

*Tales of The New Era
Volume 1: Yesterday's Hero*

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TRAVELLER
Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future

Tales of the New Era

Volume 1: Yesterday's Hero

BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING *TRAVELLER* GAME SYSTEM AND UNIVERSE BY MARC MILLER

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Dave Nilsen
Matthew Carson
The Pyromaniacs who Kept the Flame for so long

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is not a game supplement as such, although it will serve to give players an introduction to what the Traveller: New Era background looks and feels like. *Yesterday's Hero* forms part of the backstory to the TNE: 1248 Traveller setting, though most of the tales herein are set much earlier than that.

Yesterday's Hero began as the short story *Absent Friends* which I cheekily included with the New Era novel manuscript (which became *Diaspora Phoenix*) I was submitting to GDW. This was late 1993 or early 1994, I seem to recall. Although GDW had said they weren't looking for fiction, *Absent Friends* impressed them enough to be accepted for publication 'somewhere'. Of course, events overtook GDW and like *Diaspora Phoenix*, *Absent Friends* was not published for a long, long time.

I eventually put out the New Era shorts I'd done (by then there was a whole set of them) on the QLI website. There they remained for a fair while before mysteriously disappearing. A couple of computer reinstallations and replacements along the way meant that I lacked the originals to put them up somewhere else, so the tales were lost in the mists of history.

Until today. Much of my early writing was done on an Amiga computer, which has been sitting in a bag in my garage for years. Some random whim caused me to set it up and sort through the disks, and there I found treasure. Not only the originals of *Yesterday's Hero* but also much of my early fiction awaited discovery. Then only a long and frustrating period of transferring data between entirely different computer systems lay between my rediscovered fiction and re-release.

Well, that and a good hard rewriting, the addition of extra material, layout, reformatting and all manner of things, but the end result is this volume. Reconstructed from data files long thought lost forever, I give you.... *Yesterday's Hero*.

'Yesterday's Hero' The Story of Captain Lisa Ryson, RCES

Compiled by Commander William Ryson RCN, from his mother's autobiographical notes, transcripts of comms exchanges, interviews and Reformation Coalition sources including service records, the Official History and news footage.

Note: Commander Ryson has left his mother's notes more or less as they stood, including those passages where she later contradicted herself or expressed opinions not those of the author. In places, where gaps had to be filled, some slight dramatisation has been used to allow the text to flow more coherently.

This work is dedicated in loving memory to the author's parents, Captain Lisa 'Lander' Ryson RCES and Colonel William 'Bison' Ryson RCM, and to all the heroes of yesterday. Sleep well, and Gods light your way.

*'To Absent Friends'
Comdr William 'Cannon' Ryson Jnr, 1247.*

Foreword by Admiral Ian 'Buster' Harvey, RCN (Ret)

The words 'Star Viking' mean different things to different people. To some, it means the heroes who rebuilt our civilization with little more than guts and suffering. To others it means professional robbers and murderers. There are those who think that Star Vikings are an historical invention, or that the term refers to those old men and women who sit around in bars and coffee-houses grumbling or talking about The Old Days. There are even those who remember that the term used to apply to planetary raiders during the Collapse of the Third Imperium.

Now me, I know what the words mean. I know what it is to be a Star Viking, because I was one. I'm getting a bit long in the tooth now, but I'm not too senile to remember how it was. I'll try to tell you, and then I'll leave it to Cannon to show you through his mother's eyes what it really was to be one of them – one of us.

Despite everything that's going on today, things really are better. We can be fairly sure we'll survive the next ten years. But back in 1200, as we tried to claw our way out of the wreckage, we really couldn't be so sure. It was a time for desperate measures, a time when violence was the only solution to the matter at hand even though we knew we were stacking up other problems for the future.

We tried the peaceful, friendly approach. I was a child when the Dawn League began preparing its first trading missions out into the wilds. We watched the ships head out on their mission of hope and friendship... and we waited in vain for their return. We reached out a hand of friendship to the universe and were beaten bloody for it. Our people were murdered or imprisoned, our ships stolen from us.

Something changed then. There was anger, but more than that there was desperation. We needed more than our own resources if we were to rebuild our civilization. We offered to trade for what we needed and lost heavily instead. But the need was still there. And so the decision was made; if we could not obtain what we needed peacefully and with mutual benefit, then we would have to take it.

This decision was not made lightly. Whatever conventional wisdom may say my generation was not composed of people who would choose violence when a kind word or a fistful of cash would suffice. We did indeed topple governments, provoke civil wars and raid planets when we felt the need. But also we built and traded. We gave advice and equipment to those who would deal peacefully with us. Our troops – those murderous Star Viking raiders – trained local security forces and fought alongside them to defend civilization.

We made mistakes, yes. At times we were so cynical and burned-out that we reached for the trigger far too soon. It may be that at times we simply went through the motions of considering the options before launching a raid. But they were desperate times and we were desperate people. We had to succeed, and fast, or we were finished. And given a choice

between questionable deeds and death not just for us but for the folks back home, we made our choices and we acted upon them.

We launched Smash & Grab raids to take what we needed. Didn't the current owners also need it? Yes, sometimes they did. Sometimes we caused damage that vastly outweighed the benefits we gained. But even at our most cynical there was always this – if you gave us a chance, we'd trade with you fairly and as honestly as trade ever gets. We'd send you bootstrap teams or military advisors. We'd sell you technology or equipment in return for what we needed.

I'm not suggesting we didn't kill a lot of innocent people, nor that everything we did was good and nice and clean. It wasn't like that. But nor were we villains. Even at our worst, we had ideals. And at our best...I hesitate to talk about the best of us. Too many men and women died to save strangers, or gave away years of their lives doing mundane but vital work – knowing that they would only be forgotten.

Some of Cannon's tales will illustrate the best and worst of what we did. But if you want to know about the Star Vikings, remember that yes, we raided and destroyed. But we also landed in disaster zones with a shipload of food and medical supplies. We stood against the Vampire Fleets and kept them from massacring people who called us enemies. We brought home crates of life-support spares to half-flooded underwater habitats or dying rockball colonies. We died of disease while trying to cure a planetary plague. We went home alive but were never quite 'right' again from stress or exhaustion after digging survivors out of the rubble of a catastrophe.

We, the bloody-handed slaughterers of popular myth, built and we taught and fought to protect our people.

And perhaps we lost our way. Certainly we don't really fit into today's Freedom League. It's easy to vilify us but harder to see that without the things we did, the people doing the vilifying wouldn't be around to do it. I know that some of my sibling Star Vikings feel embittered that society has turned on them, blaming them for deeds that were necessary at the time – or are now... let's say 'somewhat misremembered'.

Some of us adjusted to the way things were going, some did not. A lot of our comrades don't have to deal with it because they're dead, fallen in the service of a society that remembers them almost as criminals. So be it. If you weren't there, you can't understand. Though if you've read this far, then maybe you're trying to. I thank you for that.

Cannon's very commendable work tries to show you what it was to be a Star Viking. I'm grateful to him for that. But most of all, as I turn out the light after writing this foreword, I thank the Star Vikings. Because of them and what they did, I know that the light will come back on when I need it in the morning.

Your generation grew up with that certainty. Mine didn't. So we did something about it.

To me, that is what it was to be a Star Viking.

Admiral Ian Harvey, Aubaine, 1247

Publisher's Note: Six months after writing this foreword, Admiral Harvey departed Freedom League space aboard the reactivated starship RCES Lisa Ryson. Under his command was a force of five assorted vessels crewed by Star Viking volunteers. Task Force Harvey headed Coreward towards the Vargr Extents on what is becoming known as the Great Rescue. His current whereabouts is unknown.

Author's Introduction

This is my mother's story, not mine. It is the tale of her service with the Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service. It makes no attempt to be a deliberate history of how the Dawn League became the Reformation Coalition and finally the Freedom League. No, it is a flawed, quirky and self-indulgent account of her career from her own perspective.

It seems best to allow my mother to introduce her tale. The following passage was the very last letter written by Captain Ryson, a week before her death in defence of what was then Nicosia Colony. I believe it was a reply to a query concerning her autobiography.

I cried the day the *Morgana* came home.

My parents assumed it was because I was upset by the state the ship was in and seeing the injured crewmembers. Or maybe it was the Hiver advisors that did it. They thought I was maybe scared of the weird aliens, but that wasn't it. Did I cry because I knew what the Hiver intervention would cost? Was it because I'd never seen dead and crippled people before? Maybe. But you see, somehow I knew how much we'd have to pay in blood and tears. Or rather, I thought I knew. I was just a kid, after all, with no real conception of how much humans can suffer.

Now I've got a pretty good idea. Yes, I've suffered. I've lost nearly every colleague I've had, my husband, my starship command, my rank.... I've made mistakes that cost dozens of lives. I'm not fit for command any more. I'm an emotional wreck, a burnout. I can't be trusted with anything important. Was it really worth all that?

Yes. Absolutely.

Captain Elsie Walker led the mission to contact the Hivers, and she brought an advance party to Aubaine. She nearly didn't make it. Her ship misjumped and came out near Enderson's Giant with severe damage and several dead crewmembers, but she brought the survivors home and with them came the first Hivers to reach Aubaine. The *Morgana* brought us the technology to go back into space. They came to bring us the stars, and they gave us a chance to win back our future. That's worth any sacrifice.

That day in 1192 when the *Morgana* landed, I cried. I cried for joy.

And what if I'd really understood the terrible price we'd pay? The price I'd pay? I'd have done it all anyway. Let this be my epitaph: 'It was worth every tear.' Because we're going back to the stars.

We're going home.

Captain Lisa Ryson RCES (Retd)

Nicosia Colony, 1213.

I think she knew what was coming a few days later. How, I don't know, but she did. Let this, then, be her epitaph, and that of my father, whose story is told elsewhere. Let this be the epitaph of every fallen comrade, be they Hiver, Ithklur, Schalli, Human or Electronic. Like Captain Ryson, I think they would say:

'It was worth every drop of blood, every tear.'

Now I will leave my mother to tell her tale. Remember: These people died, but they also lived. Gods bless them all.

Graduation Day

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired". Lisa is at this point 23 years old, and graduating from the Technical Academy on Aubaine. It is late in the year 1201, by the Imperial calendar.

Graduation Day... the day the legend was born. It seems so long ago now. We were so young, full of hopes and dreams... and innocence. It frightens me now, to think that they let us loose with starships and weaponry. But we learned. Oh, how we learned.

And where are the cadets that stood with me on that day? Starship captains they became, great navigators and explorers. Planetary governors and ground-breaking scientists. Visionaries. Heroes in a time of darkness.

And how few remain.

How heartbreakingly few.

But even if everyone else forgets, I remember the day it all started. It was as overcast and dreary as any other day on Aubaine. I remember the chill wind, damp with the threat of sleet as it cut across the open campus. Nobody was outside without a good reason, and those who had one were huddled into their coats, hurriedly scuttling from heated building to sealed vehicle.

But the weather didn't matter to us as we gathered on the steps of the Academy. Not that day. It was *our* day, the beginning of all our dreams. The day we ceased to be students and became Qualified Personnel. There was no real ceremony. We'd collect a sealed envelope containing our papers from the Academy Director, exchange a few informal words, and leave the Academy to take our posts. That was it. After all, the overall results had already been published; today we'd get the details but we already knew we'd made it.

Nobody on the steps that day had failed to become Starflight Qualified. The failures were already back in training. But of course there were degrees of success, and sometimes the envelope contained more than qualification papers. Sometimes there was an assignment confirmation or some other nice surprise.

So there we were; two dozen windswept students shuffling about on the Academy steps. The mood swung between tense impatience and hidden jealousy. The others talked excitedly about what they were going to do, what they'd see out there and where their careers might lead. I stood among them and pretended I wanted to be there.

I already knew what was in my envelope.... An Astrogator's ticket, first class. Pilot's license, third class. Deck Officer's examination, with the lowest pass mark in the history of the Academy. Engineering Officer (basic). Pass, just. Bachelor's Honors degree in Applied Physics with Astrophysics, Second Class. A plastic-coated identity card bearing my authorization codes. Overall, an impressive package.

But what I was thinking was; is a small white envelope really worth five years of someone's life? MY life? Five years of training flights, exams, problem-solving exercises and long, long lectures. Five years spent in the company of the same few dozen people, spent in the closed world of the Academy.

Had it all been a horrible mistake? Did I really remember the way I felt, aged six, when all I could ever want lay on the tarmac of the spaceport, gently venting gas from its cooling systems and surrounded by cheering spectators? Had I really wanted the starship? Did I want to go to the stars? Suddenly I didn't know any more, and I was more scared than I've ever been.

Finally the doors opened. An arm slipped around my waist, and Dave's bright, cheerful voice said something like, "Come on then. Let's see the damage report!"

Yes, that was part of it too. Parting from Dave. Friend, lover and occasional teacher. The center of my world for... how long? And now we'd be parted, maybe for good. There were only so many starships. The chances of two graduates finding berths on the same ship were non-existent. Dave Duvall and Lisa Davies, together through everything the Academy could do to them, would be parted at last. And he didn't seem to care.

I sighed and tripped on the steps as the students surged towards the opening doors. Dave pulled me upright, but impersonally. He wasn't interested in me, not then.

Dave's mind was on one thing only. His First Class pass in every subject, and his application to the Corps. Rumor had it that the Navy had offered Dave fast-track promotion and an immediate lieutenantcy, a student's dream. And the Transport and Mercantile Office held open a Deck Officer post on one of the big freighters. Several merchant ships offered very good salaries for his services. He'd turned them all down in favor of the Service.

The Reformation Coalition Exploration Service. The Star Vikings. The new pioneers, braving the Wilds to roll back the darkness. Bringing light to prevent another Long Night. That was where Dave Duvall wanted to be. And if that took him away from me, so be it.

The main hall was large enough to accommodate us all easily. The imitation-wood paneling was lit by discreet ceiling lights, the oil portraits of spacefaring heroes framed in real gold. The hall was impressive enough to make most students stop and stare, at least for a moment. Not that day though.

Half a dozen dignitaries – a Hiver and five humans - stood waiting around the Academy Director as we approached. Director Mike Keller was a living legend - just. He walked with a cane, supporting his oft-replaced hip and knee joints. His spine had more inserts than bones. His skull was mostly tungsten. Keller had crashed in or ejected from more experimental spacecraft than any other test pilot in living memory. Now he consulted for the constructors, taught the next generation of pilots, and ran the Starflight department at the Academy. His next crash would be his last, the doctors said.

Despite that Keller still flew. He never explained why. Maybe he couldn't. But I know why he did it. I didn't back then, but now... now I get it, Mike. And I can't explain it either.

He stood there leaning on his cane, wearing a simple pilot's tunic and trousers as was his wont. His right hand held a bundle of envelopes embossed with the Academy arms. His remaining eye glistened with moisture as a sad smile hovered around his lips.

We fell silent and halted in a tense but respectful semi-circle just short of our hero. Keller raked us with his famous soul-baring stare, starting at the far left of the line, his one-eyed gaze resting upon each of us in turn. For a long moment nobody spoke. Finally the Director broke his silence. "Class. Attention!"

We came to a military-style attention, the loose and excited semicircle forming into two neat and straight ranks. And then we waited in apprehensive silence. Keller stared for another moment. "That's better. You might be graduating today, but you're still my trainees. Don't embarrass me like that again. In front of your prospective employers, too! These gentles," he gestured with the envelopes at the six waiting dignitaries, "have come to discuss with those of you who do not already have posts the possibility of an appointment with their respective services."

We stood rigid as Keller introduced the recruiters, men and women representing the military and merchant fleets, System Defense Command and three independent merchant lines. The Corps was conspicuously absent. They didn't recruit also-rans.

Keller stared for a long moment at the silent ranks before he spoke again. "Most of you may never have to stand still for such a long time again. For those joining the Fleet this is just the beginning. But for today...." he smiled fondly, sadly. "Class! Stand Easy!"

The lines relaxed, some students into military 'at ease' stance, the rest of us into various relaxed or just plain slouchy postures.

"Your training is over, and my name is on the papers. Don't let me down. Don't ever stop learning. Today is the beginning, not the end. Remember that! I will see you each individually, the recruiters will want to talk with you, and then there will no doubt be some disreputable party somewhere you will feel the need to invite me to." Keller smiled impishly. "But for now I must say goodbye to you all. You're not my students any more, you're my colleagues. You share the same vacuum as me. Try to remember what an honor that is!"

Keller shrugged as laughter finally broke out among the students. "Francis Braun, my dear colleague... may I speak with you for a brief moment?" he said with deliberately overplayed politeness. Braun stepped forward to accept his papers, walking slowly beside Keller to the far end of the hall as the rest of the students began to talk excitedly among themselves.

I just hung around, wishing to be somewhere else.

"Lisa Davies?" My name interrupted some particularly gloomy thoughts. I hurried across the hall as Braun wandered away from Keller, staring at his papers with amazement and joy written all over his face. Keller leaned on the wall, his cane nearby. He smiled and handed over the envelope. I took it, turned it over a couple of times, then opened it carefully as if by some miracle it might hold what I wanted it to.

Whatever that was.

The results were exactly as published, of course. I scanned the formal lettering of the confirmation papers, then moved on to the letters behind them. All were printed on heavy paper embossed with the logos of the RCES and the private shipping outfits.

Keller watched me scan the letters. He must have seen me try to hide the disappointment and frustration. He nodded sympathetically, "You're good, Lisa. Don't forget that. But RCES has a waiting list a parsec long, and Mercantile Interstellar has no officers' berths open at all. You could try applying for a Petty Officer's berth and move up when they get a vacancy."

"Petty Officers aren't flight crew," I said disgustedly.

"They always need cargo shuttle pilots. Or you could try for a berth on an independent freighter? Join a Lancer crew?"

"Shuttles? Tramp freighters? Lancers! No Thanks," I said.

Keller looked disappointed. "I thought you'd take any job to get out there."

"Once."

"Your heart's not in it any more?"

"I don't know," I sighed.

"Well, that happens. There's a few teaching posts going at the Academy. And your degree's good. You could go into industry...."

I snorted rudely.

"Thought not. So what do you want?"

"I don't know," I replied quietly. "I think I've made a mistake."

"A hugely disastrous and expensive mistake," Keller agreed with the ghost of a smile. "If it really was one."

"I think it was."

"Perhaps. Follow your heart, Lisa. It doesn't matter what you do so long as you love it. That's the reason for going out there. The only reason. So long as you don't just drift along, so long as you do something with your life that you want, it won't be a waste."

Suddenly I knew why he still flew despite the warnings. But it didn't matter to me at the time. "I don't know what I want," I said sadly.

"You will, some day. I'm sorry starflight wasn't it. But you'd know it if it was. You won't talk to the recruiters then?"

"No."

"Very well. I won't criticize you for making this choice."

"But you're disappointed."

"Good Gods, no!" He said emphatically, "I'd be disappointed if you just drifted into a post on some freighter because you hadn't thought about it. If you let your life float by you, I'd be disappointed. But I know you better than that. You'll find your mania, your obsession, and you'll live it out to the full. And whatever happens, you're Starflight Qualified. Astrogator First Class. There's not that many of us about. It's something to be proud of."

"How come you're so sure you know me?" I asked, wondering if I was being impudent.

"Because you're just like me." Keller replied with the hint of a knowing smile.

I drifted back into the hall, exchanged some automatic pleasantries with excited colleagues. Party invitations were exchanged, assignments compared, promises made to stay in touch. I wandered through it all, seeing but not experiencing the Graduation Day euphoria.

Dave was standing by the main doors, face glowing with excitement as he debated the merits of various assignments with the other two class high-fliers. Ian Reynolds had earned himself the Navy posting he'd always wanted, and kept shoving the acceptance papers under Dave's nose to prove it. Yolanda Ivris had been offered a fantastically highly-paid post with the prestigious Coalition Couriers shipping corporation. Dave dismissed their success with a wave. He was assigned to the RCES, the beginning of his dream.

I knew exactly what Dave was saying without being able to hear. And I didn't want to hear it, not when he was talking so animatedly about a posting that would take him away from me forever. Dave would be announcing that he'd command an Exploration Cruiser someday. I turned and came face to face with Simon Kelder, the lanky son of a deep-sea engineer.

"Get what you want, Simon?" I said without preamble.

He shrugged nonchalantly, then grinned like a fool. "Yeah. I've got a fat contract with Partrie Industries waiting. Two weeks off, then I report as Junior Astrogator on the *Partrie Splendor!* She's a specialized mining ship, strips hydrocarbons out of asteroid fields."

"I'm glad for you, Simon." I said absently.

"What you got?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Options."

"Oh." Simon fell silent for a moment, then went on, "There's a graduation party tonight - several actually. I've carefully selected a route to stagger between them... want to come?" he asked almost shyly.

I wasn't the most attractive woman at the Academy, but I wasn't bad. A slim five feet exactly, with straight blonde hair falling to my shoulders and green eyes... I know I filled a crewsuit well enough to turn heads. Simon must have sensed the growing distance between me and Dave and decided to make a play. It was about the last thing I needed right now.

"Maybe. I'll...." I glanced up to see Dave striding over. He'd finally remembered about me.

"I got it! I'm going to the RCES! I'll get that command someday.... Then you can be my first officer.... What's the matter?"

Even in his excitement, Dave had finally noticed that something was wrong. Perhaps it was the way my eyes hardened as the words sank in, my fists clenched. I had a moment of revelation. The unreasoning fury followed a few seconds later. I still remember what went through my mind.

'Be my first officer'. You always were in charge, weren't you, Dave? It was always you and not me that was important. Would you have noticed if I'd left? Yes. Yes you would, and if I mattered enough then you'd have found a way to get me

back because that's what you do with the things you want. I was just part of the package, wasn't I? And I cared so much I didn't notice.

"Lisa?" he said softly, "You didn't get any of those postings you wanted, did you? I'm sorry." He did look genuinely sorry at the moment, but he'd probably forget within seconds. "Keep trying – you'll get what you want eventually."

"That would be difficult," I replied quietly. Simon slipped away. If he had a shred of empathy in him, he'd have been headed for the nearest bomb shelter.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I don't know...."

"Hey, cheer up. You've got an Astrogator's ticket and a pilot's license. There's plenty of work in the minor shipping lines or the cargo ports - freighting pays very well. Almost as well as the Service."

"Yeah." I replied vaguely. I felt sick and light headed. I actually wanted to kill him at that moment. Ironic, that, given what happened later. Such is life.

"And I'll be able to pick my own staff someday...."

"I'm all right, Dave. I just need to think about my options. I'm going outside." I turned away and left him standing there, still clutching the precious acceptance papers and mouthing meaningless sympathy.

I walked out into the cold, breathing in the salty air. You could never get far from the sea on Aubaine. For a moment, I stood alone at the top of the steps, gazing out across the campus that had been my home, my life, and trying to get a grip on my homicidal fury. Then I slowly descended, wandering away across the campus. I've no idea where I thought I was going.

The endless classroom lectures, the simulations, the training flights in the Academy's training skiff. The EVA drills, damage-control exercises. The week-long graduation exercise where six randomly-picked students were placed in a simulator and told that the freighter we were crewing had just suffered a catastrophic drive failure during a hijack attempt. And we weren't going to be let out until we either quit, salvaged the situation, or 'died'.

A whole week without sleep, in cold and darkness for the most part as the sadists in charge simulated power failures and a string of other disasters. And for what? Had it really been worth it? I was pretty sure it hadn't.

"Lisa!" I turned, puzzled. Mike Keller – Director Keller – stood leaning on his cane at the top of the steps. He'd never addressed me by my first name before, always maintained formal relations with his students. But of course I wasn't a student any more. I was... what?

I turned and walked back to the steps as Keller descended slowly, painfully, to meet me. He didn't waste time on pleasantries. "There's an Academy tradition – the Final Flight. You know it?"

"Of course," I replied, a little sharply. I wondered what it had to do with me. "Oh, I'm sorry, Director Keller."

"Mike. Just Mike now. Anyway, you know what we do?"

"The two best students take a final flight with you in the skiff. Take your pick - they're in there swapping job descriptions." I nodded sharply at the doorway.

Keller smiled wickedly. "Oh yes. I know what you mean. Our straight-A boys and girls off to make their fortunes among the stars. But I only take the *best* students on the Final Flight. You coming?"

"What? I don't get it."

"Yes you do. They're all obsessed with space and starflight for what they can get out of it. Fame, fat pay checks, a reputation. Girls – or boys – around them in every port of call. Ah yes, the glory!" Keller grinned. "I know it well."

"But?"

"But there's another kind of student. Flawed. Uncertain. The ones who don't get straight As. The ones who struggle to get there because they just have to. The obsessives. The ones who want to go to the stars because they're just drawn there. The ones who can't explain what they want or why then need it. The ones like you."

"I don't even know what I want," I said softly, "You'd better take someone else."

"You know. You're confused right now but you know. Maybe this last flight will prove to yourself that you want this."

"Or that I don't. What if it's all been a mistake?"

"What if it has?"

"I'll have failed."

"No," Keller corrected me, "You'll have tried. It takes courage to admit that you were wrong and to start again. If you really know it's been a mistake then I'll respect you for admitting it. I'll even go so far as to concede that I was wrong about you. But who would turn down a chance to fly with Mike Keller?"

"Someone who didn't care about starflight," I replied gloomily.

"Exactly. One hour from now, at the Spaceport."

"Not the Academy training field?"

"No. You're not trainees now."

"All right. One hour. Who's the other lucky candidate?"

Keller shrugged. "Wait and see."

I don't remember what I did during that hour, but at the end of it, I showed my shiny new Flight Crew card to the port security guards, who nodded knowingly, handed me a case containing a crewsuit, and stood aside. Their attitude was no more respectful than when I'd been a student, but then I wasn't acting any different to when I was a student.

Despite my apathy, I felt an involuntary rush of excitement at sight of the training skiff *Academician*. The skiff was a small wedge-shaped vessel with rounded corners and fins for stability under atmospheric flight. It carried a crew of three in relative comfort, but my memories of it were colored by the experience of sharing it with seven other students and two instructors.

Beside the skiff's boarding ramp stood two figures, one of them leaning on a cane. He waved his free hand cheerily. I'd had already dismissed the possibility that this was an elaborate attempt at seduction, but I was still relieved to see that the other crewmember was Pete Havers.

Pete was quietly obsessive about starflight, and in particular about Jump drives. He could pull apart any T-plate or Jump drive, find any fault and fix it, and put it back together better than new. And that was about all he could do. Pete didn't really interact with people. He communicated with fellow humans in much the same way he did with computers. He never went out, drank or gambled. He was about as dull as they came.

But I trusted him completely. We shared several assignments, including the truly horrible Graduation Exercise. Pete was dull, but reliable. He was a technical wizard, too. And he was just bursting to get out into space. I'd grown to know him well enough to see that. I was humbled and a little embarrassed to be flying alongside him.

I tried to look a little more enthusiastic as I stepped onto the boarding ramp, exchanging polite greetings with Pete. It felt like logging onto a data terminal, and conveyed as much warmth. I turned to Keller. "Pilot/Astrogator Davies, L. My ticket sir," I said formally.

Keller took the proffered identity card, slipped it into a portable reader and carefully observed the screen even though he'd only presented the ticket that afternoon and was quite aware of my status. "Michael Gregorias Keller, Master and Commander of the skiff *Academician*. Welcome aboard. You are assigned as Chief Pilot and Astrogator."

"Aye sir," I responded, stepping up the ramp. The ritual should have been thrilling, but I was just numb as I slipped into my crewsuit. A crewsuit is a light space suit worn in case of disaster. It carries a small oxygen bottle and short-term life support gear of its own but it's not intended for long periods of work outside the ship. Most vessels carry heavy EVA suits for that. The crewsuit was designed simply to enable crews to survive a catastrophe long enough to do something about it. We don't use them so much any more; Body Sleeves were just coming in back then.

I heard Pete go through the same boarding ritual. He was assigned as Technical Officer, his station the drive room. He suited up and went aft as I made my way forward to the bridge. Keller entered, still wearing his normal tunic and trousers. He seated himself in the command chair and said formally, "Pilot, check clearance for takeoff with Port Control."

"No, Sir," I countered. "All crew must be suited for takeoff."

"Article Twelve Subsection Four. I know it well." Keller responded. "Ignore it. Most private captains do."

I turned in her chair to face him. "No sir. I could have my license revoked for making an unsafe takeoff. You know that better than I do...."

"How would anyone find out?" Keller asked, but he was smiling as he saw realization dawn on my face. "And would it matter to you?"

"Yes. Yes it would, dammit! You've made your point. Now put your... " I bit down on an expletive, "...suit on!" I snapped at him, then tacked on a distinctly surly, "Sir."

"Stroppy... stroppy. Very well. As Master of this vessel I hereby suspend Article Twelve on my own authority. Clear us for takeoff."

I turned back to my station. "Under protest."

"Acknowledged."

The skiff had controls similar to a conventional aircraft; a joystick and throttles for manual control. Most of the actual piloting was done by computer, following instructions given by the pilot. Only in direst emergency would manual control be employed. But still the pilot was required to be at the manual controls for takeoff and landing.

I hit the comms stud, "Port control, this is Jump-Capable Vessel *Academician* requesting clearance for orbital lift. Over."

"Clearance granted, *Academician*. Port Control out."

"Pilot to all crew. Report status."

"Drives ready, station secure," Pete's disembodied voice said.

"Me, too. You need to lighten up," Keller put in from behind her. "This is a celebration."

"I seem to recall being told that 'Takeoff is not an occasion for levity.' Who said that?" I replied.

Keller chuckled. "I was talking to students, who were cheering themselves hoarse at having narrowly managed to miss the ground, as you may remember. Yes, take your job seriously – our lives depend on it. But you don't have to be so dour about it."

"Very good. Lifting now," I said flatly and engaged the autopilot, feeling the slight dislocation as the artificial gravity field cut in to replace natural gravity. "Contragravity engaged. Neutral lift. Lifting."

There was really nothing to do but sit with my hands on the controls as the computer took the skiff up. It's a necessary but somewhat unglamorous task. As Keller had once said in a lecture, 'pilots don't get paid for sitting with their hands on the controls while the computer flies the craft. They get paid in case they have to take over. And the day someone does have to go manual, he or she has about three seconds to earn all the pay of all the pilots everywhere, or die and probably take a whole lot of other people out too. Remember that if your attention wanders during takeoff.'

