night, kid? To get money to live, to give yourself a chance? Or to play with these toys, to pretend? But why pretend, kid? I know you have the killer instinct. That old man died this morning."

Danny fired. He missed. The battlewagon opened up with everything it had and, in simulation, splotted Danny across a holographic cosmos.

Daniel was not impressed.

His hand dipped into his pocket, an angry fist forming around a roll of coins. He glanced sideways and caught a glimpse of something dark and nebulous.

"Trouble with you, kid," continued the voice, apparently oblivious to Danny's rising temper, "is that you're wasting your rage fighting your own kind."

Danny's fist came out and up fast, pulling back and letting go with a pile-driver punch. It swung through thin air and smacked against the wall.

He stared about. Everyone in the pool hall was staring back at him.

"Do your tripping outside, mate," the manager yelled from behind his counter, and everybody laughed.

Danny turned to leave, then saw two cops entering the hall. He ducked his head back into the hooded screen, rolled the machine a coin and pressed the start button. The screen lit with

a myriad of stars. His fingers found the controls.

They won't find me, he told himself. They won't find me.

"No. They won't find you," said the voice beside him.

Danny didn't dare look up. He hung onto the controls and played it cool. A fighter was swinging down from the top right of the screen.

"Here's your chance, kid!"

The fighter began to shoot.

Almost instinctively Danny's thumb twitched on the firing stud, and the attacking fighter disintegrated in a silent fireball.

"Congratulations, kid!" cried the voice, not from beside Danny now, but seemingly from a speaker in the control panel. "Now you're a *real* Ace!"

Danny looked down, then around. Gone were the sounds and sights of the pool hall. His surroundings were as black as space itself.

On the screen a trio of large space cruisers were quickly coming into range, and in one terrible moment of realisation Danny knew this was not a game.

In the next moment the cruisers were opening up on him.