I kept my attention on the readouts. All in the green, a perfect takeoff.

"Excellent maneuver, Pilot." Keller said formally. "Take us into orbit, then lay in a course for the Enderson's Giant."

"We're going outsystem?" I asked, surprised.

"No. But we'll make a flyby of the gas giant, then set up for a symbolic Jump – it's traditional. We lay in a course, run the J-drive up to Readiness Three, then close down and make for the Naval Base, where I buy lunch at the fabulously expensive Admiralty Restaurant. Then we get blind drunk and the Shore Patrol has to remove us. That's part of the tradition too these days, or didn't last year's graduates tell you?"

"No. Course laid in. Accelerating towards Jump point." I reported, ignoring Keller's flippant remarks. "Switching to automatics." I tapped in my authentication code and sat back, feeling the drive surge even through the internal compensation.

"Excellent," Keller said quietly, perhaps replying to a direct communication from the drive room.

"Computer confirms everything green. Course laid in for far orbit of Enderson's Giant. I suppose you'll want to visual the *Morgana* monument?"

"Course looks good. And you're right, we'll eyeball the monument. Might serve to remind you what it cost to get out here again," Keller said.

"I know what it cost... I saw the *Morgana* land when I was a little girl," I replied.

"With respect, you know, but you don't *understand*," Keller said, unsnapping his seat buckles. "All crew; stand down from ready stations. We're on course for Enderson's giant. Well done. Let's have a coffee." He limped out of the bridge, heading for the skiff's tiny galley. For an instant I wondered if my calculations were any good; I always do. But it didn't matter anyway – it wasn't like we were really going to enter Jump. I followed. Keller into the galley and sat down.

Hours later, we were still sat in the galley. Keller was telling tales about his involvement in the early days of the Dawn League, when we finally pieced the lost Jump technology back together and began building experimental ships... and sending rebuilt vessels left over from the Imperium period out to explore the Wilds.

Not all of the missions were successful. Most ships came home with missing personnel. Hostile locals on the planets they visited, or accidents, system failures... the list of causes was endless. But Mike Keller and the other pioneers went out again and again, in starships that became increasingly more reliable. They forged links with the more friendly worlds, set up a trading consortium; even established shipping lines.

It was always dangerous at the frontiers of known space – and at the frontiers of knowledge. Keller was telling us about another spectacular escapade of his, where his experimental shuttle had disintegrated under full-power trials and left him hurtling through space in a rescue ball amid a cloud of debris, when the alarm klaxon sounded.

Keller was heading for the bridge at a fast hobble before his cup had hit the galley table. I was just behind him. Pete Havers scrambled back into the drive room and closed the hatch.

Keller reached his station first. "Distress signal. Distorted," he reported.

I scrambled into the pilot's seat and cancelled the alert klaxon. "Any details?"

"Audio only, no video. That's odd. Playing it now."

Harsh static hissed from the speakers as the message was relayed, "Mayday, Mayday. This is starship *Marvelous Contrivance* to any vessel in range. Our co-ordinates follow. We have suffered collision damage and drive failure in proximity to Enderson's Giant. We are caught in a decaying orbit. Request assistance. Repeat, this is starship..."

The voice was calm and smooth, like a trained orator. If it hadn't been for the panicky shouting in the background I'd have wondered if the call were a training broadcast or a hoax.

"Boost and retransmit that signal, all distress bands. Course change, Astrogator." Keller said sharply.

"Programmed. I'll correct for the precise co-ordinates as the computer advises. Implement course change?"

"Do it." Keller's manner had changed, hardened. He didn't acknowledge my foresight. He expected it, demanded it.

"Implemented. Going to maximum acceleration."

I could see the wispy bands of cloud in the gas giant's upper atmosphere through the front ports as we surged towards it. I was used to seeing it in the night sky, but this was different... the gas giant had reached out and grabbed a starship, and here we were streaking into its clutches.

"*Academician* to *Contrivance*. We have relayed your call and are proceeding to your assistance. You are falling onto the upper atmosphere? Confirm?" Keller spoke directly to the voice from the distressed ship.

"Confirmed, *Academician*. What is your ETA?"

"Eighty-seven minutes, *Contrivance*. Over."

"Thank you, *Academician*. Return to your course. You can't help us."

"Your situation's that bad?"

"Confirmed. We'll skim the upper reaches of the Carston Layer in just over sixty minutes. Hull breakup should most likely occur a little after that." The voice was still calm, almost lecturing.

"There's nobody nearer?"

"We have received a response from a military ship out of Dreisen, but they're nearly twenty minutes behind you. Thank you for trying, *Academician*. This is the wages of greed."

"Say again, *Contrivance*?"

"We were trying to salvage the old Jovian-weather research station in the Layer. We came a little too close and collided with a strut. My pilot managed to get us into a higher orbit before we lost power to the main drive, for all the good that's done us. Now we know why the salvage has never before been attempted. But that aside, to whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"Michael Keller, Master and Commander of the skiff *Academician*."

"Truly! I'm honored to make your acquaintance, mister Keller. Your work on Jumpfield Dynamics was ground-breaking. I'll be... oh, yes." Another voice broke in, saying something I couldn't quite make out. My attention was on an urgent communication from the drive room.

"I *would* have been honored to meet you, mister Keller," The voice was saying, "Unfortunately I am reminded that our circumstances may prevent it."

Keller snorted in disbelief as the voice went on, "We will transmit to you what information we have gathered on the Giant and the condition of the science station. We were planning to salvage it for sale – the information as well as the station – but now...."

"Do whatever you can to stay in orbit, *Contrivance*. We will be with you as quickly as possible." Keller interrupted.

"You cannot possibly make it in time. Don't waste your efforts. Oh, I know, interstellar law requires you to assist. Well, I am Doctor Daniel Little, Captain of the vessel *Marvelous Contrivance*. I formally withdraw our plea for aid."

"Don't be stupid. We're coming. Hold on," Keller snapped. "Astrogator?"

"Drive room informs me that we can push the drive with a reasonable margin of safety to shave off twelve minutes from our ETA. No idea how he's done it, but...."

"Do it."

"Implementing." The skiff began to shudder as the drives exceeded their rated output. A crash came from direction of the open galley hatch.

"Damage report?" snapped Keller.

I looked down at her status board. "All systems green... but I think the coffee pot's had it."

Keller snorted in what may have been amusement. Then he turned serious. "Still not going to make it, are we?"

"According to the computer projection, no."

"To hell with the computer. Can you do anything?"

I frowned. This was no test or graduation exercise. A mistake now could rip the skiff in two. "I could recalculate the course from this point, see if anything's changed. The new course might save us a minute or two."

"Not enough."

"And I could overload the drives beyond the safety cutouts. That, and use the atmosphere to brake at the far end instead of drive deceleration. That'd let us maintain maximum acceleration inward for a few more minutes, and still be in a position to assist when we get there. Assuming we survive atmospheric entry."

Keller froze. The idea scared even him. It was theoretically possible to let the HEPLAR thrusters run wild to gain a lot of extra thrust. Of course, that usually meant they overheated to the point critical components melted. Overloading would certainly damage the drives, possibly destroy them. The repair cost was incalculable.

Weighed against a shipload of human lives. Salvagers too greedy or too stupid to limit their risks. Keller exchanged a few words with Pete over the intercom, then opened communications with the distressed vessel.

"*Academician* to *Contrivance*. What is your status?"

"Dire, bordering upon the catastrophic. We estimate less than fifty minutes remain to breakup. We will transmit all the data we have gathered to you."

"He's not taking this too seriously, is he? Or maybe he wants to sound good on the news replays," I muttered, though secretly I was impressed by the *Contrivance's* skipper's bravado, "It's not like falling thirty thousand miles through a gas giant's atmosphere was anything to worry about...."

Keller was still arguing with the salvage vessel's skipper, "We're still seventy minutes away. Can your hull take the battering long enough for us to reach you and attach a tow line?"

"No chance at all, I'm afraid. And I'm not having you enter a gas giant's atmosphere at speed on our account. No sense in sacrificing yourselves."

"*Contrivance*, we are burning our drives. We may be able to reach you in time. Do what you can!" Keller declared forcefully.

"Thank you, *Academician*. I suppose I'd expect nothing else from Mike Keller. It's been a real pleasure."

"Hold on," Keller repeated, but whether to the distressed vessel's crew or to his own, I didn't know. The skiff had begun to judder violently.

"Rendezvous in forty-eight minutes at present speed. Assuming we don't come apart."

"Hold course."

The minutes crawled by. The skiff's acceleration slowly dropped as the plasma exhausts warped under the stress. I flipped us and began deceleration, knowing that we were coming in hot. Really, really hot, and straight at a gas giant. I tried not to think about it.

Suddenly the video screen flared into grainy life, showing the scene on the bridge of the *Contrivance*. All was not well. We could see a battered control area, shaking violently as the incredibly powerful winds of the giant's upper atmosphere buffeted the craft about. A balding man in his late fifties, wearing the thickest pair of spectacles I've ever seen above a black goatee beard, faced the screen. He was bouncing around in a command chair that was far too large for him as his crew tried to hold the ship together. They weren't succeeding.

"I commend your determination and compassion," the bearded man said. "And thank you for the chance to set eyes upon your lovely Astrogator. But that's all we'll get to do, I'm afraid. Secondary Contragrav is going down. Primary is gone. There's nothing left to fight with. I have prepared a squirt transmission of our data. Are you ready to receive?"

"Ready," Keller said.

"Atmosphere in two minutes forty seconds," I reported.

"Transmitting," the bearded man said.

"Receiving. You're Doctor Little?" Keller asked.

"Yes. Why haven't you turned away?"

"We're not turning away. We're coming straight into the atmosphere to attach a tow line. Confirmed, Pilot?"

"Confirmed." I swallowed apprehensively and added more quietly, "I only have a Third Class license."

"Barely qualified. I know. I awarded it. But their lives depend upon it. You'll cope."

"Can't you do it? You're a test pilot!" I snapped.

"No. I have to operate the towing cable."

"I can do that!"

"No you can't. I've shot a line before and you haven't. It's almost an impossible shot and we'll only get one try."

I sighed. "I'm maintaining deceleration for as long as possible, but we'll have to flip for aerodynamic entry. You really want me to dive straight into the atmosphere?"

Keller nodded. "Yes. Scrub off as much speed as you can on the atmosphere, then pass under them and I'll shoot from underneath. Get as close as you can, then ease us away when the line fixes."

"Aye sir," I replied formally, as you do when a superior asks you to do the suicidally impossible. "Atmosphere in one minute."

Keller grunted something as he made his way aft, out of the bridge area.

The video screen lit again, "We are starting to break up. Turn away, *Academician!*" Doctor Little said harshly. "At that speed you'll rupture your own hull! Turn away!"

"No," I said quietly, surprising myself. "Prepare for tow. Atmosphere in thirty seconds."

"Idiots!" snapped Little. "What is it with you? Simple pride? 'Kaister men don't turn back!' – is that it? Give it up. You cannot possibly help us!"

Twenty seconds.

I remember that legend, one of the fragments from Old Terra. The Kaister Lifeboat Disaster; the sad tale of a lifeboat crew – in the days of sail and oar – braving the storm to save the crew of a sinking ship. Most of the lifeboatmen died to save a lone survivor. I suddenly understood why they had refused to turn back.

Why I needed to do this.

Ten seconds.

Because fellow starfarers were in mortal danger and there was no-one else to help them.

Three seconds.

Fellow starfarers... The intensity of the thought almost stunned me.

One.

We plunged into the giant planet's atmosphere, shreds of antennae and hull fittings scattering behind in an incandescent rainbow. Incredible winds buffeted the wedge-shaped hull, throwing us about like a toy. The computer warning tone sounded. It couldn't cope with the situation. I sympathized.

I triggered the manual override, fought the winds myself. Our remaining sensors – the ones I hadn't torn off – peered into the vast gloom all around. Even this high up the atmosphere was murky with lashing ammonia flakes and methane vapor. We left behind a twisting, churning contrail of ammonia precipitate in our wake.

There! I jerked upright in my seat. Ahead lay the *Contrivance*, scattering debris to the methane winds. Her hull was in a bad way, rents appearing all along its bulbous length. She was out of control, a decaying contragravity field the only thing keeping her from a long plunge down to the heart of Enderson's Giant. She would be tiny flinders by the time she fell halfway, her crew long dead.

I teased the skiff closer, trying to get into the lee of the damaged ship without being crushed by its hull. No chance. There was too much turbulence. "Pilot to Captain," I said. "I'm going to lunge at her under full power. You'll get one shot. That's all I can give you."

"Understood, Pilot," Keller replied. No judgment, just acceptance of my professional appraisal. I felt perversely proud.

The wind slackened for a second. I shoved the throttles all the way forward. "Now!" I snapped into the intercom.

The methane winds bounced the *Contrivance* away just as Keller fired. The line snaked out, falling far short of the hull. The magnetic clamp dragged the line down, hanging beneath the skiff, indicating every change in wind direction by its manic swings. I felt my heart go cold.

"Pilot. Take us above and to the windward side of the hull." Keller's calm voice said over the intercom.

"It'll never attach. It's got to hit square on," I replied. I wanted to recommend we break off, but I couldn't find the words. Not when they would mean abandoning the *Contrivance* to its fate

"Do it, Pilot. And in my absence, you're the Master of this ship. Good luck."

"Master? What d'you mean? Where are you going?" I demanded. I had a horrible feeling I already knew.

"Get us into position, Pilot. I'm going outside."

Outside? I shook my head in disbelief. He wanted to go outside into that maelstrom? He must be planning to fix the line manually. He must be quite mad. It was exactly what I'd known he was going to do. What I would have tried to do.

A warning light lit up on the damage board, accompanied by a low buzz. Structural damage, not serious. Not yet. I brought the skiff about into the wind, shoved the throttles forward. The skiff lurched and bounced, passing perilously close to the hull of the *Contrivance*. There were no more signals from the crippled ship now, no power readings from the hull. If anyone was still alive inside her they would soon begin the long fall to oblivion.

I watched my hull monitor, saw the tiny figure in his bulky EVA suit sliding down the tow cable. The heavy magnetic grapple lashed about in the turbulence close to the crippled ship. Keller reached the end of the cable, climbed onto the grapple... and released his safety harness.

I gaped in disbelief. Now Keller hung by his strength alone, clinging to the grapple as it flailed about close to the ragged surface of the hull. There were faint signals coming from his suit communicator, but atmospheric interference rendered his words unintelligible.

I just carried out his last orders, edging the skiff closer and closer to the cripple as Keller got his feet under him, somehow standing against the wind without his stick to support him. A gust threw the two craft together. I dragged on the controls, fighting the turbulence. The skiff lurched away from the cripple. The grapple swung close to the jagged hull.

And Keller jumped.

Thirty thousand miles of atmosphere lay between him and the giant's tiny rock core. Thirty thousand miles of immense pressure, vast temperature differentials, high gravity and methane winds. Mike Keller leaped out over that vast abyss with nothing but human courage to carry him across.

He hit the hull and fell, weak leg giving out under him. His hands scrabbled at the jagged surface, clumsy in the EVA gloves. Keller skidded down the rounded hull, heading for that immense drop. Then his outflung left hand grabbed an antenna, bent over by the shrieking wind. Ammonia sleet dusted his faceplate as he began to crawl back up the hull, searching for a solid attachment point for the grapple.

He found one, where the main spinal rib of the hull met the Bridge bulkhead. Grabbing hold with his left hand, Keller triggered the emergency flare on his suit shoulder with his right.

I saw the flare – just – on the hull monitor I brought the skiff in close, jerking to a stop to swing the grapple. Some vagary of wind brought the vessels closer together than I'd expected. I watched in horror as the grapple struck the hull and bounced right over Keller. It struck again on his far side, at the limit of its swing.

As the grapple hung, weightless in the equilibrium of forces existing in that split second, Keller grabbed it and dragged it squarely down onto the hull. Somehow he held it there until I could trigger the magnetic locks to hold it in place.

I turned the skiff and eased the throttles forward, dragging the cripple towards the uncaring stars.

We lurched and bounced upwards, damaged drives straining to lift two ships. For a few seconds it was surprisingly easy. Then the contragravity field aboard *Contrivance* finally gave out. The load doubled, tripled. The skiff staggered under the strain. *Contrivance* began to fall until she dangled at the end of the cable, an ugly tattered pendulum swinging wildly. Then both craft were lifting again, and I grinned in triumph.

Until I saw the small object falling away from the *Contrivance's* bridge section. Ammonia evaporated away from a maroon emergency flare as Mike Keller tumbled free and began the thirty-thousand mile drop.

"The Final Flight..." I remember whispered to myself as the skiff cleared atmosphere at last, rising slowly past the battered old scientific station to embrace the stars.

The video screen came to life, showing a young lieutenant wearing the insignia of a communications officer. "...patrol vessel *Levantine* to distressed craft. We have you in visual range. Do you require assistance?"

Talk about asking stupid questions.

"This is Training Vessel *Academician* under Acting Master Davies, Lisa," I replied though a choked throat. "Request assistance immediately for the vessel we have in tow. We are not in distress at this time, although we have moderate to severe structural and other damage."

"Acknowledged, *Academician*. Captain Hughes offers her congratulations on a fine rescue. Is Director Keller not aboard?"

"No, *Levantine*. Director... Mike... Keller was killed in the rescue attempt. He went outside to manually attach the line."

The communications officer looked stunned. "Keller's dead?"

"That's what I said." I repeated, even though I didn't really believe it myself.

The comms lieutenant made a visible effort to pull himself together as a sharp word from behind dragged him back to reality, "We are proceeding to assist the cripple."

"Acknowledged."

The frigate came alongside the *Contrivance*. EVA suits began to cross the short gap between the vessels as the rescue parties entered the hull.

I sat in the pilot's chair... Lisa Davies, Astrogator First Class, Qualified for a whole afternoon and already Acting Master of what was still theoretically a starship. I watched the rescue progress through a haze of tears. I knew I should be looking at the damage to my vessel, but all I could see was Mike Keller begin his long fall, over and over.

The communicator said something, but I couldn't hear it. I was staring out of the viewport, gazing through the tears and the scorchmarks on the armored ceramic. Gazing out into the endless night. Gazing at the stars.

And suddenly there was clarity and stillness, and filling me was a new purpose. This was Keller's final gift, the realization of what I wanted in life. With it came the humble understanding of what this final flight had meant. He'd known my heart better than I did. He'd understood the dreams that drove me and the doubts that held me back.

There, aboard a wrecked vessel, I became what no academy ceremony could have made me. I became a spacer, nothing more. But the feeling was so profound that it dominated my entire life.

It was Graduation Day, after all.

Absent Friends

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 23 years old, a recent graduate of the Hiver Technical Academy. Having failed to meet the requirements of the prestigious RCES, Lisa has a comfortable, safe job as an orbital traffic controller. It is early 1202.

I've been asked many, many times... what did it take to make me throw away that nice safe, comfortable job with the Port Authority? To exchange it for mortal danger in a broken-down salvage ship out there on the fringe?

The truth is; I really don't know. Another day I'd have turned the Doc down flat; maybe even laughed in his face. But he caught me at just the right moment. Was it fate? Divine intervention? Maybe he planned it that way. But I don't think so. I think it was just one of those things that happen in our lives.

Anyway, it happened like this...

I was sat in a starport bar, seeking the future in a few millimeters of vodka and orange. The bar was almost empty; all but the last few diehards had gone home to bed. And still he wasn't there.

He wasn't coming. I knew that in my heart, but to get up and go home would be to admit it, and I just couldn't face that. So I sat and brooded for hours. I'd had a couple of offers of company earlier in the evening, but now even the drunks left me alone. Like you leave an unstable nuclear warhead alone.

I finished my drink at last, put down the glass and stared at it. I'd been doing a lot of that in the three months since Graduation Day. Three months spent working for the Port Authority as a ground-based Astrogator and technical advisor. The pay was excellent, my working conditions bordered upon the luxurious. And yet there was a desperate unhappiness welling up under the facade of contentment I showed the world. I didn't dare think about what would happen if it broke through, even for a second.

And I was scared it was about to.

I'd been waiting for Dave, you see. Four hours or more I'd sat there, or three months, depending on how you looked at it. Oh, I knew he was bad for me; I'd even tried hard to hate and resent him for the way he treated me. But I couldn't. Just couldn't do it. And so when his ship made port and he called, suggesting dinner, I was overjoyed. Oh, I figured I was being used; taken for granted. I knew it'd mean nothing to him. I knew I'd get hurt. But I wanted to see him so much that I buried all that and rushed off to see him.

And he never even showed.

I came to a decision, shoved the empty glass away and stood to go. I stepped around the table and walked slowly towards the door. I knew what I was doing; taking my time to give Dave a few more seconds to appear. Of course, he didn't.

But someone else did.

I expected him to move aside; almost walked into him before I realized he was deliberately blocking the doorway. I glared, then recognized the black goatee, the thick eyebrows behind thicker glasses rising in recognition. Doctor Ian Little of the *Marvelous Contrivance*. About the last person I expected to run into. And about the last I wanted to.

He smiled triumphantly. "Astrogator Davies!" he said loudly, causing a few drunken heads to turn.

"Doctor Little," I replied, trying to slip past him.

"Such a lack of inquisitiveness!" he pronounced. "Aren't you even slightly interested in what a learned fellow such as myself – who incidentally, you may address as 'Doc', as the members of my unruly and disreputable crew do – is doing wandering about spacers' bars at one in the morning?"

"No," I said, motioning for him to move aside. "Drinking, I'd guess but it's not my concern. Now leave me alone."

"I can't, I'm afraid. You see, I need to find someone."

I sighed, "Who?"

"You."

I remember blinking in surprise even as my subconscious nodded in satisfaction. Then the alarm bells started to ring in the back of my mind. I was about to do something impulsive and stupid. I shrugged and moved forward again. "We did all the thank-you stuff months ago. You're welcome. Now I'm going home to bed. I've got a day full of course plots tomorrow and I'd better get some sleep."

"Ah yes." He still didn't move. "Course plots. Traffic control. Orbital holding patterns. Preprogrammed course chips for commercial traffic. You're very good, your supervisor tells me. But are you happy?"

"I'm very, very highly paid. That makes me happy." I was vaguely annoyed that he'd been talking to my superiors.

"No it doesn't."

"How would you know?" I demanded sharply.

"You know it's true. Anyway, I came with a proposal for you."

"I think I can guess," I said coolly, pretending not to feel the excitement building. A full symphony of bells, sirens and alarm klaxons was sounding in my mind, but I just stood there, calm on the surface like it wasn't really happening.

Finally the Doc stepped aside, allowing me to leave the bar. We stepped out onto the dark and quiet street. I imagined I could see Enderson's Giant glowing through the clouds.

He fell into step alongside me and made his pitch, just like I knew he would. "Give up on getting into the Service. Resign from your highly-paid job with the Port Authority. Sell the apartment and put all your belongings into storage. Throw it all away for a berth on a broken-down old salvage ship."

"You make it sound very attractive. What are you paying?"

"A cut of the profits, which isn't a great deal because I am far too altruistic for my own good. I spend more time salvaging vital things for people who need them than expensive things for people who can pay for them."

"I take it the *Contrivance* is out of drydock?" I said, pointlessly.

"Finally."

"No money in it, cramped conditions, months in space... you really expect me to sign up on the face of that?"

"Yes." he answered bluntly.

"Where are you operating?"

Doc Little stopped, looked up and raised his arms to the sky as if in supplication to the gods. "Out there."

"Where exactly?"

"Out there exactly!" he said, "Everywhere. Anywhere. Just... out there." A small smile played around his lips.

"Goodnight, Doctor Little," I said. I turned and walked briskly away. "I might call you tomorrow."

"You will," he said firmly to my back.

I did, right after I quit my job at the Port Authority.

* * *

A week later, I presented my Flight Crew Credentials and boarded the salvage vessel *Marvelous Contrivance* to take over as Astrogator. I could see right away that I'd made a horrible mistake. Inside was at least as bad as outside, even after the dockyard techs had done their best.

Contrivance was a salvage job herself, cobbled together from bits of three other craft. Her hull had once been an *Aztec* class small freighter. Her drives had come from a military vessel of some kind. Her internal systems were a mix of ancient and modern, some circuits scrounged, some homebuilt.

The Doc showed me around. That didn't take long. *Contrivance* was not a large vessel. "This isn't a typical salvage ship," I observed, eyeing the small cargo bay. "There's too much electronics and computer gear, not enough cutting and lifting equipment."

"Very observant. In fact what we salvage is not usually material."

"What? Oh – information," I said. "You're trying to salvage the knowledge we've lost. That's why you're so poor."

He smiled, bowing and spreading his hands in acknowledgement. "That is our humble function. We try to benefit humanity by unearthing what the fools of previous generations have lost. Any money we make from material salvage in the process is purely incidental."

"I can see that," I replied dryly, looking around at the dimly-lit cargo hold with its dented, grubby decking and makeshift fittings. "But I'll bet there's good money for scientific data."

"Sometimes. The more far-sighted corporations pay well for even fragmentary information. But most of them want patents or techniques. They have no interest in bettering our lot as a species or even as a society."

"I see. So how did you manage to pay for the repairs?"

"We sold everything we had, called in all our favors. This trip is, as one might say, paydirt or bust. We finish outfitting today. When the supplies run out, there are no more to be had. We'll have to sell the ship. That's assuming she's not condemned as a hazard to navigation."

"Oh, good," I muttered. This was getting more crazy by the day. "You keep saying 'we'. Where's everyone else?"

"Purchasing supplies. They'll be back soon. In fact...." He held up a finger as footsteps echoed on the boarding ramp, accompanied by voices raised in argument. Three figures appeared, framed in the doorway. I squinted against the daylight behind them. "May I have the pleasure of introducing my crew and fellow altruists," the Doc said, waving a hand in their direction.

The first was a tall, burly man in his late thirties, sporting a crew-cut and dressed in a dark blue tunic and trousers reminiscent of a Fleet uniform. He stepped forward with his right hand extended, "Jim Saunders, Pilot. I'm on secondment from the Coalition Navy. I hear good things about you." I shook his hand, assuming that Doctor Little had talked about my part in the rescue at some point. That seemed inevitable, considering.

Jim stepped aside. A slim young woman approached me, wavy brown hair cut in a short bob. She, too, wore military-style clothing. "Alice Ord," she said simply. "I was aboard when you towed us out of the Doc's last brilliant catastrophe. Thanks. Owe you one."

"Thank Mike Keller..." I said absently, trying to suppress a vision of his final moments. I bit my lip and looked at the floor for a moment.

The third member of the trio was trying to sidle towards the drive section without being noticed. He was the scruffiest individual I'd seen in months. I'd passed deadbeats in the street who dressed better. "Hello, Pete," I said brightly. "Been a while."

Pete Havers stopped, glanced briefly in my direction and grunted, "Hi, Lisa." With that our acquaintance was renewed and we'd caught up three months' worth of interactions. Pete was like that. He turned away and scurried into the drive room.

"He's a good drives man," said Jim apologetically. "Bit of a failure as a human being, though."

"I know," I replied. I turned to the Doc. "Now, tell me what you've talked us into."

He led us into the spare cabin that doubled as a crew lounge and arms locker. I blinked in surprise at the fearsome array of weaponry festooning the walls. "You planning to start a war?" I joked, then fell silent as the Doc's face hardened. "Sorry."

"Apology accepted," the Doc said magnanimously. "I don't much like to hear jocular references to violence. I've seen the results firsthand too many times."

"Tell me why you carry all this armament then," I asked.

"Purely for self-defense. The fauna of certain worlds is somewhat unfriendly. Some of the flora too, I seem to recall...." the Doc's expression became distant, a faint smile playing about his lips.

"Not now," Jim put in suddenly. "Fact is, we do a lot of work out in the Wilds, searching for useful stuff to bring back. We deal mainly in smaller technical items – things that can be reverse-engineered to see how they were made – and information. Sometimes the locals object to us poking around. We have to defend ourselves."

"With all that lot?"

"Not all at once. But we've had to shoot our way out once or twice before. That's really Alice's department," Jim explained.

Alice shrugged, "I tried for the RC Marines – failed the final selections. The Doc gave me a berth and I've been with him ever since. What we do isn't highly-paid, but it's important."

"So what is it this time?" I asked.

"We have what looks like a particularly virulent 'flu epidemic on Oriflamme at present. It's getting worse, and people are starting to die. There's an outbreak of Miller's Disease, too. There's cancer, DTC Syndrome and the common cold.... And I have a good lead on an old medical facility that might just have a cure to one or more of them. Do you have any idea of the worth of such a cure?"

I nodded soberly. "High-risk, right?"

The Doc shrugged. "Much as always. But our outfitting was paid for by a down payment from the Institute Of Medicine. They want samples and data from this facility, and they're offering an impressive amount for an intact medical database from before the Collapse. When I think about what we've lost...."

I interrupted him. "How much is 'an impressive amount'?"

"Nearly as much as we owe on the repairs," Alice put in sourly.

"And it's a long way out?"

"Nicosia," the Doc answered. "Everything closer is already being picked over by official research teams."

"Fabulous. So we're going out to try to find some probably-mythical medical research center in the hope that there's something useful inside...." I said. "I must be insane!"

The Doc shook his balding head. "It's not nearly such a bleak picture as you paint, Lisa. My informant was very hopeful."

"So hopeful that he didn't go himself, but sent us out in this rustbucket. Very reassuring," I retorted. Nobody was convinced though. I might wriggle on the hook for a while, but they had me and we all knew it.

"This information is the most solid we have ever acted upon! This operation is the best planned yet!" said the Doc sharply, almost defensively.

"That's my point exactly. I saw the results of your last well-planned operation...."

"Perhaps you should return to your lucrative post with the Port Authority," snapped the Doc.

I pretended to shudder in horror. Then I realized the horror was real. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as the supplies arrive," replied the Doc. "You are sure that you wish to come with us?"

"Yeah. It beats making a fortune from a nice, safe office," I retorted.

"You know, I think she'll fit in fine," said Jim suddenly. "She's obviously deranged."

I just laughed. It didn't matter anyway.

Because I was going to the stars.

* * *

We coasted into orbit around Rohit to make rendezvous with the RCES Clipper *Apollo*. I'd never seen her before and of course I didn't know then how my fate would be bound up with that fine old ship. It's terrible, what they want to do to her. I'd stop it, if I could. I couldn't stop them doing it to me, and I can't save her either.

But anyway; the Doc had somehow contrived to get supplies from *Apollo*. She was acting as a support-and-depot vessel for a mob of little scoutboats in the nearby systems, so I guess she had some stuff to spare.

Apollo was big and impressive, especially compared to our little rustbucket. It hurt me to look at her... All I'd ever wanted was to serve aboard a ship like that. Like Dave was doing aboard one of her sisters....

Jim brought the *Contrivance* alongside RCES *Apollo*. Her main armament was a spinal meson gun facing directly forward, aimed by pivoting the whole ship. She had a whole bunch of smaller turrets mounting lasers blistering her spine and flanks. She looked businesslike and powerful.

I loved her at first sight.

Apollo's hull form was a long rectangle, made up of modules fixed to her long spine. Only the fore and aft sections, holding command and engineering sections respectively, were permanent. She had all kinds of modules fitted, from extra fuel tanks to laboratories and a small barracks unit for her shipboard troops. She'd be a pig to maneuver under full power, I decided.

And I had the most desperate hankering to try it.

A Scout/Courier was clamped to the hull right aft, smooth wedge hullform telling of an atmospheric capability her mother ship lacked. Another scout slid gracefully clear of the docking clamps and accelerated away before engaging her Jump drive.

Jim brought us in to dock against the ventral surface, giving us a clear view of Rohit below from the control room ports. Not that it was a pretty or inspiring sight.

"Internal gravity fields matched. Airlocks sealed... and we have permission to come aboard!" Jim announced.

"Pete, we're going aboard. You coming?" I said into the intercom.

"No," came the reply, and the circuit shut off.

"Talkative as ever," I chuckled and followed the others to *Contrivance's* main airlock.

"Wow!" Alice said quietly as we boarded the *Apollo*. "No wonder it's hard to get into the Service." She waved, indicating the clean, wide corridor with its light gray carpeting and discreet lights. I just smiled thinly.

Ahead, Jim and the Doc were exchanging greetings with two officers from the *Apollo*. One was a young lieutenant wearing Marine insignia. He wore a ceremonial sword, but the pistol on his other hip was quite real. He was big and blond and muscular, just the sort they liked to put on the recruiting posters. I dismissed him as a dumb thug. Well, I was half right about that.

The other officer was a much older woman with iron-gray curly hair, dressed in the black body sleeve and overjacket that was the RCES working dress. She wore no sidearm but carried her hat under one arm. A captain's hat.

"Doctor Little," the captain said formally. Welcome aboard. Our recreation facilities – such as they are – are at your disposal."

"It'll be like shore leave after our ship, Elsie," the Doc responded with a smile. The blond thug pretended he hadn't heard the informal greeting.

"Allow me to introduce my crew," the Doc said. "Jim you know. This is Alice Ord, our ground combat specialist and dogsbody-general." He waved at Alice, who shook hands briefly, distantly. Her attention was on the grunt.

"And Lisa Davies, our Astrogator."

I stepped forward. "We've met – sort of," I said almost shyly. After all, I was finally meeting one of my lifetime heroes. Captain Elsie Walker, RCES. A living legend.

The captain looked puzzled. "When?"

"Nile Downport. The day you brought what was left of the *Morgana* in. It was the day I decided to follow you into what became the Service." After a second I added, "Not that I made it."

Captain Walker looked at me for a long, long moment, then understanding blossomed behind her pale blue eyes. "You were that little girl. The one who cried when they brought the casualties out."

"You remember?"

"I remember every second of that day. The moment when I really understood that I'd got them home despite everything..."

"You got them home," I agreed distantly. Another difference between us; another reminder of my failure. Mike Keller had died within a few thousand kliks of where this woman saved her crippled, misjumped exploration ship despite all the odds.

The others were shuffling. Captain Walker nodded sharply. "But we're keeping you all standing around here. Bison?" she addressed the grunt, "Show our guests to the rec facilities."

"Sir," The Marine replied, his crisp response at odds with the captain's relaxed manner.

"Bison?" I asked.

"My callsign. From Bill Ryson," the Marine said with a faint smile.

"From your combat style," the captain corrected him. "I'll join you later for dinner." She added. "But Daniel and I have a lot of catching up to do."

"Daniel?" Lisa said. "Oh, the Doc."

"Contrary to rumor, I do have a forename. Unfortunately I have few peers to use it," the Doc said with a faint smile. "Enjoy yourselves."

With that, he turned and followed Captain Walker into Officers' Country, while the burly lieutenant led us plebs towards the aft of the ship.

"Very informal, these Service ships," I observed to the grunt, trying to take my mind off the dark and depressing thoughts filling it.

"The Navy has much tighter discipline, but the Exploration Service uses so many freelancers and civilian specialists that informality seemed appropriate." He sounded like he disapproved. "But that doesn't mean they're sloppy," he added grudgingly.

"They?" I asked.

"They. The Marine Corps tries to maintain a slight distance even when we're assigned aboard RCES ships."

"Why?" asked Alice. She didn't want me occupy all the grunt's attention. "Not the differences... I mean why all the meson guns and missiles and ground troops? This is a research ship, right?"

"No," Ryson responded. "It's an exploration cruiser. There are other powers out here with their own ships, plus pirates, Vampires, hostile locals... it pays to be prepared. You aren't obliged to use the weaponry you have, but if you haven't got it you don't have the option."

"I see," I said. "What's the mission here at Rohit? If that's not classified..."

Bison shrugged. "Whatever needs doing. Rescue for endangered field teams, shipboard security.... Once we helped prevent a coup."

"A coup?"

"Yes. There's hundreds of little states scattered all over various regressed worlds out here. Some are trying to claw their way back up from barbarism; others seem determined to tear down the last vestiges of civilization. We try not to let that happen," he said with a slightly predatory grin that hinted at extreme measures. "That time it meant military action to shore up a local government. It's rarely dull out here."

"So the Service does a lot more than explore?" Alice asked, just to make conversation.

"Oh yes. Most of it doesn't make the media back home, but we have a fun time. The Navy is responsible for responding to major military threats and protecting the home systems. Everything else falls to the Service. We've spent more time on this cruise acting as a traveling law court, disaster relief agency and police force than actually exploring. Think of us as a cosmic fire brigade."

That got a few chuckles. I decided that perhaps he wasn't so dumb, nor so disagreeable, after all.

"Well, here we are. I'm assigned as your liaison officer during your visit," Bison said. "I'll show you what there is first, then I'll be in the lounge in case you need me. Unless anyone plays squash?"

* * *

Squash is a stupid game for idiots who are too fit and have nothing better to do with their lightning reflexes. Bison and several of his colleagues demonstrated this to us over the next day or two. They beat us soundly at everything else we tried, too. The RCES people were good company once I overcame her reservations towards them – reservations I have to admit stemmed mainly from jealousy.

We were still comparing our humiliating defeats as we entered Jump for Nicosia – and when we emerged a week later, too. I put us into orbit and ran a surface scan of the planet, then alerted the others. Jim and the Doc entered the tiny bridge, cutting off in the middle of another of their arguments. Jim tripped on the loose cables snaking across the floor.

"Dammit!" he snapped, stumbling, "Can't we put in a false floor over this lot?"

"What, another major rebuild?" I asked mildly. The electronics aboard *Contrivance* had been salvaged from many sources. None of the systems fitted where it was supposed to. The result was a messy sprawl of cables and wiring snaking across every flat surface, hanging down the bulkheads like brightly-colored vines in some electronic jungle.

"We could do it," Jim said defensively. "We've got some spare deck plate."

"Yeah, and what happens when something shorts out or just plain stops working?" I countered. Jim grunted something and moved to stand behind the pilot's station. I took the hint and moved over.

"It wasn't worth disturbing you for a simple orbital insertion," I said, settling into the Astrogator's chair.

"I'm here now," Jim replied. "What've we got?"

The Doc was accessing what passed for a main database aboard *Contrivance*. He summarized the data the computer came up with in a few sentences, "There are a few million people on the planet, regressed all the way back to muskets and ox-ploughs. The initial contact mission was a failure. Apparently there is some sort of religious ban on steam engines and anything more advanced. Landing a starship in one of their cities was not the most advisable course of action."

"Score one for the RCES," Jim interrupted.

"Much of the planet is very sparsely inhabited," the Doc went on, throwing an irritable glance in Jim's direction, "and many areas were wholly abandoned, including the one in which my contact believes the medical installation is located."

"Who is this contact anyway?" Jim spoke up.

"I am surrounded by intellectual pygmies!" the Doc gestured sharply as he spoke, "Surely you can deduce my source of information."

"But isn't it illegal for RCES personnel to sell information to freelance ships?" I said.

"Captain Walker is a scholar, like myself. And we are no ordinary freelancer ship. However, you are correct. She could lose her command at the very least. But what is the alternative? The RCES has its hands full at present. Who is going to undertake this mission if not us?" The Doc shrugged.

"Yeah. But think of the damage we could do to interstellar relations." I protested.

"What, you mean worse than landing a contact boat in the main square?" Jim observed.

"You have a point," the Doc said to both of us. "However, we shall avoid any dealings with the locals. Contact and diplomacy are not our concern. We have dockyard payments to meet."

"Sorting out other people's mistakes isn't our job, you mean," Jim put in.

"I merely meant that diplomacy does not look impressive on a balance sheet. Now," he called up a holographic map of the planet, zooming in on a region of the smallest continent, "We shall be landing in what could be described as 'the middle of nowhere', many klicks from any of the locals' settlements. Considering the state of their communications and transport we shall be in and out long before they have even noticed us, let alone done anything about it. Remember that the fastest message on this world moves at the speed of a galloping horse."

"Looks deserted," Jim said, peering closely at the map. "I assume you'll want us close to these ruins?"

"Indeed, unless you enjoy hiking." the Doc replied

"No settlements anywhere nearby... how recent is this map?" I asked.

"It was updated from the orbital survey the contact ship made three months or so ago," the Doc replied.

"So probably no new cities built since then." Jim said with a faint smile. "Nearest settlement is this coastal town here – what, ninety kliks overland?"

"There are a few scattered farms a little nearer, and possibly a small market town or two. No major settlements, though, so no military forces."

"But it's guns galore anyway, just in case," I said from the Astrogator's seat. I was beginning to think the whole flight had been a wild goose chase.

"Indeed," the Doc replied. "We shall be deploying a surveillance satellite as we enter orbit. The RCES is paying us a small bonus to do their work for them."

"Oh, good. You mean we get paid this month?" I asked.

"Don't push it," Jim replied. "My back pay alone would cover the dockyard bills."

"Orbital insertion complete. Computer's requesting permission to deploy the sat," I observed.

"Grant it," said the Doc absently. "And once it's done Jim, if you would be so kind as to take us down?"

"Gladly," Jim responded. "How hot?"

"Gently, if you please. I'd like the hull intact," The Doc replied.

Jim muttered something and reached for the manual controls.

All five of us crammed into the tiny bridge for the insertion, watching the planet race up to meet us. Despite what the Doc said, Jim took *Contrivance* down like a military assault shuttle. I heard Pete whimpering and glanced around at the rest of the crew. Jim was loving it. The Doc was trying to look unconcerned. Alice clung to a console, pale-faced. I said a little prayer.

Contrivance touched down in a storm of dust beside the ruins. Jim locked the ship's systems down and left his seat, making a mock bow as if acknowledging applause." Gently, I said!" the Doc admonished him.

"That was gently," Jim replied. "Let's tool up and go prospecting."

We broke out weaponry and flak jackets out of the ship's makeshift arsenal. I watched in amused disbelief as Pete tried to bury himself under a pile of weaponry: a big revolver, two automatic pistols, a pump-action shotgun, grenades and – I swear – an Elephant Gun.

"What're you planning to do with that? I asked as Pete shoved what appeared to be two beer cans into the twin breach.

"Might need it," Pete replied. I shrugged and turned away.

Alice was more sensible. No wasted gear, just an assault rifle and a backup pistol. Jim was similarly equipped, but with the addition of a sword. He had fenced for the Fleet, and now insisted in carrying a live blade wherever he went. He had this deal with Alice – she would fence with him in the cargo bay if he agreed to spend a similar amount of time acting as a punchbag. Actually Jim was a pretty good fistfighter, but Alice was just frightening. I'd already declined several offers of tuition from both of them. Pretty soon they'd stopped offering.

The Doc loaded the sawnoff shotgun that was his only concession to self-defense. He was so shortsighted that any other weapon would just be a liability.

"Pick your tool," Jim said to me. "You did Basic Firearms at the Academy, right?"

"Uh, yes. I was only bottom of my class because you can't get any lower than that," I replied. The firearms course had been a formality, included for the benefit of those planning to enter the military services. I was inept and uninterested, and it showed.

"We've got a couple of spare rifles – no, better idea." Jim reached into a cupboard and produced the smallest machine-pistol I'd ever seen. "Picked this up a while ago. It's a vehicle-crewman weapon. The Navy issues them to assault pilots and the like. Semi- or full-automatic. Effective range is about four meters and it has a rate of fire that'll make your eyes water."

"Thanks." I took it gingerly as he rummaged for spare magazines and webbing.

"If your target's close enough that you can't miss, shoot. Any further away and you'd be better to run anyway."

"Right." I fastened the webbing belt as tight as it would go, slipped the subgun and spare clips into their respective positions. The weapon was so light I could forget it was there. Almost.

"Right then. Let's go." Jim swung himself into the offroad jeep that was our only means of on-planet transportation. His sword caught on the door. He eased it into a comfortable position and settled himself in the passenger seat.

"Thought you'd drive," I said.

"I don't have a license," Jim replied. "Failed my test six times."

"Does that really matter here?" I demanded, "You were an assault pilot for all the Gods' sakes! How'd you fail your driving test?"

"I lied. I didn't," Jim said with a smile. "But after orbital craft a jeep isn't very exciting."

"Fine. I'll see what I can do," I declared, swinging myself over the jammed driver's door. "I'm just a mere Astrogator, so hold on everybody."

The cargo ramp dropped away as the Doc triggered the remote. I engaged the drive and the jeep lurched onto the ramp, tires squealing on the deck plate. Out of spite I put my foot down hard and roared away from the ship, bouncing the others around so much that it took the Doc three attempts to find the 'close' button on the remote.

After a few minutes the ruins became too thick to race though. I settled for chugging along at a sedate pace while the others used sophisticated scanning devices and simple eyeballs to scan the ruins for any sign of an intact building or installation.

It took over six hours of searching, which took us at least a couple of kilometers from the ship, before Jim suddenly called out, "Jackpot!"

"What? What've you got?" I demanded as the jeep skidded to a gravel-spitting halt. "Power readings. Very faint. There's a shut-down reactor nearby," Jim told me. "Spread out and search. But take care. There may be radioactive hotspots – we have no idea what state the reactor will be in by now," the Doc said quietly, swinging himself out of the jeep.

So we scrambled about in the rubble, searching for an entrance. Siting reactors underground had been policy in the latter days of the old Imperium. And if the reactor had survived, perhaps other equipment had. The Doc was ecstatic, muttering about the rediscovery of humankind's heritage. The rest of us were counting the credits. Which is why they failed to notice the red-robed man observing us from a ruined administration building.

Finally, Alice and Pete called the rest of us over. "Found a way in," Alice explained. "Pete had a look around inside. He says the place was deliberately mothballed to preserve it. They even left a trickle of power on to preserve the data storage gear. Pete's explored the upper level – there's *loads* of intact stuff, including controls for a reactor. This rubble seems to be the remains of the top two floors – the above-ground part of the installation. This was a service entrance, I think. It's pretty much blocked here but it widens out into a storage bay. Plenty of room."

The Doc scrambled up. "But what's its function? What have we found?"

Pete's head appeared in the hole at his feet, squinting in the late afternoon sunlight. His face was dust-streaked but grinning. "Medical," he said simply.

As Pete ducked back into the medical complex, Alice slipped inside. The others followed, splitting up to search.

A short time later the Doc summoned us together to compare our findings. "This place was a research and teaching institute attached to one of the universities, I think. The town must have existed primarily to serve the installation. There are signs that it was used as a conventional hospital – it must have been operational until maybe a couple of centuries ago," the Doc observed.

"There'd be civilian hospitals. Why bother with a makeshift one in the middle of nowhere?" Jim said.

"It obviously served as one at one time. Maybe the civilian ones were bombed, or maybe the city people rioted and trashed them. How should I know anyway?" Jim liked to argue with the Doc, usually just for the sake of it.

"So perhaps they built a community out here. They held on as the other worlds lost contact. Watched the war go by and their people sinking back to barbarism." The Doc really didn't like talking about the fall of civilization

"Grim. But musket and ox-plow isn't barbarism," Jim countered.

"Depends on your definition, doesn't it?" the Doc put in.

The rest of us left them to their argument and began to look for moveable equipment. It turned out that the complex had been abandoned in good order. Some of the materials were placed in storage, others neatly packaged as if for a move. Jim, Alice and I began moving the lighter items out to the jeep for transport to the ship while the Doc and Pete tried to bring the installation computer on-line for a download.

It was while I was on my second trip out to the jeep, staggering along with a double armload of medical supplies, that the shooting started. Nobody saw where the first shots came from. Most of them missed. One round caught Jim in the abdomen. He doubled up and fell, spilling packages in all directions. Alice and I threw ourselves down. I felt something fragile from my armload break as I hit the hard ground, but that really didn't bother me at the time.

"Jim!" Alice yelled, trying to keep her head down yet look around both at once. More shots rang out, whining from tumbled concrete.

"I'm okay!" Jim called back, rolling into cover, "Jacket stopped it. It hurts plenty, though!"

We stayed down, inching towards better cover. Alice's rifle came up, steadied on a pile of rubble. She squeezed off a disciplined short burst. A scattering of concrete chips and dust rewarded her efforts and her target ducked. Other heads appeared over the rubble, blasting away with bolt-action rifles and black-powder muskets more or less at random. They gave their positions away with a cloud of smoke as their primitive weapon discharged.

Primitive, but deadly.

I cringed behind a pile of rubble, painfully aware of how little my flak jacket covered and suddenly appreciating the Port Authority job I'd given up. Jim's rifle stuttered into life, hosing a long burst at something I couldn't see. With no real idea what he was firing at, I began spraying bullets in the same general direction, venting frustration and terror in a rippling snarl of useless automatic fire. A musket ball shattered the concrete next to my elbow, and I ducked to reload. My hands shook so much that it took six goes to get the new magazine in.

Everything went quiet for a few minutes, then a shout went up from somewhere in the rubble. Dozens of figures rose from the tumbled ruins, waving rifles or muskets. They began to scramble forward in a rush, some stopping to fire hastily-aimed shots at us.

The attackers wore monks' cowls and robes, mostly brown but with the odd red robe here and there. The red-robed monks carried no weapons, but held aloft what appeared to be some sort of religious icons – in the teeth of automatic fire, at that!

Alice began firing neat single shots, her rifle twitching from target to target as they closed. More shots hit than missed, but there were lots of them and they weren't worried about trivialities like staying alive. Jim sprayed fire at the nearest of them. I cowered, waiting for them to come close enough to use the subgun.

And hoping they wouldn't.

A brown-robed monk leaped over the rubble I had my back to, charging at Alice with bayonet fixed. Alice hadn't seen him. I raised the tiny subgun in both hands and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Cocking handle!" I snarled, wrenching the offending lever back. The bayonet was inches from Alice's unprotected back. I held the trigger down as the subgun blasted itself empty, writhing about alarmingly in my hands as the burst cut the monk in half. How I didn't kill Alice too I don't know.

I rolled aside, buttoning out the magazine as another monk leaped over the rubble. He turned, swung his rifle club-like at my head. I ducked, shoving the new clip in, remembering to cock the weapon this time. The monk wound up to swing again, then hurtled aside to smash into the concrete as a sound like thunder boomed out. A second explosion followed.

I looked around in terror. And there, in the entrance to the medical institute, stood Pete Havers. His elephant gun dropped to the concrete as he let it go. He pulled the shotgun from his back and continued firing, stepping forward each time as he worked the pump, marching out to meet the monks. A round slammed into his flak jacket. Pete shot the firer down.

Alice yelled at him to get down. Pete ignored her, dropping the empty shotgun and drawing a pair of nickel-plated automatic pistols. He dropped to one knee and began firing wildly into the rubble. Alice continued her aimed semi-automatic shots as the monks melted away, leaving more than a dozen of their number dead or dying. I made like a mole.

An explosion, louder even than the elephant gun, shook the rubble. Pete stood up to take a look. Alice moved to stop him as one of the 'corpses' pulled a pistol, a clumsy flintlock. He fired it at Pete and missed him. Not by much. I lurched to my feet and jumped on the monk. I put my boot on his chest and emptied a whole magazine into his face. Then I noticed the long-range fire coming my way and got down again, feeling sick and weak.

We took cover around the entrance and held a council of war. We dragged the wounded monks who lay within reach inside the complex, where the Doc carried out a mixture of first aid and interrogation. After a few minutes he reappeared.

"What now?" asked Pete.

"It seems to me that the locals are a bit unfriendly," added Jim blandly. "And possibly even barbaric."

The Doc ignored him and tried to sum up what he'd learned. From his tone he could have been lecturing to a bunch of students in some college. "Our scanning equipment failed to pick up a monastery a few miles from here. It is inhabited, as you may have guessed, by these militant Luddite monks. They believe that their mission is to cleanse their world of the 'taint' of science. Now that they know about this installation, they will certainly destroy it if we leave it unguarded. The equipment and data stored within would be of immense value at home. Ergo, we cannot allow the locals access to the site."

"Outstanding logic," muttered Jim. "I am breathless in admiration."

"However," the Doc went on, "We cannot defend the place indefinitely. We must send for help."

"Where to?" I asked. "You don't think the local government is going to help us out, do you?"

The Doc snorted. "Of course not! I propose sending the *Contrivance* out to bring assistance."

I really didn't like the sound of that, but felt compelled to ask, "Where?"

"The *Apollo* is still at Rohit. *Contrivance* could make the trip."

"A week in Jump each way!" I said derisively. "And anyway, what use is a depot ship going to be?"

"You forget that the RCES acts as a fire brigade out here. *Apollo* has troops aboard. Most of all it's there and within reach. It's our best hope." the Doc waved airily as he said it.

"And meanwhile the locals tear up the base for a fortnight?" Jim asked.

"No. Four of us stay here and defend. One takes the ship out alone. It's a short trip."

"Now that is beyond half-baked," said Jim.

"It's lunatic," I added.

"Got any better ideas?" asked Alice from where she was keeping watch a few meters away. There wasn't much anyone could say to that.

"The ship's a couple of klicks away. We can't use the jeep since the monks have already used it as a target for bomb-throwing practice," I put in. "So some lucky person has to try to get through that lot," I gestured with my thumb at the rubble in general. "They have to somehow reach the ship and fly it to Rohit, all alone. Then convince the cavalry to come charging to our rescue."

"That seems to be a reasonable appraisal of our situation," the Doc responded. "The monks do not seem to have enough men to take the facility. Not against four of us with modern weapons. I imagine they'll make a few more assaults before they concede that this is true, then decide to keep us bottled up while they send for assistance."

"So?" I asked.

"So, if we can hold on until nightfall, one of us should have a reasonable chance of reaching the ship."

I sat quietly for a moment, fearing what she was about to say. The ghost of Mike Keller floated before my eyes, going out alone to fix a towing cable. Had he known he would die? Or did he feel like I did at that moment, shaking in stark terror but convinced of success if he could but find the courage to try? Had he thought of it as merely another calculated risk? Or had he just gone and done it because it needed to be done and to hell with the consequences?

"I'll go," I said softly. "I can fly the ship, Astrogate and run the drives. None of you can." Mike's ghost nodded in approval.

There was silence for a minute. Alice and Jim nodded. Pete placed his hand on my arm, the most human contact we'd ever made. "Take these," he said. He passed over a hand grenade and his huge chromed revolver, "Just in case."

I took the gifts in silence, clipping the grenade to my belt and gazing at the vast bulk of the handgun. Real wood grips, a seven-inch barrel protruding from a six-round cylinder. I pressed the catch and swung out the cylinder, checked the load.

"Point Four-Six Express Magnum Explosive Hollow Points. They'll stop a charging Poni," Pete said proudly. "I've got a couple of speedloaders here – these are just ball, this one's Armour Piercing Discarding Sabot."

"Uh, thanks," I said, turning the hand cannon over to examine the other side. Pete had just made the longest speech of his life, but it went unnoticed. I swung the cylinder back in, buckled on the holster and shoved the revolver in, promising myself that I'd never need to fire it.

"No cocking handle," I announced suddenly with a crooked smile, making the others frown in puzzlement. "Oh, nothing."

We settled down to wait for nightfall. The monks tried to sneak closer. We drove them off with rifle fire. They tried another rush, with similar results to the first. The day wore on in an agony of waiting, watching, interspersed by the occasional shot. Finally, night fell, and about two hours after that I slipped out, picking my careful way through the rubble.

For the first few moments it went well, then I somehow managed to dislodge a loose chunk of masonry. It fell with a loud clatter onto a rusted piece of metal sheeting. I winced at the tinny rumble. Instantly the rubble was all activity, monks leaping up to shoot at sounds and movements. I did the mole impression again. A monk surged up close by. I tried to bring the machine-pistol to bear, but I was too slow. A musket roared nearby as another monk saw the movement and snap-fired. My assailant tumbled to the ground, groaning. I didn't bother thanking the gods. I just got up and fled.

I know I fell several times, but I kept on blundering in what I hoped to all the gods was the direction of the ship. I was terrified that I might be going around in circles. And then there it was, lying under the clear stars, safety and security and salvation all in one.

It was surrounded by monks, of course.

I crouched down, hearing random shots behind me. Half-mad with fear, I knew that I couldn't face going back to the others through that hell of musketry. I forced myself to rise and sneak a little closer.

My foot caught on something soft. Something that yielded, grunted. Something that leaped up from its slumbers with a long knife held ready. I'd had seen plenty of scenes like this in martial arts movies. Any decent movie hero would take the monk out in a silent but spectacular martial arts exchange, or maybe break his neck with a single move, then move on with a cheesy wisecrack.

But I'm not action hero, just a five-foot wimp who has real trouble with stiff doors. And I was scared to death. So I abandoned stealth and emptied the SMG at him. The monk flailed as the point-blank burst ripped into his chest, rounds punching out through his back to whine from the concrete.

Just in case there was somebody on the planet who didn't know I was there, I lobbed the grenade out into the darkness and sprinted for the ship. As I ran, I hit the remote for the secondary cargo doors, hoping that nobody was near them.

Monks scrambled from their makeshift camps, from where they were supposed to be watching the ship. They grabbed for muskets and rifles and started shooting. I saw sparks against the hull as a round whipped by my unprotected head and struck the ship. I tried to fire back, but the SMG was empty. I tried to reload at the run like I'd seen Alice do in practice. Instead I dropped the gun and stepped on it. I imagine I fell quite spectacularly.

Even now, I still have a mental blank about what happened next. Suddenly I was on the cargo ramp with the revolver hot in my hand and five bloody corpses behind me.

As I hit the 'close' button a skinny little monk in a flapping robe leaped up the ramp, trying to club me with his musket. I kicked out at him, my boot driving up between his legs. He started to double up, staggering forward into the ship. I hit him backhand across the face with the pistol barrel, then remembered I might have a round left. I jabbed the hand canon out at him and pulled the trigger.

The revolver jerked in my hand, feeling like I was holding onto my very own private earthquake. A sheet of flame a couple of meters long roared from the muzzle as the explosive hollow-point round hit my assailant in the throat. He slid back down the ramp, all but decapitated. I scrambled for the bridge section as soon as the ramp closed.

The *Contrivance* had no weapons, so I took off. The contragrav thrusters bowled the surviving monks about as the ship rose from Nicosia's surface. Maybe I squished a few.

I hope so.

* * *

The trip to Rohit was a nightmare. The ship's drive systems had taken some damage when the monks had tried to blast their way in through the cargo doors with crude black power explosives. The drives rumbled and threatened to cut out at any moment.

And it was creepy to be all alone in the ship like that. I had to fight a compulsion to go hunting the ship for the monk I just knew had managed to get on board. There wasn't one, of course. There was no way any of them could have got inside. I put it down to too many suspense movies.

Finally, after just under seven fraught days and sleepless nights, *Contrivance* precipitated out of Jump at Rohit. The RCES people responded to my distress signal with amazing speed. Within minutes the *Apollo* had detached some of her external stores modules and was preparing for Jump.

I docked *Contrivance* to the detached stores modules. They left a scratch crew behind to man – and maybe repair – her, in case any of the scoutboats came in during the clipper's absence.

As *Apollo* moved out to the Jump point, heading for Nicosia and rescue, I was ushered into the Captain's presence. I felt out of place in the plush office. It wasn't my tattered coveralls or a week's worth of tears and tension so much as a feeling that I just was not worthy to be there.

Captain Walker gestured to a chair. "Sit down. We are already preparing for Jump insertion. That won't be pleasant – we have a drive fault."

"I came to beg for help. I didn't ask for all this," I said apologetically.

"We look after our own," Walker responded.

"I'm sorry?"

"The RCES looks after its own. He never told you, did he?"

I shook my head. Who had never told me what?

"Daniel. The Doc. He was my first officer and scientific advisor before he decided he could better serve humaniti by doing what he does. Daniel had a disagreement with our superiors about what needs to be done. The mutual agreement was that he should leave active service, go on the reserve list. He still works for the RCES, on and off. He's one of us."

"I see." I wondered what else he hadn't mentioned.

"That's why I told him about the installation. I'm not allowed to chase rumors when there's an operation to be carried out. But he can. The Exploration Board turns a blind eye to the breach in regulations because he always gets results. And I'm allowed to go to the rescue of downed crews – because that's one of the reasons we're here."

"But the rest of us aren't with the RCES," I objected, puzzled.

"Anyone who flies with us is one of us," Walker said, with an emphasis I didn't understand at the time. "Now, I have to ask something of you."

"Anything," I said, and winced as the world turned inside out for a second. Walker had been right; Jump insertion in this ship was profoundly unpleasant.

"When we arrive, I have a whole company of ground troops to drop, and even an assault shuttle to do it in. What I haven't got is a spare pilot."

"Why not?"

"I had to transfer some personnel to RCES *Avenger*. They needed extra crew for an extraction – one of our advisory teams got themselves into trouble. My replacements haven't arrived yet. So; will you fly my assault lander?"

"Of course."

"You can stay inside once you touch down. A guide might help but I'm sure the Marines can handle it once they reach the ground."

I nodded. "They're my friends... I'll do whatever it takes to get them out safely."

"I've assigned you a cabin to get cleaned up in. I'll have someone escort you to the briefing room shortly." Walker stood, indicating that the interview was over.

* * *

Apollo hurtled into orbit over Nicosia, braking hard under full thrust. Without her external cargo pods the clipper was surprisingly maneuverable. I watched the insertion from the pilot's seat in the one and only assault lander. Beside me sat my volunteer copilot. He was a cargo pilot, skilled at what he did but not qualified for planetary assault. But then neither was I. Finally I got confirmation from Bison and his oversized platoon of volunteers – all that could be crammed into the lander - that they were ready. The Captain's launch clearance came in a moment later, and the shuttle blasted free of its mother craft, arcing out and down towards the planet and a rescue mission that might already be too late.

I just ignored all the rules and went in hot. Very hot. The shuttle bounced around in atmospheric turbulence, but it was nothing after Enderson's Giant.

I fought the controls rather than slow the shuttle. The bridge door slid open, revealing Bison's muscular frame. He'd used his override to get onto the lander's bridge. He started to ask what the problem was, looked at the instruments, then nodded knowingly. All he said was, "Gods in space...." He went quietly back to his position and strapped in.

As they approached the ruins, I could see fighting going on. The monks had been reinforced by some sort of local militia. Hundreds of them were attacking the complex.

We came in right on top of them, and never mind the terrain. The shuttle hit so hard that one of its landing legs buckled. The troops piled out. I grabbed a submachine-gun from an overhead bracket and followed them into a blizzard of fire. Most of them hit the deck straight away. I did likewise.

The ground troops took up firing positions, began a practiced fire-and maneuver operation to clear the monks and militia away from the complex' main entrance. I kept my head down as the overmatched locals gave way before the troops' disciplined assault. I watched Bison directing the operation with cool efficiency while I chafed to be moving out. I knew he was doing it right; doing it as fast as it could be done, but it wasn't fast enough for me. There was no way to contact my friends, no way to know if they were still alive.

I looked around, saw a group of monks and militiamen force their way into the ruined building where I'd last seen Jim and the others. I went cold, and then all the fear burned away in a pure desperate rage. I stood up, ignoring the flying lead.

Someone called out to me to get down. Instead I ran towards the building with the SMG in one hand and an automatic pistol in the other. I used the SMG on semi-auto as a big handgun, firing at anything that got in her way. Some of the ground troops charged after me. At least three musket-balls hit my flak jacket, but at the time I felt nothing.

We overran a couple of small groups, just kept on going. Some of the troops behind me got hit but we just plunged on in a berserk fury. I threw aside the automatic pistol when the slide locked back on an empty chamber, and drew the revolver. I reached the entrance, emptied the subgun at a militiaman who tried to bayonet me, and charged inside. Three of the ground troops had reached the building along with me. We forced their way towards the sounds of firing farther inside. Two militia troopers tried to stop us, but they only had muskets. Once they'd fired they had to reload, which took about twenty seconds.

A lifetime.

My scratch assault party hurdled the bodies and pressed on. Two of the troopers turned aside to clear side chambers. The third – Bison himself, I realize now – raced after me, He was slowed by his heavy armor, but not as much as I'd have expected.

About a minute later I reached the inner chamber where we'd found a stash of medical supplies. There were two more militia troopers in the doorway with their backs to the corridor. I shot them both, the revolver thunderously loud in the confined space. Bison's rifle snarled behind me as he engaged more hostiles. I entered the chamber at a dead run.

And only about thirty seconds too late.

There were maybe a dozen bodies near the entrance, then a couple farther in. Opposite the doorway was the Doc, a bayonet still jammed between his ribs. His sawnoff lay only a few inches from his outstretched hand. Jim lay beside Pete a few feet away, sprawled over a makeshift barricade of heavy furniture. There was blood on Jim's sword, and I later discovered that Pete had managed to run out of ammunition for all his weapons. Alice lay face down in a pool of blood.

The Doc was still moving feebly, but the spreading pool of dark blood beneath him told me enough. His glasses were broken. He squinted up at me, then tried to smile. "You came back," he gasped.

Then he raised his hand and tried to point.

I turned, followed the gesture. Just too late.

There was one left.

He was one of the monks, still standing despite a terrible wound in his side.

I stared dumbly as he raised a flintlock pistol and shot me.

The ball struck my flak jacket just to the right of my heart. It staggered me back a pace, but it didn't hurt. Nothing could hurt my heart after what I'd just seen. I brought up the revolver and shot him in the chest, throwing him back against the bloody wall.

I fired again as he slid down. His arms flailed, throwing the empty flintlock pistol across the room.

And again. The revolver jumped in my hand, a living thing animated by hate and loss. Again.

The corpse hit the floor, sagged limply.

I kept on pulling the trigger, the cylinder revolving, hammer clicking on discharged cartridges, again and again. Then I dropped the gun to the floor. It hit with a loud metallic thud.

Bison and some of the troopers had arrived by then, but I ignored them. I ran to the Doc and cradled his head in my arms. He smiled again and weakly reached up to take my hand. "I checked the data banks. There's a century of medical knowledge stored in there... cures for dozens of diseases. Miller's, among others. We're going to save a lot of lives," he choked out. "We did it. We actually did it."

Then he died.

Bison escorted me away, gently led me to the shuttle. They collected the bodies, loaded the salvaged equipment, downloaded the database and sealed the complex with explosives. Then they boarded the shuttle and waited.

It was a long, long time before I could bring myself to lift off.

* * *

Aboard the *Apollo*, I sat alone with my ghosts, staring at a cabin wall. Pretty soon I'd be taking the *Contrivance* back to Aubaine. The payout from the Institute Of Medicine was immense, and it would be mine alone. There would be no need to share with the rest of the salvage crew. Like the two troopers killed in the assault, we'd buried them in space.

I sighed. Take the *Contrivance* home, then what? Outfit her with the bonus payment? Go salvaging? Maybe. Carry on the work of Doctor Daniel Little with a crew of my own?

But the immense payout wouldn't cover the debts run up by *Contrivance* in her eccentric service to humaniti. I'd had taken a good look at the ship's papers. Things were much worse than the Doc had made out. He'd known he'd have to sell the ship after this mission, even if he was successful. And now I'd have to sell, or find a new financial backer.

But who would invest in a wreck like *Contrivance*?

The door chime sounded. "Open," I said quietly.

The door slid open. Bison stood there, looking a little grim. He entered the small cabin. "I'm truly sorry we were too late," he said softly.

"I know. I couldn't have asked for more. They're heroes now. The database alone will advance medicine by years. It'll save a lot of lives."

"To die in the service of all humaniti. There's no greater glory," Bison agreed.

"They'd rather have lived though," I said.

"Oh yes. But if you have to die, then that's the way it should be. Their lives weren't wasted."

"I know," I agreed, blinking back tears.

"I know it's a bad time, but the Captain would like to see you in the Flight Mess," Bison said gently.

"What's going on?"

"Lots of things. We've received a message from the Broli Foundation. They're offering quite a large sum for that wreck of yours – and a handy salary if you'll sign up as her Astrogator."

"I see. And the bad news?" I just knew there had to be some.

"We can't take you home. We've been diverted to search for the *Avenger*. She's overdue. So's the *Mallarn*, the ship that should be bringing our replacement crew. So we still don't have a Sublight Craft Officer."

"Fine. I'm coming," I said without enthusiasm, not seeing the significance of that statement. I rose to follow him.

We entered the Flight Crew Mess, and after going about two steps I came to halt, stunned but strangely not all that surprised. What I saw is graven on my memory to this day. The senior officers of RCES *Apollo* sat around the long table, with Elsie Walker at the head. There were bottles on the table, a glass at every place. Bison walked round the table and seated himself without a word.

There was one vacant chair. It was the place nearest the door. There was a body sleeve and overjacket draped over the back. The chair stood out from the table, waiting for its owner to sit down on it. MY chair, I realized.

I gazed dumbly at the faces. They're so familiar now, but then they were strangers offering me a place in their world. Captain Walker – Elsie – said with a sad smile that I understand now, "Say yes or go back out that door, Lisa. It's that simple."

In a small and strangled voice, I said yes.

"In that case, please welcome Lisa Davies aboard as our new Sublight Craft Officer. Lisa will hold the provisional rank of Lieutenant, and will use the Tacnet callsign..."

"...Lander," Bison put in with a chuckle.

"Take your seat, Lander...." Elsie said, and as I hesitantly settled myself, she stood.

"Today, people, we have gained a new sister," Elsie stood and raised her glass. Everyone picked up theirs. Beer, wine or soda according to preference, it didn't matter. "You know how Lander came to sit among us. She's lost people to the Service, even before she joined it. But she's one of us now. One of the Few. Welcome, Lisa... Lander."

Glasses were raised in salute, and the image froze, locked away in mind forever.

"Brothers and sisters," Elsie said, "I give you a toast. Our dearly loved comrades. Our proud fallen.... our absent friends."

Each of us wondered how long before we joined the ranks of the absent. There was a moment's silence. And then we raised our glasses and chorused, "Absent Friends."

And where are they now? What became of them?

They brought civilization back to the stars. They made the universe a better place. And they died doing it. Every single one of them. And now I'm all alone, the only one left to remember.

Gods bless you, my Absent Friends.

You will never be forgotten.

Boarding Party

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 24 years old, a recent addition to the crew of RCES Apollo. It is mid 1202.

You want to know what it's really like out there? Then go into any starport bar and listen to the spacers talk. There's one horror story that you'll keep on hearing. In a million different forms you'll hear about ships that came out of Jump and ran into something that wasn't supposed to be there. They say it's impossible. Well, it happens. I know it does.

There was this girl I went through the Hiver academy with, back on Aubaine. She was a pilot, one of the real hotshots. She shipped out with one of the earliest RC missions. First Jump, they came out next to another ship going the other way. I mean, the odds against that sort of thing are astronomical, but there they were. Nose to nose with another vessel and not a thing they could do about it.

The logs later showed they were less than three meters apart as they passed - they found bits of a maser dish stuck in the control surfaces. Scary. They say it shouldn't happen.

It does, though.

I always have this bad feeling before an Emergence, and nobody takes any notice of me. I guess they were all used to it on the *Apollo*. Anyway, there was this one survey trip we were on, just routine see-what's-there stuff, nothing very unusual at all. We were all getting pretty bored after a couple of weeks prowling about asteroids and moons looking for salvage, so we moved on.

I had this funny feeling before we went into Jump, and it was worse coming out. Still, I'm the resident neurotic. Nobody takes any notice of me at the best of times. They used to make up jokes about me being space-crazy. Yeah, well maybe I am. I came back alive, though, and some of them didn't.

We popped out of Jump nice as you like, except for the usual pains. *Apollo* had this weird fault on the drives. It caused the worst Jump Emergences you've ever felt. The drives worked OK, but it hurt – a lot. That's why we didn't have a Hiver on board. The Emergences were enough to make a Hiver sick for days. We ran out of volunteers pretty quick.

Anyway, there we all were, wondering if we'd had internal organ damage and waiting for Elsie to say something clever to me. There was nothing anywhere near us; no Vampire with its guns blazing or oncoming asteroid field. Nothing. I still had a bad feeling, and I said so.

Elsie, our skipper, was an old salvage chief. The no-nonsense type. She was just turning to me to make another of her acid remarks when I noticed something on the passive EMS readout. As a command officer I had to be on the bridge, but there's nothing much for the officer-in-charge of Assault Landers to do during Emergence, except suffer with the rest.

"Hey, what's that?" I called out, and pointed at the detector station. Everybody jeered at me. They had a great time, right up until they realized I was serious. After that it was Battle-Stations-This-Is-Not-A-Drill and all that military stuff; sensors on, missiles armed and ship's cat locked in a cupboard. Elsie ran a smart ship.

Somewhere up front I'd picked up a drifting object, leaking a little bit of energy. Whatever it was, it was no asteroid. We decided it must be a starship. As we crept closer it turned out to be exactly that.

We held a quick debate on the bridge; Chief Gunner decided it must be a Vampire and could he launch his missiles please? The Navigator thought it was a derelict. Elsie thought it might be a Free Trader coasting out to Jump and not wanting to be noticed.

We had ourselves quite a little debate, with all the usual arm-waving and shouting. Then our pilot lit up the maneuver drive. The question's academic now, he told the ensuing babble, since they can't fail to have noticed that, and shouldn't

we be doing something positive?

There was quite a bit more angry shouting at that, but the die was cast. The Ithklur all thought it was hilarious, but they would. Anyone who preaches universal peace, love and respect for everything, yet goes around tearing people's arms off is bound to have a strange sense of humor.

I love Ithklur, contradictions and all. They're so emotional, so full of wonder. So reliable. Some people can't see past the Santa Claus thing. Well, I here's my theory: I blame the Hivers. Yeah, okay, so the Hivers get blamed for everything remotely wacky about our lives, just like the Ancients get blamed for every piece of defective Physics. But I think that the Hivers have fiddled with some Ithklur mythology and symbololgy until the name of a perfectly serious religious figure ended up sounding like Santa Claus, complete with red and white hat and all.

Or maybe the Ithklur always had a red-hatted culture hero called San*Klass and the Hivers altered the Terran Father Christmas myth to fit with that. Or maybe they both existed all along and it's just a strange piece of coincidence. Maybe the only reason to wonder any of this is that I've been around Hivers too long and I see manipulation everywhere. After all, the universe gets a lot stranger than this if you look at it carefully enough. Maybe we should blame the Ancients instead.

Anyway, who cares? I love the Ithklur for what they are. I'm told that's a very Ithklur attitude. Fine with me.

Elsie tried communicating with the derelict, but we got no answer. We thought about it for a while and decided to board. It certainly looked like a derelict. Pity it wasn't.

I piloted the first Fury across with a bunch of volunteers on board. In charge was a Marine captain named Bill Ryson; Bison they called him on the tacnet. Now Bill was as tough as they come; a regular, grade 'A' space hero straight out of the Saturday morning reruns. The big blond guy you see on recruiting posters - yeah, that's him. Armed to the teeth and nice as you like. We went in close to the ship and he organized his team.

Bill came onto my bridge once they were ready. "Okay Lander," he said, "we'll jump across to the derelict. Stay clear with the Fury and the backup team, just in case."

Like I was going to take it into my head to go in there, I thought, but I said okay. It was kind of him to jump instead of wanting a docking. That way if the derelict was full of little green men or eggs with crawly things inside then they couldn't get to us on the lander. Bill was like that. He looked out for his team-mates all the time. We all miss him now he's gone.

Me more than most.

They jumped across. It took Bison four rather undignified bounce-off-and-be-hauled-back efforts to get a decent grip and fix the line. Then the other three fools - all right, volunteers - went across with a fiber-optic comms relay cable. They were all RC Marines, tough as hell and twice as mean. They worshipped Bison.

But then, who didn't?

I watched as the Marines climbed about on the hull for a bit and eventually found an airlock. It wasn't very big and they could only get two in at once. Guess who went in first?

The ship they were entering was unfamiliar; it'd probably been cobbled together from bits of about nine others at some point. About a thousand tonnes displacement and no visible weaponry. Plenty of hull damage though. I sat and fretted, listening to the comms chatter coming back down the fiber-optic line. Bison called the second team in, then the third. Twelve Marines in total, plus five more waiting to drag them out if anything went wrong.

The comms traffic wasn't very interesting: area secure; some power still on but most systems offline; hey look at all this lovely salvage; shut up stupid and watch for hostiles. All that military chat, banter and repartee. Boring. I still had this bad feeling, though. I was trying to convince myself it was the stomach ache the Jump drive had given me, when we got the first hint of bad news. It was nothing really, just a Marine calling in out of sequence.

Bison was on it right away, demanding why Tick-Tock had called in instead of Blaster. I ask you, a grown man calling himself Tick-Tock? Anyway, we were all thinking Bison was off his trolley at last - he always was paranoid - as he ordered a soundoff and go-to-ground. There was a certain tension in the lander and over on the *Apollo*. It says something about how well Elsie knew Bison that the second Fury was launching with a bunch of volunteers on board within a minute of that call.

My bad feeling got worse. I drew my revolver, a great stainless steel monstrosity with a six-inch barrel, and idly spun the cylinder. John "Bouncer" Askey, my copilot, looked worried. I pointed the cannon somewhere else.

That revolver and me go back a long way. It saved my life on Nicosia and it's all I have left of the old freelancer crew I worked with. Thereby hangs a tale, but we'll save it for another time.

Anyway, I was sitting playing with my handgun and getting some funny looks from the copilot when the firing started. It was just a couple of shots at first, then someone started yelling and there was this almighty volley of shots, grenades and God-knows-what. I could hear Bison giving orders, still all calm and firm.

The commlink pickups must have been swamped by all that firing, because the reception got very fuzzy. We lost contact with the *Apollo* moments later, when a whole load of area jamming started up from within the derelict.

I heard Bison's orders change from what's-going-on to fall-back-and-give-cover. I remember the moment when I started to panic. It was when Bison's voice rose. I'd never heard him even sound concerned before and it sent a chill right through me. Then he was talking just to me and I felt honored for some reason.

"Lander," he said, "ready the backup team. We're coming out with casualties." His voice was tense, scared even. That wasn't like Bison, but he had a good reason.

"Ready, Bison," I replied, and I was scared. He hadn't had time to say who or what was kicking our butts, but it had to be something pretty meaty. "Lander One standing ready for pickup. What's your ETA?"

There was this long silence, punctuated by gunfire and explosions. I said again, "Bison, this is Lander. What's your ETA?"

The commlink had gone silent, and for a second I thought they were all dead. Then Bison said, ever so quiet, "Balls to our ETA. Half the team coming out immediately. We're giving cover."

About five minutes later they appeared in the airlock; five of them, two apparently unconscious or dead. I transferred them straight over to Lander Two so I could stay on station. There had been nothing over the commlink for a while, so I transmitted again.

"Bison," I said, "Bison! Where the hell are you?"

"Lander. Break off and return to *Apollo*. We are cut off in the command area of the derelict. Only three plus myself left. I wish to commend Marine Sergeant "Madman" McGronagh, Marines "Royster" Renashii and "Halfwit" Hills for volunteering for the rearguard. Marines "Whatsit" Travens and "Tick-Tock" Hughes have been killed in action. "Raven" Hawley is missing. We are low on ammunition, cut off by possibly twenty hostiles. Suspect ship is Vampire, repeat Vampire. Recommend standoff bombardment. Lander, are you there? I'm talking to you!"

There was more shooting, then, "Lander, tell Elsie to kill it! Use the meson gun, but for all the Gods' sake you've got to kill this thing! I want you to break off now! Leave us and break off! Lander, Lander?" I sat for a few seconds, shocked dumb. I heard him, all Saturday-morning hero calling in artillery fire on his own position, all noble self-sacrifice, and I looked at the revolver.

Absent Friends, it whispered to me. More absent friends to toast at dinner. I remembered Jim and the Doc and all the others and my eyes filled with tears. They were gone too, into the halls of memory; heroes that didn't make it.

"Not this time." I said it almost silently, but Bouncer heard me. He looked across, panicky. I guess I have a reputation. Through my tight throat, I grated out, "Bison, hold on. We're coming." I slammed the throttles home.

Just before the boarding cable snapped, I heard Bison's voice saying something over the commlink. I think it was "Idiot!" but I can't be sure.

The Fury curved away from the derelict's hull, while I chose my target. There! The biggest hull-breach, close to the bridge section. Bouncer was reaching for his maneuver controls, but he stopped when I shoved the revolver in the side of his head. I didn't have time to be subtle.

"Fire the laser into that breach. Do it!" I snapped at him.

"You're not...."

"Fire the damned laser or I'll kill you!" I would have, too. I could have used the laser myself, but Bouncer might have tried to jump me. Gods knew he was scared enough to.

The Fury's laser fired into the breach, widening it a bit. I'd just about killed our sideways drift, and now I opened the throttles fully. The lander's aerodynamic nose section should widen the breach a little, I thought.

I hadn't really considered coming out again.

As I snapped my faceplate shut, I heard Bouncer's panicky voice on the intercom, saying, "Brace for impact! Brace for impact! Oh Gods in Space, brace for impact!"

I cut him out of the intercom, and spoke into it myself, insanely calm. "Stand by to ram and board. Backup team with me, crew defend the lander. Bison's in big trouble and we're getting him out."

I cut the intercom, still waving the revolver vaguely in Bouncer's direction to keep him quiet. He'd given up by now. I could tell by the way he was trying to hide inside his suit's chest protector. His eyes were very big. The derelict was racing towards the front ports. I hit the 'close' control for the blast-shield and braced myself.

Just before the shield closed I saw something moving in the breached chamber. It was humanoid, but it wasn't human. Humans need pressure suits in space and this thing didn't wear one. Then the shield was shut and we hit with a scraping crash that made my teeth rattle.

We came to rest against something solid and I hit the emergency cabin door control. I'd blown the cabin atmosphere and we'd be going home with no door, assuming we went home at all, but I didn't care. All that mattered was no more absent friends. I holstered the revolver, unclipped my SMG from the bulkhead, and jumped out.

Just as well there was artificial grav in the derelict, or I'm not sure where I'd have gone. As it was I was airborne for a while longer than I expected. The backup team were boiling down the assault ramp, all alert and keen. Behind them the two lander techs were nervously covering the chamber. I wondered if Bouncer would take off again immediately and decided I didn't care.

I ignored a pulped leg sticking out from under the lander's nose, and led my team of daredevils into the derelict's main hull. There was some dim light, and what it showed wasn't pretty. The ship was old, fixed up a million times, and it was hostile. The grav plates were too feeble to hurt us with and our suits were protection against fire-suppression gases and such like, but it was scary in there.

We pushed on, searching for Bison's rearguard. Occasionally the hull vibrated, maybe a grenade going off somewhere. The suits' comm units were useless with all the jamming coming from the derelict.

We searched for a few minutes before we found Tick-tock. Most of him, anyway. I think he'd pulled the pin on one of his own grenades. There were two humanoid corpses nearby, riddled with holes. They'd been humans at one time, but someone or something had implanted a whole lot of junk into them. Breathing gear, some way to survive low pressure, a

load of other stuff I couldn't identify. It was disgusting. One of the backup Marines threw up in his helmet. I sent him back to the lander. Normally I'd have puked too, but I wasn't sane enough just then.

The rest of us pushed on. The vibrations were closer now. One bright spark had the great idea of sticking her helmet against a bulkhead. She heard the vibrations better, but not where they came from.

We rounded a corner in a mob, which was stupid. I was the only officer present so I should have told my team not to bunch, but what the hell do I know about being a Marine? Anyway, there was this big guy standing motionless in the corridor. No suit, no helmet, huge gun. Face a mass of wires. I froze, and some idiot ran into me. I fell forward.

The big guy's burst went over me, hit the wall-listener instead. A chest full of gauss needles and another vacant chair. We all started shooting.

I'm a lousy shot, and I've no real idea what I hit, if anything. Fortunately our support gunner, Ballboy, was on target with his LAG. The Vampire's pet went down, leaving a trail of gory bits falling slowly in the low gravity.

We started running towards the door behind him. I did the reloading-while-you-run thing, which meant I arrived at the door last and swearing. Ballboy shoved it open and leaped in. Boomboom and Fidget piled in...and stopped dead. I crashed into them as the surgeon looked up from his table.

We'd found the missing Marine.

The surgeon looked like the other Vampire slave, but more delicate. It even wore what had once been a white coat. It went for a pistol and just disappeared as Boomboom and Ballboy took it down.

We'd found Raven Hawley too late. It had already put something into her head - without anesthetic. She rolled her eyes at us, but she couldn't speak. She was in a plastic cocoon, presumably to keep the vacuum from killing her while they operated to make her one of them. We couldn't get her out without killing her. I didn't know what to do.

Raven solved the problem herself. Boomboom was close to the cocoon, and she gestured at him, trying to communicate. We all looked the other way as he placed a breaching charge into the opening in the cocoon the surgeon had used. Raven managed a tiny smile as Boomboom set the timer. She gave us a thumbs-up, and lay back. We ran out of the far end of the chamber as the charge blew.

There won't be anything left of Raven to find or bury, but at least she isn't hurting any more.

We ran on, getting desperate now. Somewhere up ahead our friends were dying. Another slave appeared, this one wounded. We blew it to bits.

We piled around another corner, to find four slaves behind a rough barricade of tables. They'd been keeping Bison and his team pinned in the bridge, but of course the Vampire had internal cameras and they were waiting for us. Three of them fired at us while the other kept shooting down the corridor into what was presumably the bridge area.

These slaves were tough, but they weren't all that smart. Or maybe some human part still resisted the Vampire controlling them. I'd like to think that.

It was no contest really. The slaves went down like ninepins as Ballboy's LAG thumped. There wasn't much left of the barricade either, which says something about the mood among my little band. There were a couple more of the slaves nearby, so the others kept their heads down while I went into the bridge to tell Bison the way out was clear.

The bridge area was a mess. Bison had smashed everything in the hope of killing the Vampire. Fat chance. Halfwit was spread all over the deck, and Royster was hit pretty bad. Bison and Madman were still shooting down a different entry passage when I arrived. Madman almost shot me by reflex.

It took seconds to explain what we'd done. I didn't mention how Raven had died. Bison called me a stupid bitch but he was grinning like a fool. He hugged me, then told Madman to carry Royster out. We'd give cover, he said. I was really pleased to hear that.

The withdrawal was textbook stuff at first; Madman carrying his wounded companion in the middle as the backup team minced anything that got in the way. Bison and I gave rather random covering fire and kept the rear clear.

We got separated near the surgery. The Vampire managed to slam an emergency blast-door and cut Madman, Bison and me off from the others. Bison and I exchanged worried looks. Madman just hefted his rifle one-handed and shrugged. We detoured.

It took nearly fifteen minutes of pure hell to find a way around. In the end we had to blast a hole in a bulkhead. The charges worked OK against normal bulkheads, but not armored blast-doors.

Royster was still moving a bit, but he was badly hurt. His emergency suit seals weren't holding all that well, either. We became less cautious as the way seemed to clear before us. We only saw one more hostile, and Madman cut that one in half with a long burst. He even managed to reload one-handed on the move. Makes me jealous even thinking about that.

We burst into the chamber I'd rammed the lander into, to find a battle royal going on there. The techs and the Marines were shooting it out with a whole horde of slaves, all to keep a way open for us to reach safety.

We were halfway there when more slaves arrived from a side entry. These ones were different; faster and smarter. I saw one of the backup Marines go down as they opened up. I emptied my SMG at them.

I saw Royster jerk as something hit him, then Madman stumbled and fell. His right leg was gone at the knee, but all he did was roll over and start shooting. The slaves rushed at us. I dropped to one knee and began to fire as calmly as I could. Neat, controlled bursts. I saw a couple of them go down.

Bison was still running. I hadn't have time to curse him for a coward before I saw he was carrying Royster in his arms. I kept firing.

Madman was making frantic 'run-away' gestures at me from the ground, but I kept on shooting. For Raven Hawley and all the others who'd died, I kept on shooting and killing until it was too late to escape.

I pushed the last magazine into the SMG and glanced around. The lander was still clear, but most of the defenders were trying to stop a rush from the other direction. We'd been forgotten.

I could see the lifters making the lander tremble. Bouncer was readying for a takeoff and I wished the jamming would stop so I could tell him to go. I'd killed too many with my harebrained rescue scheme. It was time to cut our losses, even if I was one of them. I really thought that at the time, believe it or not.

Maybe there's a bit of the Saturday-morning hero in us all.

Madman had stopped firing, and I thought he'd died. Then he grabbed my SMG - his rifle must have been empty - and gestured at the lander with his thumb. He started shooting with the SMG in one hand and his last-ditch handgun in the other. He scored a lot of hits, but the five slaves left kept on coming. They were tough.

Idiot that I am, I grabbed Madman's pack and began dragging him towards the shuttle. He was sitting up, still shooting, but how I don't know. The missing leg should have seen him off by then.

One, then another, slave went down. Three left. Madman threw the pistol away, empty. I reached for the last breaching charge in his pack and hoped I'd have the courage to blow it when they reached us. I didn't want wires in my brain.

Then something hammered me in the gut. It didn't really hurt at first, but I couldn't move my legs. I started to fall backwards, letting go of Madman. The breaching charge rolled away. Then I felt the wet inside the suit and it started to

hurt.

Oh Gods, did it hurt.

Madman fell away from me, and the last three slaves rushed us. I couldn't do much but watch them and pray for Madman to start shooting again. I couldn't have known that the round that hit me was the only one of the burst that hadn't hit Madman's faceplate. He was already dead.

I pulled the revolver out and managed to sit up. The suit's presets had filled me with something powerful. My eyes were blurred – I don't know if that was tears or drugs –but I emptied the revolver point-blank into the nearest slave.

7.6mm hadn't hurt them very much, but the revolver was a very different story. I'd had it loaded with explosive armor-piercing, and the rounds were colossal to start with. It rattled my teeth when I fired it, but it blew the slave right off his feet. I could see bone in the craters in his chest.

Another raised a weapon to shoot me, and I remember thinking: *Thank the Gods, I'm going to die. No surgery, just one more absent friend.*

The slave disappeared from my field of view as Bison shot her. He hit the last one feet-first in some sort of low-G flying kick. The slave was certainly impressed; she did a complete flip and lost her weapon. Bison clubbed her to death with his empty rifle in a terrifying display of raw Marine aggression.

I'm told Bison dragged me and Madman back to the lander. He wouldn't leave his old comrade behind even though he was already dead. By then, the drugs had put me to sleep. I stayed that way for two whole days.

I managed to get to dinner a couple of days later. There were several vacant chairs at the table, and the mood was subdued. Elsie looked even older than usual as she rose to make the traditional speech. Bison was sitting to my left and I leaned over to speak to him, "You came back for me," was all I could manage.

"You came for us. Thank you." he still looked sad, but then Madman had been his closest friend for years.

Elsie had instituted an unusual change in the traditional toast the day I came aboard. Rather than the most senior rank taking it, Elsie sometimes had the one who had lost the most give the toast as a mark of respect. It'd helped me fit in, and now she honored Madman and the others by letting the man they'd idolized toast them.

Bison stood, and I could see tears in his eyes. He very briefly recounted the mission we'd just come back from, then made his own speech. It wasn't long.

"We look after our own in the Marines, and they say we're a bit contemptuous of outsiders. Maybe. But sometimes it all goes so sour that we can't make it alone, like it did a couple of days ago. On the bridge of that Vampire I prayed that someone would come and save us. Someone did, and Royster and I are alive as a result. Believe me, we're grateful!"

Bison waved his glass at me as he went on, "You have to be a bit mad to be a Marine, to walk into situations like that one. You have to be completely insane to follow a bunch of Marines in and try to haul them out of something they can't handle. So I give you a special toast, to a backup team who were willing to die trying to rescue us, and their leader; a neurotic little woman who can't shoot straight."

There were chuckles, but Bison went on, "Lander has the soul of a Marine and I'm proud to be on her side. To the rescuers."

We all raised our assorted glasses and cups - after a couple of rough rides the ship's glassware was becoming a bit less formal - and repeated Bison's toast. "To the rescuers."

Bison went on, "And to the ones that didn't make it. I hope someday there'll be no more absent friends, but that day is a long way off. Brothers and sisters, I give you the proud fallen, our dear lost comrades. Our absent friends."

"Absent Friends." we all chorused.

Then there was the usual silence as each of us considered the list of fallen friends, and thanked whatever we believed in that we weren't among them. Madman, Doc, Pete, Alice, Raven.... There were tears and honor for all of them.

And for the others yet to fall.

Under Hostile Skies

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 25 years old, a senior lieutenant aboard RCES Apollo. It is early 1203.

We got our butts kicked into the middle of next week on Lebherz. It shouldn't have happened, but 'shouldn't' doesn't make you immune to disaster. We found that out on Lebherz, too.

Lebherz was a low-priority target, and the republic of Laken was just a tiny part of the whole. An insular part at that. Since the initial tech level was lowish, RC command figured it wasn't worth raiding. A few freelancers made some quick bucks now and again, but that was it for RC contact with Lebherz.

That all changed when our INTEL people found a new structure and figured out what it was. It seems that somebody had unearthed a nice ready-built base for the military to use. The locals moved forces into it. Problem was, that base just happened to be the partly-buried superstructure of an Atlantic class Heavy Cruiser.

With the rest of the ship attached and possibly in working order.

The theories flew about; maybe the ship had Virus, maybe it could be made to fly, maybe they could get the spinal Meson gun fixed up for orbital defence work. Any of these or dozens of other possibilities could be a real nuisance.

Inevitably, someone had to go and take a look. They sent an Infiltration team. Then things got serious. The Cruiser wasn't the only interesting thing in Laken. The locals were digging up all kinds of stuff, mainly military hardware. The implications were obvious.

Lebherz is Balkanised, and thus rather more susceptible than most worlds to our 'integration by bits' policy. The best the locals had was TL 5-6, with a few TL 9 relics. They'd be unable do anything at all about the new gear the Laken lot are digging up. We'd be seeing a Laken Confederacy ruling the world in short order. If that Confederacy had a heavy cruiser available to it, or a working ground-based meson gun, they could really louse up our plans. We didn't want that.

Now some people said that Laken wouldn't go for conquest. They were more insular and territorial than most of the power blocs on-planet. But if whoever had made that ship his HQ thought about it for a bit, he'd soon realise that the best way to keep everyone else out of Laken would be to flatten them. Take that with the local antipathy to psionics - who ran most of the rest of the planet - and we'd see a very messy affair indeed.

Now, locals killing each other isn't really our business, but when it could result in our people getting hurt then that's different. Plans were drawn up for a combined assault by several ships, to force entry to the cruiser and cripple it while leaving it substantially intact (just who came up with those orders?) We'd also have to snatch what gear we could, sabotage the locals, and keep the door open for the teams to get out again. Easy.

They were pretty keen on this one. Apollo was reconfigured as the main troopship. We had our sister-ship *Aube* along as fighter-carrier and escort, plus a *Victrix* ship and two hired merchants. We had assault-drop capsules, a couple of the new up-armed Assault Landers, and even a couple of those attack speeders. Yeah, High Command was serious about this one.

As senior captain, Elsie was in overall command, while some hotshot Colonel from Baldur was in command of the ground troops from over on *Aube*. Why over there when we were the troopship mystifies me, but there you go.

Bison was still getting used to people calling him 'Major', but of course he volunteered to lead the first assault in. INTEL had told us the locals had fixed up the meson gun. It was only days from readiness, so we had to go straight in. There was to be a massive drop of Marines from orbit, followed by the landers and the two merchants.

The drop troops were to secure a DZ for us. That way we could unload the heavy gear and bug out. Of course, at pickup time, guess who gets to stay on the ground longest as the locals close in, waiting for the rearguard? Senior Assault Lander officer Lieutenant 'Lander' Davies of course. Me.

I fretted all the way to Lebherz, but maybe that was the Jump. We all know how I am with Jump. It got worse, though, after we emerged. I guess I just had one of those bad feelings.

We got a squirt transmission from the INTEL team, and Elsie briefed the crews one last time. Then we went in. Hot.

It reminded me of the day I took my first lander down, with no real attempt to brake or anything fancy like that. We just flashed through a high orbit, spraying drop capsules everywhere and swinging round hard. In an orbit or so we'd have a stable position, but right now we were barely under control. It was a maneuver Elsie liked, but nobody else did. Get it wrong and it'll take you hours to come back into position. Get it right, though, and you save a whole lot of time. We got it spot on, of course. Elsie was in charge.

I met Bison as he went to strap in for the assault drop. He was worried, but I don't think anyone else would have noticed. "Don't take any risks, Bill," I said lamely. He just looked at me like I was mad, then gave me a big hug.

"Don't worry Lisa," he said, and I went cold, "if I get into trouble you can always come and rescue me." He was smiling, trying to joke.

Bill never called me by my first name. All I could think was: He knows. He knows he's not going to make it! "Bill, you have to come back. Promise me you'll come back."

"I'll come back safe. Promise." He wasn't smiling now.

"No, Bill, I..." the alert klaxon cut me off. Bison rolled his eyes at the speaker.

"Five minutes. I'm late already." he kissed me and hurried off, leaving me standing in the middle of a bustling corridor feeling like a teenager again.

We closed in for the second pass. There was some desultory ground fire, a few missiles here and there as each nation decided they were our target and opened up. Nothing came anywhere near us, but the attack speeders we'd dropped had to engage a squadron of local fighters. The jets never stood a chance. It was only seven to two.

We went down on the next orbit. We were dropped all wrapped up in ablative shielding, which is not a pleasant feeling. Screaming through the upper atmosphere at speeds considerably in excess of Real Fast, with what looks like a foam cushion over the viewports? I don't recommend it. As the foam burned away I set a course for the cruiser. The other landers followed me in. The speeders were ahead of us, knocking missiles down.

There was a hell of a lot of fighting going on down there as we closed in. The locals were caught on the hop, but there must have been a division or two down there. Once they got organised, we were for a pasting. Gods willing we'd be long gone by then.

We went in firing. My copilot turned the plasma gun on a silly little armoured car. It just disappeared. Then there were ground troopers everywhere, setting stuff up, defending, assaulting, and generally doing all that ground-fighter stuff I hate so much. Against orders, I took a low pass over the base on the way out and shot up some of the defenders. I don't know if it made much difference, but I had to try to help. I guess I'm like that.

We pulled out and sat in high orbit for nearly an hour. The comms chatter was encouraging. The enemy were running about like headless chickens, and the operation was going like clockwork. The speeders were breaking up concentrations of troops, the *Victrix* ship was hovering nearby and blasting aircraft. The teams were doing well. The engineers had even managed to enter the cruiser and pull some vital components out rather than blow them up. An overwhelming success. So why did I still have a bad feeling?

On impulse, I checked my suit, SMG, and the revolver. Why not get a gauss gun, they'd say, or even a laser? I could get one easily enough. Yes, I could, but this stainless steel cannon is more than a weapon to me. It's a symbol. A symbol of

all the friends I've left behind and all the fools I've gotten killed trying some stupid rescue stunt. They say I'm a hero, but I carry this revolver to remind me what heroes cost their friends.

I don't like being a hero.

The message came through; phase one of withdrawal complete, time for the landers to pull Bison's rearguard out of the fire. I laughed out loud with relief when Bison's voice came over my commlink. "OK Lander, this party's getting dull. Time to leave. DZ is secure."

We went down, fast. I still had this bad feeling, and it got worse when the commlinks went out. Jamming, of colossal power. Only one place that could come from. The cruiser.

The rearguard was still holding when we got there, but the pressure was mounting. Tanks and even the occasional squad of battledress troopers were beginning to take the field as the locals finally woke up from their shock. We had no orbital support fire now, not with the jamming.

The DZ was screened from the cruiser and the main enemy forces by a low ridge. I stayed above the ridgeline to cover the other landers in, blasting away at the defenders. At such close range we managed to get a signal through to the flatfoots. The other landers were able to make their pickup, but Bison had taken his squad back into the fight to rescue the last of the engineers - well, he would, wouldn't he?

And now he was cut off.

"I'll get Bison, you lot clear out as soon as you're loaded." I radioed, then lifted the lander to go get our hero back.

I'd just cleared the ridgeline when the world exploded.

Those new landers were tough, all right. Just over a kiloton went off half a klik away, and we survived. Just. We were picked up by the blast and flung into the sky, but we were the lucky ones. The other landers were vaporised. The locals must have been really mad at us to use a nuke. If it hadn't been for that ridge....

I tried not to think about it as I fought the controls. We managed to crashland near where Bison was still holding out. The Marines started to run to reach us. We gave them some covering fire from the support guns, but I was wondering about the wisdom of getting aboard. Would the lander still fly?

I couldn't see Bison among them, but then he'd be the last man out of any position, if he got out at all. Artillery shells started falling all around us as the locals regrouped for a charge. I saw a knot of men running towards us. The guys in the lander doorway started cheering and firing, trying to drag their comrades along by sheer willpower.

A whole bunch of shells went off between the lander and the fugitives, and a cloud of dust and smoke obscured them. When it cleared there was nobody standing. I knew that would happen. I just knew.

I was numb as I put the lander into CG trim, began to lift. Then we saw them. Three figures running, firing. One of them had an Ithklur Marine over his suit shoulder. He was running, somehow. And firing. There was only one person that could be. Bison. They reached us twenty seconds ahead of about a million very angry locals. We lifted fast. I think I fried some of the Laken troops. Not that I care.

We were two hundred meters up when a ground-to-air missile ended my doubts about the lander. We started to go down again.

I fought the lander all the way down. We went down few klicks clear of the combat zone. The jamming had eased as we got farther away, which meant that I could spot incoming attack aircraft on the EMS scope. There were quite a few.

We skimmed a small wood and smacked down hard in some the open. I'd already warned the grunts. They were out almost before we stopped skidding. Who wants to be inside a radioactive, burning, smashed-up assault lander anyway?

There were many, many deeds of untold heroism in the bailout. There always are. I saw Marines running into the flames to drag injured comrades out, combat engineers calmly gathering tools and survival gear despite plasma ammunition cooking off a few meters away. We couldn't reach some of the injured, so one of the Ithklur stayed in the lander. We heard the pistol shots as he saved them from the flames.

He didn't get out.

Through it all I saw Bison, directing the chaos in true recruiting-poster style. He didn't even look worried.

We'd salvaged a comms set and the engineers managed to set it up under cover of the trees. We could hear aero engines by now.

The attack planes got closer, clumsy-looking things with bomb-racks full of death, all reserved especially for us. The lander was burning merrily now, and the ammo from the ventral plasma support gun had blown a hole in the fuselage.

The aircraft made an attack pass. A few of the Marines fired back from the treeline. I was astonished later when I heard nobody got killed in that pass. There were cluster bombs, rockets and cannon, plus flying splinters of shredded trees. We got a few hits on a plane and it turned away, trailing smoke.

As they came around again, Bison was conferring with his sergeant. I only heard the word 'Napalm', but I could guess the rest. I scuttled over to where the comms set was and handed my SMG to a weaponless engineer. I'd be a liability to us all if I started shooting anyway.

"Go to Bison. He'll assign you combat duties. I'll handle comms." I ordered him. With a shock I realised I was second-in-command here. The engineer nodded and hurried off.

The planes came around as I tried to raise the *Apollo*. I saw Bison run out into the open and stand there, shooting his gauss rifle from the shoulder. For a moment I thought he'd flipped out, but then I saw why. One of the Marines was running back to the lander. He'd never make it if the planes went for him, so Bison was giving them a better target. Lunatic!

The nearest plane came straight at Bison in a slight dive. It had autocannon in the wing roots, he had a rifle. They discuss this in flight school. Never fly straight at your target unless it's human. Head-on, it's very hard to miss and if you're dealing with a computer gunner it'll splash you all over the cockpit. But a human gunner will get scared and flinch, they say, so it's OK.

Bison didn't flinch.

He stood there, facing a storm of 20mm. He stood there and shot a gods-bedamned plane down with his rifle. I've never seen anything like it. They'd not put that in a vid-show. Nobody would believe it. Bison legged it for the woods after that, with the other planes spraying lead after him. He somehow managed to get under cover in time.

The dorsal gun on the lander opened up. Our dorsal mount was a VRF gauss gun we were evaluating. I'll recommend it all right. Even firing without computer assistance, the Marine took two of the planes down before it got too hot in there and he had to bail out.

The others covered him as best they could, but the last fighter caught him with a few rounds and that was it. Battledress or no, that guy was mince. Bison bloody well ran out into the open and dragged his body in anyway. Sometimes I despair.

I managed to get through to *Apollo*. I got Elsie straight away. She must have been waiting for us to call in. "Lander, lander, it that you?" she said, and to hell with radio discipline.

"Lander here. Go."

"It looks bad from here. What's your situation?"

I looked around. There was smallarms fire from somewhere. The first grunts must be arriving to finish us off. "Bad, bordering on crappy. The lander's down, total loss. Crew safe along with ten other personnel, including Bison. Three wounded, seven dead."

"Bad here, too. Some ground fire incoming. We lost all the landers and the merchants to the nuke. We've nothing to pick you up with."

"Understood, *Apollo*." I said coldly. I could hear how bad Elsie was hurting, but I was too stressed out to care.

"Lisa, I'd bring the *Apollo* down itself if I could. You know that."

"I know, Elsie." I managed to speak more kindly this time, perhaps because I knew Elsie was crying. She always cried when she lost a crewmember. "We'll split up if we can, fight our way out. Maybe we'll be picked up later. Godspeed, Elsie. And look after the cat for me, you hear?" I knew it was false heroism of the Saturday-morning type, but I said the words anyway. They sound good at the inquest when they're looking to give out posthumous decorations.

"Understood Lisa. We'll assist if we can." Elsie was playing out the scene too. She knew as well as I did that we'd played all the cards. It ended here. Now.

I killed the transmitter and drew my revolver. Six rounds of explosive armor-piercing. A fat lot of good, but I'd hurt someone before I went down.

The first few enemy grunts were in the woods now. We were holding them easily, for now. We could have split, but we all realised that an enemy willing to use a nuke on his own soil was not going to be civil to captives. There was a unanimous decision to stick with the wounded. We couldn't move them, so like a bunch of fools we elected to die with them. Stupid.

The firing intensified over the next half-hour, and the dispersed Marines came back in. Our perimeter shrank to a few dozen meters. The locals were holding off, waiting for tanks maybe. They were scared of us all right.

More of the Marines and engineers were down now, and a couple had died from their wounds. We were being jammed again, although not as much as before. That put a stop to any orbital support we might have had.

Bison edged over to me. "Lisa, I've got an idea. I'll slip out and try to find their EW truck, kill the jamming. That way you can call in fire from orbit as the tanks come. They'll not be able to overrun you."

"That's right Bill. 'You'. Not 'us', because you'll be dead long-since, right?"

"It's a chance," he offered.

I looked at him for a while, oblivious of much else but his recruiting-poster features as I thought to myself, He'll do it, too. Do it or die trying. Because he really is a hero. Then a thought hit me.

"Bill." he looked around sharply at my urgent tone. "I just thought. What would happen if I was up there instead of Elsie?"

"You're not." Bill said, "But I'd be happier if you were."

"Thanks, but what would I do, what crazy trick would I pull? I'm trying to think of something but I can't. What would you expect me to do?"

Bison paused to take a few potshots at some infantry who'd got a bit close. "Hell, Lisa, after that stunt on the derelict I'd believe anything of you."

"But what?"

"I don't know... maybe you'd send an unarmed lifeboat down. No, too small. You couldn't get us all in a lifeboat.... But you could get us all in..."

"...the fueller!" we both shouted at each other.

Bison looked me in the eye. "I have to take that jammer out so you can call Elsie."

"No, Bill."

"I have to."

"No. *We* have to."

Bison grinned briefly, then he looked sad. "You want a transfer to the Marines?" He tried to joke but it came out limp and sad.

It took seconds to explain the plan to Bison's sergeant. Sergeant Yiemen just shrugged, then saluted. Not even the Marines salute much, but this was a piece of idiocy worthy of anyone's respect. Yiemen shook both our hands. I think he knew our chances as well as we did.

We slipped out through the woods shortly after. The locals were all over the place, but we managed to avoid them for a while. Eventually one of them heard me crashing about, even over the noise of gunfire. He tried to raise an alarm, but Bison clubbed him down with his rifle. We moved on.

The jammer turned out to be a great bulky affair mounted on a truck. We were behind the main fighting now, and the guys in the wood were making enough noise to distract any number of locals. We sneaked up as close as we could, then charged.

I let Bison do the shooting, the bayoneting and the martial arts stuff. I just concentrated on running without tripping over. I can usually just about handle that.

A junior officer appeared around the truck as I made for the cab. I skidded to a stop and tried to assume a firing stance. He had his handgun out already, but I was quicker. I emptied the revolver at him at about three meters. He flinched, then the autopistol came up. I'd missed completely.

The lieutenant's face was white, scared. He fired at me three times. One round caught me on the hip, a glancing hit stopped by the flight suit's kevlar, but by the Gods it hurt. Bison shot him without breaking stride. The round passed within ten centimeters of my head, but according to Bison I wasn't in any danger. Arrogant, insufferable man!

I jumped into the cab and started the truck as Bison scrambled into the rear and put his power-assisted boot through the jamming gear. Instantly we had a link to the others, and to the *Apollo's* comms officer. I yelled out the idea even as I started the truck. We planned to use it to get some distance between us and the main enemy force.

We drove around for a good three quarters of an hour, listening to the others telling us how they'd repulsed another assault. I could tell Bison felt like a rat, not being there with his team, but we couldn't get back to them through the enemy cordon.

We ditched the truck once the locals started strafing us from the air, and called down orbital fire on some tanks we found setting up for an assault on our people. Their infantry found us not long after that. We holed up in a farmhouse and Bison kept local infantry at bay for a while.

We heard the fueller picking up the others, and then coming across for us. It settled on its lifters about a hundred meters from us. We piled out into the open and started to run.

It was pretty hairy. There were aircraft shooting at the fueller, tanks coming up, infantry closing in. A jeep full of troops came bouncing across the grass, spraying machinegun rounds at us. Bison got between me and it to protect me. He

figured his battledress would stop the bullets, where my flight-suit would be as much use as tissue paper. A couple of Marines shot the jeep up from the fueller doorway, and we ran on.

Something tore past and exploded not far from the fueller - an antitank rocket, big enough to tear a hole right through it. Bison turned to deal with it - and a machinegun burst from a second jeep caught him across the body. He spun and fell against me. One of the rounds ricocheted from his suit and ripped my right shoulder open.

The rocket-launcher was a hundred meters away, reloaded now. The crewman was about to fire and there was only me to stop him. Possibly the worst shot in the Service, and armed with a pistol to boot. Bison wasn't moving as I brought the revolver up left-handed. Without thinking about it I pulled the trigger.

Life's funny like that. I can't hit a man at three meters with a whole six rounds, yet a single shot at a hundred meters, left-handed? He folded around the bullet and the rocket went wild.

I shoved the revolver into its holster and dragged Bison's still form towards the fueller with my good hand. Then Yiemen was with me, and the engineer with my SMG. We got Bison in, for all the good it would do. I wouldn't leave him out there. I realised then that I couldn't live without him.

I still don't think I can.

We lifted in a takeoff that I'd have been proud of, as the medics tried to save Bison. He'd taken several heavy machinegun Armor-Piercing rounds. Even through battledress he was chopped up badly. Yiemen led me away from him. I fought, but the sergeant wouldn't let me go. Eventually I calmed down enough to realise I couldn't do anything but get in the way. I went onto the bridge instead.

Elsie was there, as I'd half-expected. I thought she might ride the fueller down to rescue her brood. I wasn't expecting her to be the pilot, though. Elsie gave me a hug that got so tight I couldn't escape. Then two Marines grabbed me so the medics could dope me.

That was it for Lebherz.

We were in Jump by the time Bison could walk again, and it was several weeks before he was fit for duty. We spent those weeks on Aubaine, on our honeymoon.

Yeah, that's right. We'd been together for a while, but suddenly we both wanted something more solid. Bill vanished into the machine shop as soon as sickbay released him, and came back with something he'd made for me.

We were married on Aubaine while *Apollo* was being repaired of her ground-fire damage. Elsie handled the service and we had a whole squad of grinning Marines as the Best Man.

It was a lovely service – short and to the point, as if we knew how little time we all had – but beautiful all the same. There were raised eyebrows when Bill produced the ring, of course. There's not a lot of gold aboard a Coalition clipper, so he'd made it out of stainless steel. And hope.

Bill, Elsie, Sergeant Yiemen... they're all dead now. All of them. There's only me left to remember. I lost the revolver on Nicosia, which is kind of fitting, but I still wear the ring.

I always will.

Vampire

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 26 years old, a senior lieutenant aboard RCES Apollo. It is late 1204.

There are plenty of missions that don't go sour, of course. Most of them in fact. There are always problems, false starts, unexpected hiccups, but it's rare that anything as bad as Leberz happens. That's just as well, or we'd be real short of personnel.

It'd been a trip like that when we arrived in the Mitchell system. We'd done a bunch of hot recoveries recently, so RCES Command decided to put us on contact, support and cold recovery. It wasn't so dramatic, just poking about dead worlds looking for stuff, but right then we all needed something a bit less exciting.

We resupplied the salvage crews on Agiruur, Mitchell, Kipper and Taumotu, then visited Quarry. What a hell-hole! Still, at least there was no shooting there. We left Bison and some of his Marines with an engineering team on Quarry as part of an uplift package. Bill and I had only been married a few months and I really didn't want to leave him behind, but we all have our jobs to do. Turned out it was for the best.

The locals were cautious, but not too hostile. They were even talking about unsealing the old Imperial research station for us if we could come up with a suitable aid package in return. Command figured Bison was in no danger. That was easy enough for Command to do.

I was less happy about it, although it was kind of nice to have a double cabin to myself for a while. Truth be known, I was getting bored with shuttle runs to pick up salvage from the ground teams. I was itching for some action. We got some in the Mitchell system.

We came out of Jump and the *Apollo* kicked us all in the gut again with its weird Emergence, then we were clear. We were getting some comms chatter, and the lieutenant at the comms station started talking to the skipper, quiet and urgent. That meant trouble, but for now I had no way of telling what was going on. I killed a few minutes in studying the system. Three gas giants, no planetoids.

Mitchell itself was a tiny ball of rock orbiting the inner gas giant. It was once one of the highest-tech systems in the region. Now it was just a barren wasteland of vacuum and mining units populated only by corpses. And a few salvage teams. Mitchell had been a major Vampire site at one time, but it was supposed to have been cleared out.

Supposedly.

Elsie, our skipper, turned from the comms station. "All right, everybody listen. Essential personnel remain at posts. I want everyone else on parade in the cargo deck in ten minutes for a full briefing. The rest of you will get a voice transmission of what I have to say. Sound general alert and check weapons status, but no battle alert yet."

I exchanged a worried look with the navigator. He was a top-flight graduate from the Academy, very highly qualified, but he was still young and still scared. Weren't we all?

We assembled on the cargo deck as ordered, most of us wearing sidearms as per alert drill. The Marines that came in with Elsie were wearing battledress. I gulped.

The master-at-arms ran through a roll-call. We all answered tightly. We quickly got to the junior ranks.

"Crewmember Untissi."

"Sir!"

"Crewmember Havve?"

"Sir!"

"Ship's Cat Second Class Morgan?"

"Here!" There were no laughs this time. Ensign Gardane had brought Morgan aboard, and answered for him. Morgan was a great scruffy brute of a ginger tom, recently demoted for 'conduct unbecoming a ship's cat'. He'd sometimes come and sit at the end of the roll-call line, washing his paws and generally ignoring the skipper. It usually caused great hilarity, but today we were too tense for laughs.

"All right." began Elsie, pacing in front of us. "You're wondering what's going on here. Simply, we've heard from one of the salvage teams - and only one. There should be five. Apparently, an unknown ship took out the two armed shuttles we had on overwatch before blasting the living hell out of the salvage operation. The fifth station is partially concealed, so it apparently escaped detection. There are ten people down there, plus possible survivors from the other operations. There's also the possibility that the aggressor ship is still around, although the attack was last week. We're going in to pick up the salvage crew, and we'll need to be alert. I don't want to be hit by surprise."

There was a pause, and then Elsie went on. "We'll stand off over Mitchell and send the landers down to make the pickup. We'll have the main armament ready at a moment's notice if there's any problems. We'll pull the salvage crew straight out, no matter what we or they lose in the process. I'm not hanging around here, and I'm not leaving anyone on the surface. There'll be a squad of Marines under Lieutenant Hood to drag the salvage teams out - forcibly if necessary. Salvagers can be a stubborn bunch."

That got a few chuckles. More than a few of us, Elsie included, were ex-salvage crew. "Tough" and "stubborn" are two words you don't have to even mention. Maybe that's why Elsie always had such a fondness for me. I come from a salvager background too, though my keywords are 'dumb' and 'clumsy'.

The parade was dismissed, and senior officers gathered in the forward lounge area for a more detailed briefing. There was still plenty of time as we coasted into the system. Much of the briefing was technical stuff for the *Apollo's* flight crews, weapons reports and such like. I half-listened, and waited for my turn.

Eventually the others were dismissed, and I was surprised to find myself alone with the skipper. She didn't beat about the bush.

"Lander. Lisa. I want this one to go smooth, all right? No heroics, no blazing guns. Just in and out. If the salvagers don't want to pull out, you have ten minutes to convince them and then you lift. With or without, got it?"

I nodded soberly.

"Good. Because you're in overall command of the rescue. Hood's good, but he's inexperienced. You've seen a lot more action. In fact you're due a promotion."

I stared for a second.

"Yes, that's right." Elsie smiled slightly, "I've decided to put you in for Lieutenant Commander, with the rider that I don't think you're ready for a starship command just yet."

"I'm too impulsive?"

Elsie nodded, "That's a good start. At least you realise it. Heroics are for the Marines. I know what your husband says about you being a Marine, but I also know that Marines don't command starships. So, I've filed the orders and you're under evaluation. That means Command wants to see calm, orderly operations. Courage is never out of fashion, but your berserker instincts will just get the promotion held over. I don't want that, because I don't put anyone in for a promotion unless I think they'll get it. I don't like to be wrong, Lisa."

"You're not wrong. I'll keep it cool, and I'll get your salvagers out."

"Good. I'm counting on you. You'll be on site, not me. Do a good job for me, you hear?"

I smiled back. "I will, and I'll bring the lander back intact this time. I promise."

Elsie gazed levelly at me for a while, as if to say 'don't make promises you can't keep.' Then she nodded at the door. "Ask the Navigation team if they'll come in please." That was my cue to leave. I don't like melodrama, so I didn't salute. Neither did Elsie. We rarely did.

We waited for several hours at alert stations as we coasted in. The gas giant got very big on the screen, but Mitchell was still tiny even up close. Comms was busy with detection sweeps and trying to get a decent link to the planet's surface. We were all a bit worried about the two debris clouds we picked up. Presumably they were the remains of the salvage shuttles.

The Marines piled in and we launched, just the one lander this time. I had an open screen to the bridge of the *Apollo* and a link to the planet. It took a good few minutes to get hold of someone in authority down there.

To my slight surprise, it was a Hiver, who called itself Ludd, possibly some feeble attempt at humor. Ludd wasn't very helpful. It's hard enough to argue with a stubborn salvage chief, let alone one with no readable body language and a mechanical voice. It was especially hard since I've had so little experience with Hivers. *Apollo* doesn't have one assigned on account of the way our Jump Emergences scramble their brains.

I tried to get the message across, all the same. "We're an assault lander from the *Apollo*, on our way down to pick your people up. Grab your belongings and get ready for evac. We'll touch down in about ten minutes."

"I am sorry." The Hiver replied, "We cannot leave our operation so quickly. We will need at least one full day to package our heavy equipment."

"No can do. My orders are immediate personnel evac. You can come back for your gear when there's a little more time. If we don't get you off-planet now there's a chance you'll be marooned."

"I say again, assault lander pilot. We cannot leave so soon. Is my voder working correctly?"

"Yes. And the answer's no. You're all coming with us, and right away. Grab your gear."

We went on like that all the way down. The Marines disembarked and bounded across to the shelters. I was still arguing with Ludd when Hood led his squad inside.

"Lander pilot. This is unforgivable. This equipment is very valuable. We cannot leave it...." Ludd was still repeating itself as the Marines appeared in the internal camera view.

"You can and you will. You have ten minutes to be in here or we leave without you. I won't risk my crew planetside with a possible hostile out there." I hoped he didn't know too much human psychology. He'd realise I was lying.

Some of the salvagers had suited up meekly enough, and the Marines were able to convey them across to us. The minutes ticked away as the three who'd stayed with Ludd argued with me over the commlink.

"What can we do?" I asked of thin air. The only answer I got was a rather disturbing vision of a squad of Marines blasting into the shelter, shooting the salvagers, and then dragging the corpses out. Ever so helpful.

"Ten minutes, Ludd. I'm warming the lifters." They were already warm, but I could put off the decision to burn my promotion just a few minutes longer with that little lie.

"Lander, ten minutes are up. Lift immediately." That was Elsie, aboard the *Apollo*. She'd be monitoring my lander's status board, of course.

"Understood, *Apollo*. Ready. You hear that salvage team. You come running now or you're staying..."

Elsie cut in again, "Lander. You have a boatload of my Marines down there, plus half the salvagers and a direct order from me. They've made their choices. Let them stay if they haven't the sense to pull out."

I thought it might be a last-ditch gambit to persuade the salvagers, but then I realised what Elsie was saying. She was reminding me that I had a crew and a whole bunch of people depending on my decision. If the hostile was still out there, I was risking them all for a bunch of stubborn fools without the sense to be rescued. Sometimes you have to cut your losses and save what you can. Especially when there's people depending on you.

I surprised myself by sliding the throttles home and lifting. It was perhaps the hardest thing I've ever done, to abandon them down there. It was easier to charge into that bunker on Nicosia, or board a Vampire derelict. That was a positive act. This was all negative. It meant running out on someone and that's never easy to do.

You do what you have to. I've learned that much out here. In that moment I realised why Elsie didn't think I was ready for a ship command. She didn't think I'd have the sand to pull out and cut losses to save the greater number. At that moment, I proved her wrong.

It was just as well I did.

We lifted seconds later. I ignored the rather supercilious message from Ludd and concentrated on laying in a course to the *Apollo*.

We still had an open video channel to the ship. The skipper threw me an ironic salute. "I bet that hurt," she said quietly.

"I'll live. I..." I broke off. Elsie was turning away from the vidscreen as the comms officer called her over. She took one look at his detector panel and snapped out, "Battle stations. Incoming vessel, maybe hostile. All stations report."

Elsie glanced at the screen again and spoke to me. "It was hiding in the gas giant's atmosphere. I was right. Only one reason to leave survivors - to make sure there was a rescue operation. I'll see you later, Lander."

"Godspeed, *Apollo*." I said formally. Maybe I sensed what was coming.

The hostile was big all right. Bigger than the *Apollo* by a good margin, and it'd been through a few fights. Its drive section was buckled in. I thought maybe the Jump drive was gone. That'd explain why it wanted a starship badly enough to lay a trap like this one.

It? I'd already decided it must be a Vampire. "Get me a data match. What is it?" I demanded of my copilot.

For just a few seconds I entertained the mad notion of ramming and boarding it, but then I did something a little more sensible. I shut the drives down and coasted to cut our signature. *Apollo* couldn't pick us up in the middle of a fight, and I wasn't planning on getting in the way.

"Records peg it as a Solomani '*Tribal*' class destroyer. Laser armament, no spinal mount. Tonnage five thousand five hundred. Good armor, some missiles, high Jump. A general-purpose fleet destroyer." The copilot's voice was scared. Not surprisingly. Even without a spinal mount, the difference in firepower between a military destroyer and the *Apollo* was considerable. It would all depend upon the amount of damage it'd already taken. That and Elsie's skills.

I saw the battle unfold over the open link.

"Evasive maneuver! Fire when ready!" snapped Elsie. The hostile was already spewing missiles. Its laser batteries opened up seconds later. *Apollo*'s lasers stopped most of the missiles and I saw the meson gun hammer right into the destroyer. Then *Apollo* shuddered under multiple hits.

"Damage report!" snapped Elsie.

"Minor damage to the hull, some fuel leakage. 'B' turret not responding." the reply came from off-camera.

"Can we outrun it?"

"Negative, skipper. It's got at least two Gs on us."

"Dammit!" Elsie staggered as the *Apollo* took another big hit. "Damage?"

"Jump drive out, some power loss."

"Them?"

"Unknown, skipper. They're leaking air and water, and their drive is erratic."

"Continue evasive pattern, but take us into a low orbit around the gas giant."

"How low sir?" came the question from the pilot.

"Low, pilot. Low."

"Sir."

Apollo lit her drives and ran for the cover of the gas giant. The destroyer was a little slow in matching course, but it stayed in weapons range. Both ships disappeared behind the giant planet, battering at one another all the way.

My comms board had been lit up for a while. I patched Ludd the Hiver through. "Please return to pick us up. You were correct, Lieutenant. I apologise."

I thought hard for a few seconds, then responded. "Negative, salvage team. Cannot make pickup at this time." I killed the transmitter before I was tempted to change my mind. We laid in a course for the gas giant instead.

We'd been coasting for a few minutes when my copilot gurgled at something and I looked at the main screen. There was nothing on it but the white glare of a nuke going off just out of sight behind the planet. My heart stopped.

Then the *Apollo* came whipping around in a hyperbolic orbit, with the destroyer still in pursuit. Both vessels were trailing wreckage and vapor and I wasn't sure which had the most damage. My screen lit up again and I could see the bridge.

What was left of it.

There was a hole in the bulkhead, and the bridge area was open to vacuum. The survivors were suited up and still fighting their ship. I couldn't hear the words they were saying but I could guess things were pretty desperate.

The destroyer was closing fast from astern when Elsie jerked her fist down and presumably gave an order. *Apollo* began to flip, almost out of control. The destroyer shaved by barely a hundred meters from the bridge area, and the meson gun blasted it dead amidships. They must have overcharged the spinal mount to judge from the damage it did. The destroyer staggered visibly, a gaping hole appeared in her hull....

And she raked the *Apollo* with all her guns.

I saw the hits from outside as the bridge monitors went dead. *Apollo* looked like Swiss cheese from where I sat, but the destroyer was spinning too. Both vessels began to drift apart as their residual momentum carried them on diverging courses.

Apollo wasn't dead, but she was hurting badly. One turret was firing in local control, but my board showed no maneuver or course correction. I made up my mind and opened the throttles.

It was the hardest docking I ever made, with all that debris about and the *Apollo* spinning out of control. I had to ignore the plaintive messages from the surface of Mitchell all the way in.

I knew what we'd find on the bridge. Carnage. They were all dead at their posts. All but Elsie. The comms officer, electrocuted; the gunner, his suit holed; that kid navigator, spread all over the deck by an internal explosion.

I found Elsie strapped into the master fire control seat, somehow still alive. She must have tried to fight on all by herself. She held on long enough to hand over command to me. I remember her last words: "You got a command after all. I'm confirming your promotion on my own authority. *Apollo's* a fine ship. Bring her home for me."

"I will." I said through my tears. She didn't hear. She'd gone where heroes go.

I looked around at the shattered remains of the bridge. My bridge. I took charge; I waved people to posts, collected reports, supervised the removal of corpses. It helped me not to think about my dead friends.

We had a little power and some maneuver, a couple of turrets working. The destroyer was limping around for another pass, but it'd not be in range for an hour. Question was; what to do with that hour?

In the end I ignored a desperate plea to rescue the Hiver and his people, and tickled *Apollo* into the gas giant's atmosphere. If the Vampire could hide in there, we could too.

We spent a day in there, jury-rigging systems. It wasn't made any easier by the storms in the upper atmosphere – we were that low. The Vampire hunted for us for hours, but its detectors weren't up to the task. Then it broadcast a general threat to shoot up the salvagers if we didn't come out and surrender. We ignored it.

It moved into firing position, and repeated its demand. By then I had four working turrets. We could have gone out there and made some futile gesture, trying to defend four stubborn salvagers. We'd have all died, but gloriously.

A day earlier I might not have had the moral courage to let them die, but today I did. We heard their last plea. We saw the Vampire shoot.

We did nothing but grieve.

There's this ancient story by some guy named Wells. Aliens invaded Terra, and people were fleeing. A passenger ship full of refugees was escaping but the aliens' fighting machines were in the way. The only thing to stop them was an ironclad warship named *Thunder Child*. Tech level three or so against a spacefaring technology. Hopeless.

Thunder Child attacked – and died. She killed one with her guns and even when she was gutted by heat rays she came charging out of the explosion to ram another, destroying it. A glorious sacrifice so that the steamer could escape. That sort of gallant, hopeless failure seems to inspire us - even today there is a Clipper, a sister of the *Apollo*, named *Thunderchild*. Well-planned success isn't very heroic, apparently. But charging to certain death against hopeless odds, achieving little? That's what makes heroes.

Well, I chose not to be a hero. I had to save the greater number. But I still hear that mechanical voice, begging me to save them. I'd never heard of a Hiver asking for salvation in the name of the gods before, or since. But Ludd begs me every night, pleads with me to go back and save them. But I couldn't. I was in command and my first duty was to RCES *Apollo* and what remained of her crew. It was my responsibility to let Ludd and the salvagers die.

I called a parade on the cargo deck, to give my final orders. Less than half of the crew were alive. We had a lander copilot in the Navigator's chair, Marines manning the guns. The salvagers who had elected to come with us were surly, but they joined in the work. I took a roll-call. It was pathetic to see so many missing.

"Crewmember Havve," snapped the Marine who was acting Master-At-Arms. "Havve?"

"She's dead, Sir," came a voice from the ranks.

"Ship's Cat?" That Marine must have had no imagination whatsoever. Putting the cat on the roll was a joke made in better times. But he was on the list, so the Marine called him.

"Ship's cat Second-Class Morgan?" No answer.

"Missing in action, Sir," came the voice of doom from the ranks. Then somebody laughed among the engineering crew. I glared at him for a moment. When I turned to see what he was looking at, I saw something that I'll never forget. There in the hatchway, large as life and complete with bandaged stump of a leg, was the ship's cat. He had a cockroach in his mouth.

You don't get many rats or mice aboard ship, but cockroaches have followed humanity everywhere. That damned cat was still killing them despite a combat wound. I believe that qualifies him for a medal.

"Ship's cat reporting for duty, Captain," some wag called from among the crew. Despite the fact that half our comrades were dead there was a ripple of laughter among the assembled ranks. I think they were just glad they were still breathing, and looking for something to celebrate. I wasn't laughing. There's probably some regulation about ship's captains not being allowed to cry on parade, but I did anyway.

So bust me.

I gave my orders and we broke the parade up. Some of them questioned the wisdom of it. They knew it'd cost more lives, but I'd promised to bring the *Apollo* home and this was the only way I could think of to do it. We'd save the greatest number this way. I won't pretend to have been happy about it.

Another two hours saw us ready for the plan. I swallowed hard and gave the 'commence' order. *Apollo* shuddered as she left orbit. Maybe the ship was scared too.

The Vampire came in fast, flipped to match course and speed and opened fire. We blazed away at one another for about ten minutes. Casualties mounted. The engineers worked wonders keeping things going as long as they did, but at the end there was nothing for it. I turned to the guns-and-missiles position and gave the orders.

"Blow the panels. Kill power."

The charges blew a section of rigged-up hull into space, along with a whole lot of junk and some bodies. We'd held a burial ceremony for them beforehand, but all the same it felt wrong. In the wake of the explosion, there was a series of power surges, and the guns went silent.

The Vampire kept firing. We were dead in space, no power. But it just kept on firing. It was killing the crew and we weren't even trying to stop it. The acting chief gunner was shouting over my suit commlink to give him power back, but I wouldn't. We waited, took the punishment. More deaths on my hands. More absent friends.

The Vampire came in close, made as if to draw away, then closed even further. It fired a few more shots, and then it did what we'd waited for. It opened its shuttle bay doors.

A small craft began to nose out. The gunner was hysterical, begging to be allowed to fire. I waited. The shuttle hovered about, maybe suspicious. We hung on. I realised I was holding my breath.

"For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful." said the Master-At-Arms quietly. It's been a soldier's ironic prayer since old Terra's pre-industrial days. I couldn't help but smile.

The shuttle was halfway out of the bay now. The Vampire couldn't shut its armored doors. "Ready." I breathed, like it might hear us. Two agonising seconds passed. "Launch!"

Apollo shuddered as the Assault Lander tore free of the wreckage, oriented itself, and sped towards the shuttle bay.

"FIRE!" I yelled, snapping the switch closed. The lights came on again and we opened fire with all our remaining guns.

The Vampire returned fire instantly, but it was a second slower with the bay doors. The lander smashed into the Vampire's shuttle, then both were inside. The doors slid shut, protecting the vessel's unarmored innards from our lasers. But not from the nuke aboard the lander. Our last warhead detonated inside the Vampire, vaporizing most of its hull. *Apollo* was hammered by debris, but even at that short range there was no blast effect. You need air for that.

By the time the sensors started working again, there was little to show the Vampire had ever existed; just a slowly expanding cloud of debris.

We slipped out of the Mitchell system without ceremony. The cruise home wasn't without problems, what with half a crew and less than half a ship. The ship's doctors were kept busy for several days with the living. The dead we buried in space.

We made it home unaided, which I'm proud of. They gave us medals, and I even insisted on one for the cat. For the sake of crew morale, you see? I still have it, hanging on the study wall alongside my own, and Bill's.

Bill was back from his mission by the time I got home, and they made us take some leave time to recover. It was pleasant to forget it all for a few weeks, but in the back of my mind there was that feeling that I'd reached the end of the line. There were no more dead men's shoes to step into.

And time was running out for me, too.

On the Carpet

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 27 years old, a command officer aboard RCES Aube. It is early 1205.

Everyone comes back.

That's the line they sell the press. And it's usually true. But not always. We try, try real hard, but sometimes you have to abandon a ground party. It happens very, very rarely, but it happens. When the ground fire is so intense that you can't get a shuttle in to make the extraction, the officer in charge has a heartbreaking decision to make. Abandon your people, and be the one to tell them you've condemned them, or send in a rescue and watch it go down in flames. More deaths, and for nothing.

That's the difference between a good field commander and a bad one - the ability to recognise a hopeless situation and cut losses. To be a stingy, evil bitch with a heart of stone.

Of course, most of the personnel who'd volunteer for a high-risk ground mission wouldn't want you to send a shuttle in after them if it was that dangerous. Most of them would try to surrender - we can always bargain or launch a rescue - or try to make off overland. And if that doesn't work out, self-sacrifice is frighteningly common in the Service. Sergeant Yemen, who was at my wedding, died that way.

He put a pistol to his head and blew his own brains out because some idiot was going to get herself and her crew killed trying to rescue him. I guess I owe him my life for that.

Anyway, it was that kind of deal on Operation Ripcord. I'd been posted aboard RCES *Aube* for a few months while they repaired what was left of *Apollo*. The cost of restoring *Apollo* to first-line status would be higher than simply building a new ship, so they were doing a patch job and putting her out as a support ship and transport. With me in command.

That wasn't the original plan; I was to have the shiny new scout cruiser *Footloose*, but she'd been posted missing on her captain's last mission before her promotion to Commodore came through. Tough break for all concerned. While *Apollo*'s repairs were underway they needed someone to cover for *Aube*'s Ground Operations Officer, who was on some kind of secondment somewhere or other. For some reason they picked me.

This was to be a coordinator's job, sitting in orbit giving orders while the crews did the work. It was something of a new experience for me, but I suppose it was good experience before taking up a command. Anyway, we'd managed to get into a bit of a dispute with the local government. They'd decided to eject our diplo team and advisors, which was a lot more amicable than most of our deals-gone-sour. We were supposed to extract the ground teams and bring them home. No big deal.

I still don't know what went wrong.

Just as we took up orbit the locals changed their minds for some reason and tried to snatch the advisors as hostages. The advisors' escort managed to fight clear with most of the party but three of the diplo team were taken prisoner. The rest were pinned down and surrounded, making for a very dangerous extraction.

We did it anyway, and brilliantly. *Aube*'s skipper sent drop troops down as well as the shuttle, even deployed our two streamlined escorts in to give cover. We made several diversionary attacks and even recaptured most of the advisors' gear. The hostages were freed without a hitch. The locals got a bloody nose for messing us about and we pulled everyone out smooth as clockwork. Almost.

The last-but-one shuttle was on its way up with the hostages when it started to go sour. Everyone was out except a four-man rearguard. The last boat came in to pick them up.

Somewhere down the line somebody, had thought to wheel in some heavy weapons – plasma guns and a few missiles. The shuttle was hit on the way in. It went down near the rearguard position. They somehow managed to get the crew out under fire, but by now there was plasma flying everywhere and the extraction zone was covered by dozens of missiles. The skipper gave the order to abandon the rearguard. There was just no way to get back in through that curtain of fire. No way at all. Besides, the only boat available – the only one not engaged in docking or refuelling – was on the way up full of important technical advisors and Marines.

The skipper ordered the shuttle pilot to keep coming. The pilot protested. The skipper repeated his order and even explained why. The lander pilot told him to go to hell, and took his ship back in. The lander was hit several times during the extraction. They lost three of their passengers – including one of the tech advisors who'd taken a rifle and joined in the rescue attempt – but they got the rearguard survivors out.

Both of them.

That was why I had Lieutenant Ian Harvey on the carpet when he returned. He was arrested as soon as he docked. Two Marines escorted him to my office. Harvey looked sullen as well as very, very tired. I was just plain furious. "Lieutenant. Shut the door." I snapped. The Marines waited outside.

"Sir." He returned to stiff attention after closing the door.

"This had better be good."

"Sir?"

"You disobeyed the Captain's direct order, and even went so far as to use obscenities over the Command frequency. You risked a shuttle full of passengers for a rearguard who you knew would most likely be dead by the time you reached them. Leaving aside material damages, your little escapade cost one more life than it saved. So justify yourself."

He glared back at me. "Sir, better a small chance than none. I took a risk, because they'd do it for me. I couldn't just leave them behind to die."

"You took a damned stupid risk and others paid for it. You also disobeyed orders. Do you think you know better than the Captain?"

"No Sir. But the captain doesn't do field missions. Doesn't depend on his buddies. He didn't know them. I did – and I want to believe that when I go down there'll be someone to come for me. Someone like you used to be. Sir."

That hurt. The implication was clear; I'd become one of *Them*; a planner, a coordinator of resources. Not people; expendable assets.

"So, Sir," he went on, with mounting fury, "You can go to hell too. They were in trouble and there was only me to help them. You can stand and watch people die if you like, but I won't! I did right and we both know it! You used to be someone who'd understand that! And if you want my wings you can have them!"

I waited until he finished. "I do understand. Better than you can know. Lieutenant, how many people do you think I've killed through pulling stunts like that one?" I didn't let him answer, but went on, "Did you ever hear a story about how a wounded Marine shot himself so that his buddies wouldn't have to come back for him?"

"Uh, yes Sir. It's just scuttlebutt, isn't it?"

"His name was Sergeant Yiemen. He was a guest at my wedding a few weeks before. I was one of the people who wanted to go back for him, despite intense ground fire and a direct order to the contrary. So you see, I do understand."

"Sir."

"I've been instructed to deal with this incident. The Captain won't even see you. I used to do stuff like you just did, and now I know what it costs. That's why we have captains and senior officers. To cut losses when it's obviously hopeless."

"Sir, I saved two of them!" Harvey snapped.

"And killed three more with your Conan The Barbarian antics!"

"Sir," Harvey replied. He probably thought it was the least damaging thing to say.

"The Captain has ordered that you be confined to quarters until we dock, and that you be dismissed from the ship's company. He won't have crew who disobey their orders."

"Sir."

"Further, I am entering in your record a severe reprimand, which will ruin your chances of promotion. Frankly that's a good thing. However, in the light of the reason for your disobedience there will be no Court-Martial unless you formally request one. I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Sir," he said again.

"So, you're dismissed the ship's company, your prospects are ruined, and you may never fly again. What'll you do?"

"I'll find another berth. Sir. This is where I want to be. Where I need to be. Somebody'll take me."

"Some poor fool with a roster to fill and no body else available might, I suppose." I agreed. "So you'll stay with the Navy?"

"Yes, Sir. I can still do some good."

"I see. In that case, I know a ship that might take you. She's short of crew; can't fill her berths. Bad reputation and all that."

"Which one sir?" He actually looked eager, Gods love him.

"RCES *Apollo*." I said without inflection, "She'll be out of dock by we reach Aubaine. You could try her."

"The *Apollo*? But she's a wreck!" Harvey burst out, pretty much echoing what everyone else said when they were offered a berth aboard. There's few prospects on a halfway demolished support ship. Most prospective crew wanted to hold out for something better.

"So's your career," I replied. I was having a devil of a job getting experienced personnel. Even mavericks like Harvey were preferable to a crew of total greenhorns. Just about.

"All right then, I'll try there. Thank you sir. Um... which idiot did they saddle with the *Apollo* then? - I mean, who's her captain?"

I smiled thinly at him. "I am."

Harvey was all apologies after that. I cursed myself inwardly for trying to score points off him. But something about this guy scared me. I knew what he was capable of because he was just like me. Just like I used to be.

Harvey made his formal application for a berth and I accepted. Then I called the Marines to take him away under arrest.

After the lieutenant had gone, I sat and thought about what he'd said. Had I changed that much? Had I started thinking about 'acceptable losses' instead of lives? Was I getting callous about personnel because I didn't know them? What if it had been Bill down there?

I poured myself a large shot from the half-empty bottle that every senior officer has. It comes with the desk. I hadn't needed to drink in the early days, but now it took several slugs to get me through a mission. It didn't affect me, though. Or so I told myself.

Anyway, my hands only shook a little bit.

I was beginning to believe that my day had passed and the fire was going out. It was a depressing thought. Here I sat in an office, drinking whiskey and chewing out young heroes. Three years ago that would have been me on the carpet. But not any longer.

I'd become one of *Them*.

Decapitation Strike

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 27 years old, commanding officer of RCES Apollo. It is mid 1205.

We coasted into orbit over Ephraim as quietly as we could manage. We were fairly sure our target would have decent detection gear, salvaged from one of our own vessels. Our job was to bring in the Emperor of Ephraim. I say bring in rather than bring down because that's what we prefer to do when our own go bad.

It happens occasionally. Out on the frontiers with a shipload of weapons and gear that's centuries ahead of what the locals have, there's always that temptation to just walk in somewhere and take over. Most of us have no problem resisting, but every now and then someone goes over the edge.

This particular villain was David Duvall, captain of the *Light of Glory*, an armed freighter we used for long-range survey, contact and recovery operations beyond the primary Area of Operations. He was about as well equipped for planetary conquest as you can get.

Worse, I'd known him at the Tech Academy. Well, more than known. I got my interest in military history from Dave, the semester we were lovers. He played a lot of wargames, claimed to have French blood from old Terra. We all knew he admired Napoleon Bonaparte, but nobody though he'd try to emulate him.

That's what he'd done, though. Taken his starship and its heavily-armed crew into private service with the King of Ephraim, then deposed him and proclaimed himself Emperor. When the *Footloose* – which was to have been my next command – came along, Dave must have tricked his way aboard and captured her. It wouldn't be hard. He was well known and respected among his fellow captains. Me included.

So far as we knew, Dave's whole crew followed him – not surprisingly; he had a certain personal magnetism in common with his idol. He could lead and inspire his followers in ways that most of us only dream of. That's what made him so dangerous; he'd managed to get the local populace on his side as well. If he wasn't stopped he'd become a threat in short order, and that we couldn't afford.

Because Ephraim was so far out, it'd taken a while for the information to filter back. The Coalition had to act fast, and Apollo was just out of dock with a whole new crew. We were all that was available. So here we were, sent to bring a renegade back.

We had a whole bunch of extra Marines aboard as well as support gear, but I found myself wondering what Dave would do. He'd know we were coming, of course, and one Clipper was the logical choice of force. On the other hand I knew very little about what he had available.

We'd expected to find either *Light of Glory* or *Footloose* on planetary overwatch, but there was nothing in orbit. I wondered about that, too. Sitting there in the big captain's chair I found myself wishing for the bottle in my desk. That's a bad sign. I thought through at least a dozen plans, but rejected them all. The flaw in each was a variant on the 'if I know that then he knows it too' theme.

In the end I chickened out of trying to outsmart Dave and settled on standard procedure. Comms raised the Ephraim palace without much trouble. "This is RCES *Apollo* to self-styled Emperor of Ephraim. Respond immediately."

He did, too. Must have been expecting us. "Duvall to *Apollo*. Welcome! Come to check on my progress?"

"I've come to arrest you, Dave." I said flatly.

"Lisa? You're a captain now? That's great! But look..."

"Look nothing. I've been sent to bring you in for trial and to recover the ships. Get smart and surrender now." I hoped I

sounded more confident than I felt.

Dave just laughed, down there in his command bunker or wherever he was. He might have been transmitting from the golf course for all I knew. "You can try, if you like," he said after a moment. "Or would you like to hear what I have to say first?"

"Okay: talk," I replied. It was all being recorded; it'd make good evidence for the Court of Inquiry. Besides, I was having a little trouble about giving the order to send in the troops. Dave was special once.

"Look at this place!" he proclaimed, "Look what I've achieved in only a few months! Ephraim was so riddled with corruption and incompetence that even a full diplo and tech-assist operation couldn't make any difference. What they needed was a strong leader, not a tired old man wasting the world's resources in clinging to power. I gave them what they needed. I gave them order! Stability! Look at the difference!"

He went on like that for a while. The worst of it was that he was right. From the reports we'd had, it looked like his rule was pretty harsh, but fair. The locals were industrializing and beginning to use their new technology effectively, even enthusiastically.

On the other hand, they were also thinking about expanding into neighboring systems, gathering independent starships, troops and specialists to them, building a stronger nation at others' expense and using that wealth to fuel their own redevelopment. The style was exactly what I'd expect from Dave; the original Napoleon pioneered this kind of thing. He made his nation rich and powerful through conquest and plunder.

Dave was behaving just like his idol would. That was part of my problem. He was looking to annex neighboring worlds in order to expand his own powerbase. That would fuel his conquests of more distant systems. Why did that disturb me? Because that's not very different from how the Coalition operates, too. Expanding at the expense of others. Was there any difference between what he was doing on Ephraim and what we were doing with the Decapitation Strikes and the Diplo missions? Are we morally that much better than the TEDs we depose?

Maybe we're not.

Dave really was making life better for his subjects, too. There was nothing I could find morally wrong with what he was doing. Except that he was still one of ours and he'd betrayed us. And what about the two starships?

That question was answered not much later. Both ships had been in a low orbit of the single moon, hidden from our detectors until they powered up. According to our readings, both had been crammed full of extra weapons from somewhere. They took up station just outside missile range and waited. I figured Dave would want to give me time to get rattled. He knew that I knew what I was up against.

The waiting went on and on while I tried to decide what to do. Procedure required that we recapture or kill the renegade. There's enough hostile states out there without growing our own. Naturally, Dave would expect that. He'd plan accordingly. And with two ships close by the operation would be trickier. He'd know we'd not want to fire on the two vessels if we could avoid it. Dammit, he'd know everything! You see, he played a lot of wargames at the Tech Academy, and he never lost. He knew our procedures, he knew me. He had all the cards.

But I still had to take him down.

We held a staff meeting. Chucked possibilities around, including making an offer to recognize him as an official governor if he'd bring Ephraim into the Coalition. I'm glad we didn't settle on that one. We'd have set a very dangerous precedent. In the end I came up with a plan. I thought it out alone and I told nobody the whole story. I had plenty of doubts about it; after all I was risking my career, wasn't I?

That was when I decided to do it, that moment when I considered my career. I'd just ordered the Marines to their drop stations. I'd had no serious problems with risking their lives, yet I balked at placing my career in jeopardy. That's just a little bit despicable.

Well, this is one captain who won't put career first, no matter what. You see, if I'd started to think like that, I didn't deserve to have a career. Those were people I was sending down, not potential 'acceptable losses'. So I decided to take the risk and be damned to it.

I am not, and will not become, one of *Them*.

The assault went in while we pretended to negotiate. That was standard procedure, too. I launched drop troops as well as the assault boats. Standard diversionary attacks. I tried to keep Dave's interest by using a nonstandard dispersion pattern – after all he'd know I knew he'd read the manual too. I'd be a complete idiot just to follow procedure against one of our own. He'd get suspicious if I did and I didn't want him any more paranoid than usual.

My exec, Andi Kooder, had to handle the negotiating as well as maneuvering the *Apollo* to keep the two renegade ships out of the drop zone. Supposedly I would be doing that, as the skipper, but I wasn't aboard the ship. Dave wouldn't expect gross dereliction of duty from me. No captain leaves the ship in combat. It's worth a court-martial at least. But that's what I did. I took an attack speeder out to help cover the landings. I'd had to ask for a volunteer as copilot. There was only one maverick willing to take such a huge risk.

Lieutenant Ian 'Buster' Harvey. Who else?

The assault went in, and Dave met it with consummate skill. It was as if he'd expected the unusual dispersions, the diversions and the feints. We never had much of a chance. To be honest, we took a pasting. When Attack Speeder Red Three reported taking a hit then went in, nobody was surprised. But then nobody knew I was the pilot, nor that I'd faked the shoot-down. We ejected just before impact and made ourselves scarce. Just the two of us, in civilian clothing and armed with sidearms, against whatever Dave had.

Not good odds.

The Marines didn't know that the crash was a setup. They made an attempt to retrieve the crew even though the Speeder had fireballed. I heard my own recorded voice ordering them to desist and cut their losses. Buster gave me a hard look when he heard that.

The assault failed. My recording gave the order to pull out. The Marines did a fabulous job of getting their buddies - living and dead - out. The only casualties not recovered were the crew of Red Three, presumed killed in the crash. *Apollo* broke orbit, harried on her way out by the two renegades. There was a little desultory weapons fire, but nobody up there wanted to push it. They'd already beaten us and nobody wanted damage to their ships.

Buster and I hid out for a whole day. We kept a low profile while Dave's people set up a victory parade. They had a right to celebrate, too. By sheer guts and skill their low-tech troops had beaten the finest the Coalition had to offer. Only one man in five among the Ephraim forces had a modern weapon, yet they outfought our Marines. I was impressed.

And while Dave marched in triumph through the streets, basking in the sun of Austerlitz, we broke into his command bunker. It was laughably easy. We whacked a couple of servants over the head, took their clothing and wandered wherever we wanted to. Nobody looks at servants. We had to put up with some abuse and a couple of interesting suggestions before we got to the bunker.

The bunker had a voice input. I took a guess and growled 'Vive L'Empereur!' at the pickup. The door slid open. I'm probably the only person in the universe who would think to try that, but then I knew Dave very well. It would be a bad joke to say that he had a Napoleon complex, but then life is packed full of bad jokes.

We waited. Sure enough the Emperor came back from his victory parade. He left the hangers-on at the outer door and entered his command bunker, which apparently doubled as his living quarters, with just a bodyguard and one senior officer, a general of ground forces I think. I'd half-expected Imperial French style uniforms, but theirs were much more functional; more like our own. I was somehow disappointed. Not that we wasted much time admiring their clothes. As soon as the door slid shut we emerged from the inner chamber, guns drawn. You should have seen their faces.

The bodyguard shoved his master aside and went for his sidearm. Buster pumped him full of lead. The other two raised

their hands. It's the only time I ever saw Dave shocked by anything.

I kept them covered while Buster signaled the *Apollo* to come back for us. Now all we had to do was wait. It went well enough for a while, then Dave started thinking again.

"You'll not escape, Lisa." he said.

"Maybe, maybe not. Shut up."

"No, listen! This is my planet! All of it. When I've completed my annexation of the nearby systems I'll apply to the Coalition for recognition. They'll have to accept or fight, and why would they want to fight a world that's appealing to join them?"

He had a point. "But you're still a renegade," I said.

"They'll pardon me. I'm no barbarian warlord. I'm only doing what the Coalition does, but a little more firmly. You see, what this world needs is firm central leadership. Control, stability. That's the way forward."

I happen to agree with him, despite my liberal upbringing. All the same I didn't waver. I didn't dare. "I'm still taking you in, Dave."

"Lisa, how would you like half a planet? You outsmarted me, and anyone who can do that...." He smiled and shrugged. Gods, but he was charming! "You can have anything you like, any rank or position: General, Admiral, Marshal... Consort? Anything...."

"Shut up, Dave. And sit down. I'm taking you home."

And so we sat. Dave Duvall talked at us for a while. He tried threats, sweet reason, bribery. He tried to play on my old feelings. He tried to sneak a holdout gun from his boot top. And when all that failed, he just sat. But I bet he was up to something even then.

Eventually the locals figured out something was wrong. I think it was about the time the *Apollo* came whipping back into orbit, dropping her assault shuttles a second time.

The locals tried to raise their Emperor, failed, and eventually tried to break into the bunker. That was when it all started to go wrong. We'd been in intermittent contact with *Apollo* during the operation. I'd also altered the security codes so only I could open bunker door.

This time there was no defense plan, no overall strategy. The locals still put up quite a fight, though. Even leaderless, they managed to hold the assault up. That was one difference between Dave and his idol. This new Napoleon knew the value of good subordinates. The attack was stalling when Dave made his move.

I didn't see all of it. I was talking to my exec on the radio when suddenly Buster grunted behind me. I spun, straight into Dave's right fist. Buster was already down. I still don't know how Dave did it. He took my revolver while I was still dazed and gave Harvey's gun to the general.

"Order your people to withdraw, Lisa. This has gone on long enough."

I shook my fuzzy head and staggered to the radio, nodding absently.

"There's a verification code," I asserted.

"There would be. Give it."

So I rattled off a series of garbage numbers into the radio, which must have puzzled the comms officer back on *Apollo*.

Dave grinned triumph at me. "Now what?" he asked flatly. "Now, Dave, the *Apollo* will withdraw its troops."

"Good."

"Not really. Once the troops are re-embarked they'll turn the main armament on this bunker and there's nothing you can do about it."

"What?" Buster, Dave and the general all exploded at once.

I smiled mirthlessly. "You don't think I didn't anticipate this? My orders are to bring you in or ensure your death. "Sorry, Dave."

"But... you too?" He sounded shocked, not quite in control. That must have been a new experience for him.

"I'd hoped to succeed cleanly, but this was the backup. Acceptable losses. Not everyone comes home. Call it my penalty for failure. Of course, I could countermand the order, but you'll have to surrender to me. Now."

Dave wasn't quite convinced. Not yet. What made the difference was Buster's reaction. "You bitch!" he snarled. He struggled up from the floor, still clutching his ribs where Dave had kicked him. He was almost purple with fury, and I think that only the fact that Dave had a gun on him stopped him assaulting me then and there.

"We're both expendable, Ian. I'm sorry." I hoped I sounded convincing enough.

"I've got a baby daughter! You knew that! And you still brought me!" Harvey advanced on me. I could see Dave losing control of the situation. The gun wavered.

"You volunteered, Ian."

"Not for a suicide mission!" He cocked his fist, gun or no.

"That's right." I whispered at him as his body blocked Dave's view of me.

Buster stopped, puzzled, as the general tried to drag him off me. For a second I thought he was going to hit me anyway, then Buster allowed himself to be pulled backwards, kept moving to slam into the old general. They crashed into Dave and the three of them went down him a heap of limbs. There was a shot.

I piled in, grabbing for my revolver. Dave had dropped it as he fell. I elbowed somebody in the face. Then I was on my feet, gun in hand. The general surged at me. I shot him twice in the chest without thinking. Dave backed against the wall. Buster stayed down. Blood soaked his clothing. He was breathing little bubbles of blood. My chest tightened. "Order your men to surrender." I told the Emperor of Ephraim.

"You know I can't. I couldn't earlier and I can't now."

"Do it or I'll shoot you."

"You won't, Lisa, you couldn't. We spent too much...."

I cut him off. "I can and I will. You know that. You managed to hit me when it suited you."

He nodded dumbly. "I'm sorry. But it was necessary. Does it have to be like this?"

"Yes." I opened to comms link to *Apollo* for an update. It wasn't good. The locals were still holding the assault up, surrounding the bunker area. I'd have to get out through them somehow, and soon, or Buster wouldn't make it. But that would give Dave a chance to escape and I couldn't allow that to happen.

Maybe Dave saw murder in my eyes, or maybe he was up to something even at that late stage in the game. I'll never know. "Lisa, you can't shoot me," he said, raising his hands. "You came to take me in. Well, I surrender; I'm still RCES

personnel. Everyone comes back, remember?"

I looked down at Ian Harvey, father and husband, choking on his own blood.

"Not everyone!" I snarled and raised the revolver to point at Dave's face.

It's true. I goaded him into it. By making him think I was going to shoot, I *made* him jump me. So I could shoot him, don't you see? I could never have done it on cold blood.

Dave lunged across the floor, grabbed the autopistol. It'd only fired one round, the one that punctured Buster's left lung. He rolled. Gods, he was fast. He blasted off at least four rounds as he rolled. They bounced around the room for a frighteningly long time, smashing consoles and furniture. He ended the roll on his feet, facing me. The service pistol was in both hands, spitting flame. He missed me twice more before I fired my first shot. That missed, too.

We were about three meters apart, blazing away. Seven shots, seven misses. I fired again, the chromed revolver thundering in my hands. The round clipped his shoulder, ripping flesh and clothing away. He fired again, then twice more, but my near-miss spoiled his aim. I dropped to one knee, fired again. He tracked me down. Three more shots. My revolver kicked again and Dave flew backwards, propelled by an 11mm explosive round. I dropped my weapon from limp fingers. It clattered to the floor, empty.

I felt the same.

We got out by a simple ruse. I dressed Buster in the dead general's jacket and supported him out of the bunker. I was surprised he could move at all, but I guess he wanted to get home real bad. Nobody looked twice at the loyal servant dragging her wounded master from the war zone. Just as well or they'd have had a faceful of explosive 11mm Magnum rounds for their trouble.

We reached a pickup squad and got out as fast as we could. With their Emperor dead, the two renegade ships surrendered rather than fight *Apollo*. If they'd known what sort of a state the ship was in they might have made a fight of it, but they just saw a battle-scarred Clipper, not a patched-up semi-wreck. She still looked deadly even if her teeth were crooked these days.

Buster recovered slowly in *Apollo's* sickbay. I went to visit him after a couple of days. I took the bottle from my desk along, even though the doc wouldn't approve. "You got me out. Uh, thanks... Captain." Buster sounded embarrassed.

"That's my job. Get everybody out I can. Drink?" He accepted, and peace was finally made.

"Captain? Did you have to shoot the... shoot Duvalle?"

I shook my head sadly, "No, but I couldn't keep an eye on him and drag you at once. I... I had to make him jump me."

"You took a huge risk. You had the right to execute him, under the circumstances... why not...?"

"Because he and I were lovers, years ago. We were still friends for a long time afterwards. I couldn't just shoot him, whatever duty required."

"You took a..."

"I know. A damned stupid risk. And I'm glad I did."

Buster sipped the whiskey, "Why?"

"Because... do you know why I did the job this way?"

"To outsmart... Dave."

"Partly, but partly because I thought I was losing it. That's between you and me, right? I didn't think I could handle it anymore. I had to go back into the field to see."

"And you shot your... old friend... so I could come home. Thank you. I can't tell you what it means."

"I already know." I found myself smiling sadly. "I've got to get to the bridge now. I've entered a commendation on your record and put you in for a medal. Your career's back on track. Piece of career advice, though. Get off *Apollo*. We're not a lucky ship."

"Oh, but we are, Sir. Very lucky. I'll stay, if you'll have me."

"Glad to, Lieutenant. Now I have to go."

As I reached the door, he called out after me, rather weakly, "Captain! You forgot the bottle."

"No, Ian," I said, turning in the doorway. "I didn't forget it. I left it behind."

I walked back to the bridge and set course for home.

Lieutenant Ian Harvey served another year on the *Apollo* before his promotion – at my recommendation – to Executive Officer of the *Aube*, with the rank of Commander. Bill and I were Godparents to his second and third children.

Captain Harvey was Godfather to my son, William Jr. He gave the baby a miniature bottle of whiskey as a Christening present. It's a private joke.

It's Admiral 'Buster' Harvey now, and still climbing. My reprimand remains on his record, along with all my commendations. He cites me as his greatest influence. Apparently he thinks I taught him something, but in reality it's the other way around.

And David Duvall? I still miss him, or rather his memory. By the time we met again on Ephraim he'd become someone I didn't know any more. The man I shot was not the man I loved. Or so I keep telling the phantoms.

The assault on Ephraim was a total success. The locals dug themselves out of the mess and elected a government that was both efficient and moderate. We were even able to send them some discreet assistance. Perhaps someday they'll join the Coalition.

And best of all, everyone came back.

Almost.

Court Of Inquiry

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time 30 years old, commanding officer of RCES Apollo. It is mid 1208.

They arrested me as soon as I touched the starport tarmac. I knew it was coming, of course. I'd just come back from an 'unscheduled' mission to Nicosia. When captains start making their own orders up it's time bring them home. Especially when those orders involve firing on civilians.

They asked me, ever so nicely, to present myself in full dress uniform at the starport after turning *Apollo* over to my exec. I think they were a little surprised that I actually did it, but then they had no idea what was going on in my head.

You see, I was finished. The trip to Nicosia was the end of my career. I knew that when I gave the order to open fire, and I suspected it as soon as I heard what was going on. I just knew I couldn't stay out of trouble. But if I didn't go I'd not want to live any more.

I'm still not sure I do.

We'd been doing a fair job of pacifying Nicosia, setting up little bootstrap communities and working with the more amenable locals. It was all going very well.

Bill was posted there as senior military advisor to the Interim Government of Maldaar. There was a whole mob of our people down there - several hundred, making a sizeable colony - since things had stabilized. After a few big raids to bust up the hostile states our allies in Maldaar were swallowing the others up in a textbook economic conquest operation. It looked like we were going to pacify the whole world using our pocketbooks instead of bayonets.

Nobody knows what started it, but suddenly there was fighting all over the place. Everybody seemed to be trying to take our bootstrap communities down and carve up the spoils. The military teams held their own for a few days, but there just weren't enough of them. They started to cave in.

The regular supply ship managed to get some of our people out, but most of them were bottled up in a shrinking perimeter around Feradia. Bill was there, coordinating the defense. There was no way they could hold out long enough for a support mission to be put together, no way at all.

By sheer coincidence, we were passing through Rohit on a support mission. That's pretty ironic, considering my early mission history. As soon as we heard, I set course for Nicosia and orders be damned.

We arrived just in time. The defense was finally collapsing. There had been wholesale massacres of our people and their supporters. With that kind of fate in store the defenders were fighting to the last. They were being pushed back, but the price they extracted from the local warlords was tremendous.

I didn't have enough troops to make much difference, not even after arming every volunteer I could find - and there were plenty. So I used *Apollo* as a hospital ship, a safe haven for non-combatants. But what about our local allies? Bill was as concerned for their welfare as for our people. That's the way it should be.

It cost him his life.

Bill was helping to get wounded men and women out of a field hospital. The locals had made him a general, but all the same he was in the front line. There are those of us destined to be commanders, and there those who are heroes. Bill was a hero.

He died a hero's death.

They went back for him, despite his orders. Three local soldiers died to carry him off the field. They thought that much of him.

I took a shuttle down to be with him at the end. He was sedated, dying of multiple bullet wounds, and he knew it. We spent a few moments alone but for a Marine medic.

"They can't hold out." Bill whispered to me.

"I know. I can't get them all out. Not even all our own people, let alone the locals."

"They'll kill them all."

"I know."

We were quiet for a while. I could feel him slipping away and there was nothing anyone could do. Then Bill managed to turn his head, forced out a few last words.

"You'll have to use the meson gun. Turn it on ground targets. These people are dying for us. That makes them our own. You have to save them. Promise me you'll do it."

"I promise. And I'll look after the cat." I tried to make a joke even though I could barely speak. I didn't mention our son, just a year old. He'd never see his father again and I couldn't remind Bill of that.

"Lisa, I want to be buried here." Bill whispered.

"Yes. Anything you want." It wasn't worth wiping the tears away. There'd only be more.

"We did good, Lisa. The lights are coming back on. Despite... this...."

"I know."

"I'd do it again."

"Rest, Bill."

But instead he forced himself up on one elbow, his recruiting-poster features urgent, desperate.

"You can save them. You have to," he hissed at me.

They were his last words. That was Bill all over. No last declaration of undying love, no last thoughts for me. There wasn't time and besides, I knew. He did his job to the last because that was all he knew how to do. It's hard to live with someone like that, but I'm glad I did. Today's heroes are somehow smaller than Bill was. There'll never be anyone like him ever again, and I was privileged to spend years with him. Others met the legend, but I knew the man.

And the man was greater than the legend.

Afterward, I went back to the ship and turned the meson gun on the attackers, their supplies and their bases. It wasn't enough. The pressure continued to mount.

So far, I'd done nothing to merit dismissal from the Service, of course. Up to that point I deserved a medal. I'd displayed courage and initiative, done everything I could. I could have walked away with clean hands, a commendation and only a stained conscience to trouble me. My career would have actually been furthered by letting our allies be overrun – as long as I followed the book.

But Buster Harvey had reminded me that the book wasn't everything. And anyway I'd just watched my husband die. I didn't care about my career at that point. I didn't really want to live. But all those people down there did, and they were

depending on me.

So career be damned. I issued an ultimatum, and when they refused to surrender I turned the meson gun on civilian targets.

That's right. I'm a war criminal. They should shoot me.

We pinpointed the TEDs' command bunkers – always in the centre of cities as protection against this kind of attack - and destroyed them. Then we kept firing at their settlements until they put someone in charge long enough to surrender to us.

We dropped troops to oversee the surrender, to make sure it stuck. We more or less pacified half of Nicosia overnight. At what cost in human life I still don't know. I'm told it wasn't as bad as it might have been. We mostly aimed to destroy amenities like reservoirs and power stations rather than population centres. The damage was a lot less than would have been caused by a series of air raids. I killed less people than the TEDs had massacred.

But I killed them all the same. How many young couples with children like mine? How many shattered families? How much heartbreak? It was necessary and I'd do it again. But it wasn't right.

We stayed a week, making sure the surrender lasted, helping the Maldaar locals dig themselves out and start building again.

Then I went home to face the hangman.

They sent a whole squad of Marines to escort me. They had gauss rifles. I was wearing a ceremonial sword. Yet still the lieutenant in charge looked nervous. Didn't he understand that I had chosen to come here?

"Captain Ryson. I have orders direct from the General Secretary to arrest you on charges of piracy, unlawful military action and on a number of charges relating to alleged war crimes. If you give me your word that you will not resist us, you may keep your sword and will not be restrained."

I just smiled sadly at him. He was awed by my reputation and the chestful of the Coalition's highest honors I wore. I don't think he would have dared try to stop me if I'd run. But that's not what I came here for.

"You have my word," I said simply.

I was taken in an executive speeder to the finest hotel on Aubaine. I never merited this treatment when I was one of the good guys.

Apart from a couple of Marines hovering nearby, I was kept in the lap of luxury for the whole day before the hearing. I spent the day idly flicking through the vid channels. There was a news item that caught my eye. Just a funeral, but it was someone I'd vaguely known. I thought I should be there.

The Coalition had been very fair. They'd appointed me a very expensive lawyer. I guess he was pretty hurt when I didn't show up for our meeting.

The piracy charge wouldn't have held up. I could have claimed that I was using my discretion as a ship's captain. I could no doubt have got around the self-interest issue, too, and as far as unlawful military action went I was technically under Bill's orders – and he was working with the locals. No problem getting out of that one.

But the fact that I turned a meson gun on civilians? They had me there. We were going through a particularly idealistic phase then. Even though I'm Aubani, I think the Oriflammen see it a bit clearer when it comes to doing what's necessary.

Still, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The general public would demand that I be cashiered. They'd not be able to stomach someone like me running around in charge of a starship. At that moment I really wouldn't have cared if they'd sentenced me to death.

Which is why I didn't meet my lawyer. Instead I went to the funeral. It was a traditional Aubani affair, held on a barge out at sea. The two bodies were consigned to the deep in weighted coffins. I'd known one of them briefly. He'd been a drive technician on the *Aube* while I was Operations Officer. The other was a Marine who I'd never heard of.

Spacehand Drive Specialist Friel left behind two children and a pretty young wife. I expected to see accusation in her eyes when I arrived, but there was only compassion. She knew about Bill, shared my loss. We stared at one another in a moment of shared grief.

I had my escort of Marines with me, of course. They silently formed an honor guard around the coffins. There but by the grace of the Gods or maybe sheer uncaring luck went any one of them. Human and Ithklur faces wore stern parade-ground expressions, but I knew people like them and I knew their thoughts were of their own mortality.

Of course, I was being followed about by the buzzards of the press. They all clustered about, waiting for me to do something controversial. It's always a good bet at any public function. Rely on Captain Ryson and her angst to put on a show. I resolved to disappoint them.

The ceremony was short and martial, a catalog of successful missions and decorations earned. You'd think neither of them had ever created anything, never done anything but play the hero. No mention of Friel's family. No mention of the exquisite wooden dolls he liked to carve. No mention that either of these men had a life, only a career. It depressed me even more than before.

I would have left it at that, but Friel's wife came over. "Captain, you knew my husband?" She was bearing up very well. A perfect Navy widow.

"I served with him for a few months on the *Aube*. My son has a sculpture he carved - of a Hiver called Nelson. Your husband was a fine craftsman."

She smiled sadly and wiped away a tear. "That's the first anyone's said about the man. They're all talking about the uniform. That's the way he talked about you - like a vid hero, not a real person."

"I'm flattered to be mentioned at all. But honestly I hardly knew him."

"I know," she said, "But would you like to say something? He'd have liked that."

No, he wouldn't. He'd have liked to come home, hang up his toolkit and settle down with his family. He'd have liked to hear someone say, 'thanks for making and building and creating.' But nobody was going to say that. All they were going to talk about was his career.

Suddenly I had something to say. I stepped up to the podium. The reporters climbed over each other to get a better position, jostling the funeral guests. That was just plain despicable.

"Friends. We are about to consign these two men to the deep. Yet I haven't heard anything about them. All I've heard is *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. All we've talked about is military glory. But what about their lives? What about the simple fact that two good and decent human beings lie here?"

"I didn't really know either of these men well, but I knew them in spirit. I've seen that spirit extinguished in a thousand ways. I could tell you the tales of noble self-sacrifice we like to hear. I could tell you how much I miss my husband. But I won't insult you with platitudes. It won't bring them back."

I blinked back the tears and went on. "So today we bury these two comrades, and tomorrow? How many more? How many more absent friends will there be? And for what?"

"I'll tell you what for. For the future. So that the children they leave behind can have a safe place to grow up. So that we can once again find our destiny without fear. These two men have given more to the Reformation Coalition than I or anyone else still living. They gave us their lives. So why are you pointing those cameras at me? *There* are your heroes!"

I pointed to the coffins, then spoke directly at the reporters. "These men leave behind them a monument greater than any we could build. There won't be a statue, not even a gravestone. But their monument is here." I stretched out my arms to encompass everyone gathered on the barge, and the world beyond.

"Their monument is Aubaine and the whole Reformation Coalition. Our worlds. Our homes. Us." I paused for a moment before I finished. "I wish we were worthy."

I stepped down. I had nothing else to say. The Marines made to fire a salute – their rifles were loaded in case I tried anything, laughable though that sounds – but I stopped them. Their officer actually agreed to what I suggested.

So the newest recruit in the squad took my sword and gave the command while I stood in the most junior position. We fired the last salute into the air as the weighted coffins slid into the mother ocean.

As the funeral barge headed for home, the Marines kept the press at bay – rather roughly – and I gazed out over the ocean. A strongly-accented voice spoke at my elbow.

"Captain. Through suffering we seek wisdom."

I turned to find myself facing an Ithklur corporal. "Then I've got all the wisdom I can use," I said sadly.

"That is not possible, but I see your pain and understand your meaning. You must remember, captain. These men have died. But first they lived. Do you see?"

I smiled sadly, thinking of Bill. "Yes. They lived."

"Captain, what do you believe in?"

"Nothing, not any more."

"Lie to me if you must, but not to yourself. You believe, Captain."

"Yes, dammit! Yes I still believe!" I snapped at him. His impertinence was annoying me, but I found his words compelling.

"What do you believe in?"

"The future. But it's hard. It's too hard now."

I've never been hugged by an Ithklur. If I'd been thinking I'd have been surprised how gentle he was. He held me until I'd finished crying. Then he took off his San*Klaass hat, symbol of his religion or maybe just a silly affectation. Whichever it was, he was solemn as he offered it to me.

"You are not yet ready to wear this. But someday Enlightenment will come to you. You will understand that whatever the price, you were right to believe. The future is a powerful talisman, with a heavy price. The future needs heroes to believe in it. It is too powerful for most of us."

Then he walked back to his unit, leaving me speechlessly holding his gift.

We docked soon after. Suddenly the corporal was no longer a philosopher but a guard once again. The Marines marched me away to face my accusers.

I paused outside, let the world take one last look at my uniform. I'd never wear it again, I was sure. Then the escort opened the doors and it all ended. No lander going down in flames, no desperate last stand against Vampire ships or privateers. No hero's funeral. Just a Court Of Inquiry and a foregone verdict. That and an alien voice whispering in my ear.

"Always believe," the corporal whispered. "The future begins now."

I messed their formalities up. "Let's get to the point." I said. "I wish to make one statement before you deliver your verdict. I will then plead any way you wish. I will not embarrass the Service."

They agreed, so I sealed my own fate. "I'll never command a starship again, nor even crew one in the Coalition service. I know that it's only the war crimes charges you'll get me with – I can legally justify all my other actions. But it's enough to damn me."

There were nods. "So. If I claim diminished responsibility due to grief at the death of my husband you'll be lenient, give me a pension and honors. But I'll never go into space again. And anyway, I won't do that because it's not true."

I took a deep breath. "Public opinion will never accept a vitriolic speech about necessity and justification. But that's the truth, isn't it? I saved our people by what I did. I weighed the odds and decided that Coalition lives were worth more than my career or even the lives of local civilians. And I know it wasn't right. But I had to do it. I also know that the public won't accept it. I knew that at the time."

Again, more nods. "So, I could let us all off lightly but I won't, because I'd have to lie. The truth is that I turned a meson gun on civilians. You all know why, but the fact remains that I did it. Guilty as charged."

I was judged by three very senior personnel: Admiral 'Laser' Hewitt, General 'Feeble' Mallai and Secretary Davinna, a member of the General Secretary's staff. They represented the Navy, the ground forces and the citizens. Their decision was unanimous.

"Captain Ryson. It is the decision of this court that you are too emotionally unstable for field operations. However, your long and exemplary service is noted. You are offered a choice of administrative, support or teaching assignments."

The General looked sorry as he went on. "You're a hero, Captain. Nothing can change that. But you are correct that public opinion will not accept your recent actions. For this reason you will be discharged from the Service. We all understand the necessity of what you did, but you broke the rules of engagement and caused civilian deaths. There will be no charges, but we see no future for you in the field."

It was still crushing, even though it was the least I'd expected.

I straightened, unbuckled the ceremonial sword and passed it to one of the guards. "I decline the offer of alternative assignment, and hereby resign my commission. We all know that what I did was necessary to save our people. If the price is my career then so be it. It was worth it, and there's a lot of young families here and on Nicosia who will agree with me. You can't possibly understand. You've not been in the field recently."

All three looked puzzled and a little sad, but the decision was duly recorded. At least it saved them the embarrassment of busting a former hero.

I left the Court of Inquiry as a civilian, with no future, no plans. Nothing but a deep spreading pool of blackness in my soul.

Sometimes it's so very hard to believe.

One Vacant Chair

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time a private citizen of Aubaine. She is 31 years old. It is early 1209.

And so I walked alone in darkness.

I always thought it'd end in flames, a bright blaze of glory and everlasting fame. Not like this. I just drifted along without purpose or hope, doing nothing. Just living, but it wasn't a life. The best word I've heard is 'heartsick'. It comes close, but it's just a word.

I embarrassed everyone like that for nearly six months. William Junior had to be looked after by relatives. I was too depressed to take proper care of him. Can you imagine that?

All I did was drink and mope, and sometimes wander around. I joined a Veterans' Group, but we were all too full of self-pity to help one another. I see that now. At the time I didn't care enough to do anything about it, but that's what we all needed. Someone to take charge and give us a meaning once more.

It didn't happen.

There were several suicides among the veterans, people like me who'd been pulled out of active operations and who felt helpless. The authorities took that as proof that they'd been right to pull us out before we could take anyone down with us. But they were wrong.

It was being out of it that we couldn't cope with. Being useless. Helpless. The stronger ones adjusted, found a new purpose. The rest of us just complained all the time and did nothing about it. How the mighty are fallen. I was self-destructive, manic depressive. And I was wasting my life. You see, I'd survived where so many others had fallen. And what was I doing with that precious gift? Nothing at all.

After a while it got better. It started with a hat.

The San*Klaass hat I was given the day they cashiered me. Given to me by an lthklur corporal who asked me what I believed in. I told him I believed in the future. He said one day I'd be Enlightened. I didn't believe him about that and I still don't. But I still believe in the future.

I was looking for another bottle when I found the hat. I'd stuffed it in a drawer and forgotten about it. I don't know how it happened to reappear. Maybe I was guided to it by some higher being or maybe it was just one of those random things that don't make any sense but happen all the same. It was lying in a drawer with a photograph of my son, my revolver and my Medal Of Honor. How those four objects came to be together I don't know.

But then the universe is a funny place.

Believe. Always believe. Those four objects prompted me to make a call. I decided to do it sober, or not at all, and I managed to stay dry long enough. One little triumph.

People had been coming to see me, diligently trying to bring me back. Buster Harvey came round that afternoon with my old exec, Andi Kooder. Andi had been invalided after he lost an eye and his arm in a fight with privateers, but he'd taken a teaching post and adjusted well.

There but for the grace of God go I. At least I'm still whole. On the outside, anyway.

I was almost sober when they came to visit. Andi took the gun away from me and we talked. We exchanged strained platitudes and small talk for a while, then suddenly I asked, "Andi, was it worth it?"

"What?" they both said at once.

"Your injuries. Was it all worth it?"

Andi sighed. "I hope so. I can't say. You obviously don't think so," he added pointedly.

"It all got too much for me, Andi. I'm sorry. But I'm not sure either. I want to believe, but I've got to see it."

"See what?"

"What we're building. I want to see the future. I've volunteered for a Pathfinder expedition."

They both looked shocked, "That's a bit desperate!" Buster said. He was right. Pathfinders have one of the most dangerous jobs in the Service. They pave the way for a major strike, usually with no backup and little chance of extraction if it goes wrong.

"That's right. After all, I'm expendable," I replied.

"No you're not. You have a child – and we all need you."

"Thank you, but you don't. And Bill Junior doesn't need an alcoholic depressive for a mother. This is the only way back."

"You're determined then?" Andi asked.

"I already made the call."

"Where are you going?" Andi asked.

I smiled grimly, suddenly full of purpose once again. "Where else? Nicosia. We're trying again. This time I'll succeed."

"Or die," Andi said.

"There's no difference, Andi. Whatever happens I'll be working towards the future, not vegetating here. I need to believe."

"A friend of mine got religion once. He started to talk just like you." Buster admonished me.

"Shall I crawl back into the bottle, then? Would you prefer that?" I snapped, then added more quietly, "Sorry, I didn't mean that. I've always been religious, well a bit. Buster, you know that."

"Not like this. You're talking like the future is your god."

"Not my god. Ours. The whole Coalition. We need to believe in something. For most of us it's a better future. But I need to be sure and this is the only way."

Andi smiled at me, pleased for the first time in as long as I can remember. "You've found a new purpose, then. But why this?"

"Because it's the only berth I can get. Buster, you know all about that, too."

Buster nodded. At one time I'd been the only skipper who'd take him. "Then look out, Nicosia," he said with a little smile.

They actually tried to talk me out of it, which was touching. After all the grief I'd given them they still cared that much. But then that's what 'friends' means. I appreciated their efforts, but I had to do this. I refused to be swayed and in the end they gave up. They probably thought I was planning to get myself killed in some glorious last stand. Maybe I was. Maybe all I wanted was the glory.

But for whatever the reason, they realised this was what I needed and they let me go. Andi turned in the doorway as they left and offered me an ironic salute. "Lander?" he said quietly.

"What?"

"Welcome back. We've missed you."

We were dropped off at Nicosia by a fake Free Trader, in Australian Empire territory. Just four of us. The others were all misfits too, but they were professionals who liked to work like this rather than suicide cases. There's a fine line between grim courage and 'who cares?' but we were on opposite sides of that line and we all knew it.

There were no ranks; just Team Leader 'Granite' and three Team Members; me, 'Wailer' and 'Tripwire'. They welcomed me willingly enough, but they didn't trust me. They knew what I was.

The operation was simple enough. Spy out local defences and set up for a major pacification operation. Ever since I'd blasted the living hell out of the other TEDs, the Australians were taking more and more territory. Theirs was the last major state not under our control or allied to us – I'd done that much good last time. Now the Marines would come in and finish the job.

But only if we set it up right.

The early stages went off perfectly. We scouted, infiltrated and spied, and the other three even started to trust me after a while. I sensed the team's attitude change when I started behaving like a professional with a job to do.

I was paired up with Wailer. He played blues saxophone – hence the Tacnet name – so we toured the bars. He played and I kept my ears open. It's a funny thing, but up until very recently live music has been the thing – or at least recorded live music. You know what I mean. Electronic music had just about died. I suppose it's an instinctive reaction to Virus that's put us off electronic anything.

Until recently that is. There's a bit of a techno revival going on since we started to accept certain AIs as people. I'm not sure that's a good thing. Which, accepting AIs or techno music? Well, both really. But then I'm a scarred old veteran. I was at Mitchell. I saw comrades killed by Vampires. I remember Raven Hawley with wires in her brain. It's not easy to forgive, and programmed music makes me shiver.

But anyway, it worked and I felt useful again. It was so good to have a purpose.

We picked up a lot of information. Granite relayed it to the INTEL ship lurking in the outsystem, got a new set of orders and we moved to Phase Two. That was when it got dangerous. Our target was a comms relay station which served part of the Planetary Aerospace Defence network, such as it was.

We made our move in daylight, one of a dozen teams setting the assault up. Each team that succeeded meant a few less casualties.

My first job was to remove one of the sentries. That was easy enough, poor dope. I talked him away from his buddy. Claimed I needed some help with a couple of guys who were hassling me and I'd be so grateful if he'd help me out. I guess I'm not as old or as burned-out as I thought. He practically fell over himself, rushing to my assistance. He scurried around the corner straight into Wailer's boot. That cooled his ardor just a bit. The other sentry did us a favor by coming to see what had happened. I hit him over the head with my pistol butt. What kind of idiot takes his helmet off on duty?

So now we had two uniforms. We'd not stand up to close inspection – they don't have women in the military in the Australian Empire - but hopefully we'd not attract too much attention while we planted the charges.

We got away with it for a while, right up until the locals detected the assault ships moving into position and went on the alert. After that they started to wonder where their sentries had gone.

It wasn't long before the shooting started. The other two got out safely, but Wailer and I were pinned down. There were only three guards with bolt-action rifles, but they had us in a truly appalling position. Their rifles could penetrate the thin wall we were hiding behind. If we tried to run for it they'd hit us. If we stayed put it was a matter of time before they got us with a blind shot. And then there was the fact that we were just about on top of the explosives.

The other half of the team still had one objective to accomplish and Pathfinders have to put their mission before rescuing comrades. The price of failure is just too high.

So Wailer and I had only one chance. We had to make a break for it. We burst out, spraying our submachine guns at the locals to keep their heads down. We got out of the comms station and fled across the yard. There were a few stray shots coming our way but we had the guards pretty much suppressed. The other two were in trouble elsewhere, but coping. All we had to do was get out.

Then we realised that the locals were trying to disarm the charges. A few bursts put them off, but that was when Wailer got hit. It was just a stupid leg hit, nothing very serious, but he couldn't run.

I was almost clear. The assault was due to start in minutes. But Wailer was lying in the open, under fire but still doing his job. He was shooting at the guards, keeping them away from the charges.

My headset crackled, "Lander, get clear. I'll cover the charges until they blow."

"Negative Wailer, you'll be caught in the blast!" I snapped back as I dived into cover. "I'm coming back for you."

It looked suicidal. I'd have to cross open ground under fire to reach him, then drag him away under fire. To add to that Wailer had seen the locals disarm some of the charges. If the locals' comms net still worked they could target the assault ships. We had to stop that.

Wailer knew it too. That's why he was putting through a priority call through to the command ship.

"Assault command. Pathfinder Six-Bee."

"Six-Bee. Go."

"Mission compromised, PAD net still active. Target orbital fire on this signal."

"Pathfinder Six-Bee, targeting. Delay to extract personnel?"

"Command, affirmative!" I broke in. "Three hundred seconds."

"Orbital laser fire in three hundred. Godspeed, Pathfinder Six-Bee."

Wailer yelled at me for that. I ignored him. I was shaking, scared for the first time on this mission. In five minutes this area would be a fireball. I had time to get clear. But probably not if I went in for Wailer, even assuming I survived the attempt.

More guards joined their comrades. Their shooting was truly terrible, but there was plenty of it.

"Lander, get clear. I can't get out." Wailer's voice said in my ear. "I'll cover you."

I gulped. I didn't want to make that run, didn't want to try to save him. I wanted to hide, to sneak away. *I wanted to live!*

I laughed out loud as I stood up and started to run. I ran into the hail of bullets, into the target zone, into almost certain death. But not because I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. No. I did it because I wanted to live. Not to go on being alive but to truly live. I maybe I'd win and maybe I'd crash and burn but either way I was back from the darkness and charging headlong into the future. It felt wonderful.

I zig-zagged across the concrete, firing one-handed. To my great surprise I reached Wailer unscathed. The guards kept shooting as I dragged him clear. It still seems miraculous to me that I wasn't hit. Perhaps that's all it was. Just another miracle.

Wailer wasn't so lucky. I felt him twitch as something hit him, then again. I kept on dragging his limp body one-handed, firing with the other.

How many times had I done that? That's my life in microcosm; dragging a dying team-mate out under fire. But that time it was different. I was scared, really scared, but it didn't matter if they got me or not. It wouldn't make any difference if the orbital fire engulfed me. I'd won the important fight; if I fell it would be as a martyr to the future, not a victim of the past.

I'd realised that I still had an obligation to the living as long as I was still alive. Whatever happened, I'd lived. Even if it all ended in flames, I'd taken what I had and used it as best I could, for the future. Believe, always believe.

I fired the subgun dry, threw it away. I pulled out the chromed revolver and kept firing. The seconds ticked down. The charges didn't blow on time. The locals must have somehow disarmed them. It didn't matter. In just a few seconds orbital fire would tear this place to shreds.

I kept dragging. Wailer wasn't moving but I held onto him. We got further away. The guards were still shooting as a stolen car screeched around the corner. Granite leaned out of the open door, firing. He yelled at me to drop Wailer and run. I wanted to. We could have got clear in time, but only if I left him and ran.

But you see, I thought he might still be alive. So I waved the others away. I dragged Wailer as far as I could then dropped him and covered him with my body. A second later the world exploded in flames as the ship's lasers blasted the station to ashes.

There was one vacant chair in the mess a few days later. We toasted absent friends and ate our dinner in silence.

The operation had been a total success. The Pathfinders had made such a mess of the locals' communications and command structure that we walked all over them. The cost was surprisingly low. Already we were setting up a world government, one that would last. The Pathfinder teams were going home after a job well done. The Marines were in control.

And me? They let me make the toast since I was already standing up. I'd had to stand throughout the meal. The explosion that followed the laser fire had burned all the skin off my butt, which made it rather painful to sit down while the grafts took. But at least we were all there. Even Wailer, who'd released himself from sickbay even though he really shouldn't have been up and about.

During that dinner I finally understood why I'd gone back for Wailer, even though I thought it was suicidal. Why I wouldn't leave him even when I thought he was dead. I did it because I still believed, and I wanted to live. Not stay alive, not just go on breathing, but to *live*.

I wanted to be useful, to go on building the future. You see, I've been at the sharp end. I've seen the sacrifice. We need people who've seen that to make sure, damn sure, that the sacrifice wasn't in vain. To take what others have died for and make something better out of it. People with no concern for career, no interest in budgets or acceptable losses. People like me.

People who believe.

So I'd applied for that advisory post. If they wouldn't let me have a starship then at least I'd see they made a good job of running the planet that'd cost me so many friends. We'd paid for this world. Now I was going to make sure we kept it. It's amazing what you can do if you only believe.

So that night we toasted the fallen and planned the future. A new world to build, a new future for me and my little son. I decided to contact the Veterans' groups, to try to show them what they could still do, give their lives some meaning once

again.

For the first time in my career, I smiled as I made the toast. I smiled because at last I knew how to make things better. I'd learned how to make something out of all the loss. I'd make Nicosia a monument to the fallen – by making it a place to live.

And I was smiling for another reason too. There were no absent friends this time.

The only vacant chair that night was mine.

Devil's Advocate

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Lisa is at this time the President-Elect for the Provisional Planetary Government of Nicosia. She is 33 years old. It is late 1210.

Andi Kooder skidded the bottle across the table at me with a huge grin. It was telling that he was handing me booze without any concerns, but then I'd come a long way in the last eighteen months. A long, long way. And so had Nicosia.

"So I'm making a left bank, trying to shake the missile," Hacker was saying. "Half my control surfaces are gone and I can hear pieces coming off the hull. And then there's an almighty flash as something goes off in orbit and to cap it all my goggles go black to save my sight, only they're defective and they don't get light again. So I think I've been blinded. I'm yelling for help but the *Mongoose II* has no dual controls and my gunner isn't flight trained anyway..."

I poured myself another shot and listened to Hacker's tale. Hacker has three fingers missing from his left hand, an artificial left foot and won't ever be able to stand up fully straight again, all from the same crash. Two years before he was suicidal; one of far too many mental breakdown cases in a veteran's hospital on Aubaine. Now he was my Vice-President.

Well, not quite Vice-President, not yet. There was the still minor technicality of the election, but nobody had any doubts about the outcome. Neither of the other two candidates had anything like the same clout as me, John 'Hacker' Morrell and the rest of my team. We were looking at a landslide victory unless something very strange happened.

Which, in a way, it did.

If you'd asked me at that moment, I'd have told you we deserved our runaway success. In a little over a year the provisional administration had changed Nicosia from a recently-pacified frontier colony to a semi-unified world with an effective central government. There was still a long way to go, we admitted, but what progress we'd made!

After the pacification we'd brought the usual bootstrap teams and advisors into Nicosia, but also some unusual ones too. I rallied a lot of the burnouts and pulled-from-active-duty veterans and sold them on the idea of settling on Nicosia. That was a lot of extra personnel, and I sneakily waited until the normal allocation of bootstrap advisors had arrived so as not to let our planners shortchange the official uplift project.

Some of my people were physically limited and some were flakes, but they were veteran Star Vikings and Lancers; tough, motivated and resourceful. We were dedicated to making something special out of Nicosia; part showcase colony and part retirement home for ourselves. Reconstruction was going well, and fast.

We'd brought what little hardware we could, but mostly we were working with local resources to try to create a viable interstellar economy more or less from scratch. It was pretty tough, especially since just about all the high-tech relics that could be salvaged from Nicosia had already been grabbed by Viking raids.

I was on some of those raids, so I can hardly complain about their thoroughness.

Thing is, it was all going so very well. The provisional regional governments pretty much had their areas nailed down and were gathering popular support, or so we believed. Over the regional administrative bodies was the provisional planetary government, with none other than me as colony director.

Very soon we'd hold regional elections, then a planetary one, and the provisional administration would be an actual democratic government at last. It really was cause for celebration, which was why we were all so cheerful as we swapped tales of adventure and glory.

It says a lot about our mood that events that had scarred us and given us nightmares were now laughed about over drinks and nibbles. We'd found a worthy purpose and dedicated ourselves to it. We were no longer useless burnouts; we had a plan and a future. We swapped tall tales and laughed about the old times, and took comfort in comradeship when the sadness came back. We were healing.

But of course we'd missed something.

Hacker wound up his tale of embarrassing disaster, and Andi Kooder regaled us – again – with the time he grav-chuted into a swamp filled with nasties and only escaped being lunch for the larger beasts by hiding in a sewer outlet. I retaliated with a tale of how Andi and I blagged our way into a planetary aerospace defense base by pretending to be representatives of one of the world's arms suppliers, then blew most of it up with our 'samples'.

And so it went on. Anyone walking in on our little gathering would have found us appallingly arrogant, I expect. Glorifying our adventures and laughing about our mistakes and misdeeds – like the time I insisted on taking RCES *Apollo* alongside myself instead of letting the actual pilot do it, and I pranged her on a mooring arm – but for us it was something different. It was part of the healing process but more even than that. We were reaffirming our ties to one another, sharing similar experiences and establishing our credentials to sit in that company of heroes.

Besides, we'd lost friends and risked our lives to rebuild the future. We were entitled to brag about it just a little, don't you think?

We finally headed off to our respective homes sometime in the early hours of the morning, and it was a fairly bleary-eyed President-elect that crawled out of bed and stumbled off in the direction of a press conference and tour of one of our flagship projects. Andi and John were off on their own baby-kissing missions elsewhere.

Andi was in charge of the security services but he'd got really into energy-generation recently, so he'd accepted an invite to visit a hydroelectric power project that we'd pushed for and backed. John was playing the wounded war hero at a security base up north, rallying support among our military personnel and the defense contractors.

Me, I had a particularly onerous job that day, touring one of our new fast-track education establishments. It was a nice idea – basically you got a free education from childhood to college level if you'd agree to serve a 2-year term as an educator in one of the less developed areas, and extra time in the field could be traded for credit towards an offworld university place. The project hadn't produced any graduates yet, but it was one of the longterm projects we'd implemented with a view to improving our adopted world.

It was a great idea and it paid dividends in the long term, but what I didn't realize as I was shown teaching rooms and lecture theatres was that we'd forgotten something in our haste to better the lot of everyone on Nicosia.

We'd forgotten to ask if everyone wanted their lot bettering.

That's not quite it. A significant proportion of the planetary population were firmly behind us, but the locals were seriously disadvantaged compared to high-tech educated offworlders who came in and picked up all the good jobs. In a generation or so, the locals would be able to compete with us on an equal footing but at that point they were second-class citizens by virtue of the fact that they'd grown up on a backwater Wilds world with no access to proper education or technology.

In hindsight, it's obvious to me that we were more than a little condescending towards the locals. We came hammering down from the stars and smashed their oppressive governments and freed them – whether they liked it or not – and then set about dragging them into the modern era whether they wanted that or not. And to cap it all we brought in a whole mob of people and set them up as a colonial elite with all the best jobs and positions of power.

The word 'oops' comes to mind.

Fact is, we did indeed make things better for the people of Nicosia, but it could have been done more sensitively and with more regard to their needs. Later on, we did it that way and look what happened; things are so much better now. But back then we never really thought about those poor dumbass locals except to congratulate ourselves on saving them from barbarism and giving them nice jobs working for us.

No great surprise then that some folks really did not like the way we treated them, and when their protests and grumbles didn't achieve anything, they resorted to more blatant means.

Like taking Andi Kooder and his delegation hostage.

I got the report via an aide as I was being shown around the sports facilities. I guess I'll never find out just how good the changing-rooms really were, nor get to look interested as the principal pointed out the latest in shower-head technology or ultra-hygienic toilets. Instead I was ushered back to my grav limo by my security detail (which, unsurprisingly, included no locals) and briefed as we headed for the capital.

I exchanged a look with my personal bodyguard, an ex-Marine by the name of Kai Renashii. Yeah, 'Royster' Renashii. He used to be part of the Herd, as our Marines aboard RCES *Apollo* were known. Herd; as in Herd of Bison, named for Bill's tacnet code. Well, it was funnier if you were there.

Royster wanted to bury me in the nearest bunker and ring it with guns, but I snapped on the limo's com unit instead. I demanded all the information available from security command. As I was reading through it, Royster tapped me on the arm. "Lander, no," he said firmly.

That's how it was between us. Whether I was Acting Colony Director or the actual, no-kidding Planetary President, it was 'Lander' among the Star Viking community. I was one of them, no more. There was nothing more to be.

I gave Royster my most reassuring and earnest shrug. "Andi's my friend," I said. "I just want to know what's going on."

"Andi is the Minister for Security, the most powerful man on this world after the Planetary Vice-President-elect," Royster replied. "And you're the President-elect. Losing both of you would be somewhat embarrassing."

I nodded. "I hear you, Royster. I'm just checking..."

Royster wasn't convinced. He patted his shoulder-holstered gauss pistol and kicked his ankle to reassure himself that the backup gun was in place. They were. Then he flipped a compartment open and handed me a heavy flak jacket. I struggled into it, and accepted my revolver from him. Well, if someone had made a play for my most senior advisor then maybe they'd go for me too. I spun the cylinder and grinned savagely. Let them try.

Andi's situation was unenviable but at least he was alive. He and his single bodyguard, plus a couple of staffers and a handful of engineers from the hydroelectric plant, had been taken completely unawares and were being held in the pumphouse, right in the middle of the dam. Local security was converging on the area but so far there were no demands.

"Royster, can you assemble the AWC team for me?" I asked casually. AWC stands for Absolute Worst Case. I'm told that's what they called the team the old Emperor used to maintain. Its job was to rescue him or his family from terrorists or whatever else happened, or die trying. My AWC team was more general. It was composed of veteran Star Vikings who could handle virtually anything from hostage-rescue to a medical disaster, fire, flood or possibly Armageddon, though they had standing orders to request backup from the military in that event.

"Done," Royster said. "You want to go to the scene?" I gave him a look. One of my own was in danger. Of course I wanted to go to the scene.

It didn't take long to get there, not at the stupidly breakneck speeds we flew at. My pilot, 'Bouncer' Askey, was another veteran. I once put a gun to his head to make him obey my orders but he forgave me – I assume – and now he drove my Presidential limo like a crazy man. I wonder where he got that from.

I fought the urge to fidget and tried to calm the fury that was building in me. Someone had taken Andi Kooder hostage. My Andi. My old friend, my old first officer, my loyal second-in-command. My responsibility. Andi Kooder. The one and only Star Viking I called by name these days instead of by Tacnet callsign. Of course, that didn't mean much given that Andi's highly imaginative Tacnet name was 'Andi', but there you go. Despite my best efforts at calm I was boiling with rage by the time we reached the dam.

Both my escorting speeders hauled off and began to orbit as Royster and I debussed from the limo. There was already a fair-sized crowd at our end of the dam: law enforcement, some military personnel and a few local residents who'd come to see what the fuss was about. It took me a few seconds to locate the guy in charge at the scene. He spotted me first.

“Lander,” the guy in charge called out as he hurried towards my limo. I waved a hand in greeting. “Colonel Renashii,” he added in Royster’s direction.

“Hi, Fisher,” I replied offhandedly. ‘Fisher’ Petrovski was another old acquaintance, a Lancer who’d worked alongside us for several years before being co-opted into the Service. Not long afterward he’d retired on health grounds after taking a bullet through the knee. The artificial replacement was good enough that he could get about okay, but he’d never returned to active duty. I’d recruited him from a retirement project and never regretted it.

Fisher eyed my handgun and body armor with obvious suspicion. “Precautionary,” I said reassuringly. “I’m not going to interfere.”

Royster made a disbelieving noise behind me. I ignored him.

“Okay, here’s what we know,” Fisher said without any reference to my lofty station. It was like old times, RCES and Lancers sharing information mid-assignment. No salutes, no protocol, just mutual respect and a job that needed doing. “There are eleven hostages all told including the Minister for Security.”

I noticed that Andi rated a title and I didn’t... but then Andi was in mortal danger and we weren’t so maybe that was fair. “All of them in the pumphouse?” I asked.

“Yes. They’re being held hostage by six or more individuals. We have definitely identified light automatic weapons and a possible grenade. As far as we know there has been no communication and no violence. Not yet.”

I nodded. That was odd, but at least it meant our people were alive. “What’s the plan?”

“We have both ends of the dam sealed off by local enforcement and a few of our troops. I’ve got a hostage-rescue team inbound but they’re not due for another ten minutes. We’ve cut off the land lines to the pumphouse and we’re not detecting any radio-frequency or maser transmissions. In short we have them bottled and isolated.”

That was the standard first-response to a hostage situation. Make the hostage-takers dependent on you for contact with the outside world. Get control of their environment as far as possible and limit their mobility. Next step was to establish communication and start negotiating. If that failed or our hand was forced, the only option would be assault. And that might be a problem.

As if he’d read my mind, Fisher gestured at the dam. “This isn’t going to be easy. Access at ground level is limited to the dam top, which means over a hundred meters in each direction before the curve gives us any cover. We could land on top of the pumphouse or approach underwater, but that would take a while to set up.”

“Can we get a vehicle onto the dam top?” That would speed up access and maybe give rolling cover for an assault team.

“Yes, there’s an access road at each end,” Fisher told me. “But it’s still a long approach. There’s no way we can achieve surprise.” Which of course meant that if the pumphouse occupants wanted to shoot the hostages they’d have plenty of time to do it.

“What about dropping gas on the pumphouse and going in from grav vehicles?” I suggested.

“At present that’s our best option, poor though it is,” Fisher replied. Of course he’d thought of it. The chances of getting anyone out alive that way were slim, and we all knew it.

Our discussion was interrupted by the scream of overloaded grav lifters. Three large cargo transports, converted to carry the rescue team and their gear, slammed down and began disgorging troopers. Some wore Coalition-issue light battledress while others were more lightly armored in ballistic cloth coveralls with a heavy rigid torso protector and helmet. Before the team commander had reported in, her snipers were in position covering the pumphouse. A team began setting up a tripod-mounted support laser.

I looked over the assault team and began to feel a bit more optimistic. I recognized more than a few faces and even the ones I didn't know looked tough and competent. If we had to go in guns blazing, these guys would get the job done.

The thought struck me that maybe that was the problem. Maybe we were a bit too eager to get the job done, a bit too keen to just smash and grab our way through the problem like good little Star Vikings. "Fisher," I said casually.

He gave me a suspicious look. "Go," he said readily enough but I think he'd guessed I was about to break my non-interference promise.

"We need to establish liaison with these people, find out what they want and how desperate they are. We'll send someone over to talk to them – and to take them a comm unit so they can negotiate with us from inside the pumphouse. If they fire on the contact team we'll go in immediately."

"It's a long approach..." Fisher said, and I took his meaning. We'd not be able to do anything in time to save the contact team if things went sour. That was okay with me.

"I want you to set up a shot for a missile, mortar, grenade launcher or whatever you can get. I want you to be able to smother that pumphouse in tear gas or soporifics plus some smoke. If you can get one through the door, excellent. First sign of trouble we'll deliver the gas and send in teams from both sides simultaneously while the third squad lands on the roof."

Fisher nodded. "That was more or less my plan. We can be ready to implement in a couple of minutes – rescue squad four landed at the far end a few moments ago."

"Good. You got a mobile comm unit you can fix to a single frequency?"

"Standard equipment," Fisher said. I rolled my eyes. Of course it was; the rescue teams needed to control what access to the outside world they granted to cornered terrorists while giving them a means to be talked into surrender.

"Get me one," I said. Fisher and Royster both grunted resignedly. A moment later I had a small comm unit in my hands. "What?" I demanded.

"They've got a senior government official as a hostage," Fisher replied. "Do I have to tell you how stupid it is sending the President herself in to negotiate for his release?"

"They've got nothing," I replied. "And if they grab me too they'll still have nothing. Plus they'll be dead. So no harm done."

"You know what I mean," he protested.

"You can elect someone else. It's not a problem," I said lightly as if none of this mattered. "But you see, they've got my friend in there and I'm going to get him out. One way or another."

"Are you planning to assault the pumphouse on your own?" Fisher suddenly asked.

The idea actually had crossed my mind. "That would be insane," I replied, smiling tightly. I knew I wasn't convincing any of us. "Look, I'm going down there now. Have the assault teams ready in case it goes sour, but all I really want to do is establish contact. Nothing more, I promise."

I started walking down to the access road, past cops and troopers and the first news crews. Royster fell in beside me as I knew he would. "So, tell me again how this is a good idea?" he asked.

"Can't think of anything better," I replied.

"Not very reassuring. You do have a plan, right?"

“Royster, will you please believe me when I say that all I’m going to do is try to talk to them so we can open negotiations?” He made another noise, and we walked on in nervous silence. As we approached the pumphouse a young woman stuck her head out of the access door, opening it just a fraction. Although we were both openly wearing body armor and sidearms, we kept our hands visible and tried to look non-threatening.

“We want to negotiate!” I called out. “Don’t shoot.”

“Stay where you are!” the girl shouted back, waving an automatic pistol about. There was nothing threatening about the gesture; it wasn’t aimed at us. She was just showing us she was armed. We got the point and halted.

“I’ve got a comm unit here,” I said. “So you can talk to us. You’ve got our people and we want them back unharmed. If we can find a way to do that so nobody gets killed, then that’s what I want. If you hurt my people I’ll leave nothing alive inside that building.”

“Your people? Who are you?” the girl called back.

“I’m Lisa Davies,” I said. “The Colony Director.”

The girl ducked back inside. We waited, wondering if we could sidle a bit closer while she was out of sight, but then she reappeared. “Stay where you are,” she said simply.

“What are your demands? What do you want?”

“We want our world back!” the girl snarled angrily. “We’ll do whatever we must to get it.”

“Including murdering helpless captives?” I replied. “Those people are harmless.”

“We’ll do what we have to!” she said.

I drew my revolver. The girl’s gun came round to aim at me, but she didn’t fire. Neither did Royster, though he clawed for his own weapon and assumed a kneeling firing position. Interesting that he didn’t try to drag me down or give me body cover. Poor guy probably thought I could actually hit a half-concealed target at fifteen meters and didn’t want to spoil my shot. In other words he treated me like a fellow Marine rather than a VIP to be protected. I’ve kind of earned that in a way, though I don’t deserve it. Real Marines can shoot straight.

I had the girl in my sights. The giant .46 Express revolver reflected dull sunlight as I sighted along the seven-inch barrel. I thumbcocked it. One squeeze and I’d send an explosive hollow point on its way. “Drop your weapon and raise your hands,” I said very evenly. “You won’t be harmed if you surrender.”

The girl hesitated, looking down the barrel of my weapon. That gun is famous. It was given to me here on Nicosia by one of my Lancer colleagues, who died defending a medical installation from the locals who wanted to smash it. It’s saved my life several times and intimidated a lot of people into not opposing me. Most of them were on the other side, but I’m sad to say I’ve pulled that gun on fellow Star Vikings when it suited me. I once hit a guy in the face at a hundred meters with a single shot and saved a boatload of Vikings from the missile he was trying to launch.

Nobody but me knows it was a fluke.

“I said drop your weapon and surrender. You will release the hostages unharmed or you will die.” I said the words flatly, with no inflection at all. This was the moment. The split-second of decision where the future could go in any direction. I might not be in that future, but I’d have a damned good try at ensuring these scum weren’t there either.

The girl didn’t reply, so I shot her.

As she crumpled to the ground I began my rush for the door. Royster swore and lunged after me. A man appeared on the roof, raising a rifle. Royster fired twice, missing, and then the gunman’s head vanished in a bright cloud of vaporized blood. The laser team were on the ball.

I crashed through the door, sending a man armed with an SMG reeling back as it struck him. He never regained his balance; three explosive rounds blasted his spine out through his back. Passing the body I scooped up his SMG. Shots whined from the wall behind me. I fired back twice, missing, and dropped the revolver on the ground.

As Royster entered the pumphouse with a gun in each hand I saw two hostages going down, murdered at close range. Andi was grappling with a rifleman and getting the worst of it. Andi only has one arm. Another gunman was firing in my direction from the stairs. I blasted him with the whole SMG magazine, riddling him.

And the hostage cowering nearby.

Time to cry about that later. Royster threw me his backup gun, his little 7.65mm, and I plunged onwards. Andi rolled clear of the rifleman. Royster and I both fired together....

I blinked, stunned at the intensity of the vision. I'd just seen the future. I knew we could do it; knew we could get most of the hostages out alive and nail all the bad guys. All I had to do was pull the trigger and start the avalanche. But what if I didn't?

What if there was some other way? What if it was time to find another way? We'd rolled back the darkness with fire and violence, but we'd had no choice. The actions of people fighting for their survival are not open to moral questions. But now our survival was more or less assured. The lights were coming back on.

And here we were, using the same methods as when we'd been on the brink of extinction. We didn't need to, not any more, but maybe the locals did. Maybe they thought they were fighting for their own survival against the offworld threat. Maybe they weren't wrong.

Back at the beginning, all those hard years ago, it'd been us and them because it had to be. If someone had something we needed and wouldn't trade it, we'd take it. We had to. I have no problems with that – like I said, survival measures are above moral reproach. But in our arrogance we'd created an 'us and them' here on Nicosia when we didn't need to. True, we were benevolent overlords compared to the TEDs we'd toppled, but we were overlords nonetheless.

We'd walked in and taken over, and we were so wrapped up in making things better for everyone that we forgot that there were people – actual thinking, feeling human beings – here when we arrived. We'd 'liberated' the planet and then imposed a new set of overlords. And yes, in a generation or so it'd all be friendly and egalitarian, but these people couldn't see that because we'd never bothered to show them. We'd given the locals a taste of freedom and then taken it away. No wonder some of them hated us.

I'd come here because some of my people were in trouble and I'm terrifyingly protective about my people. But that was the thing – I was about to be elected as the president of the entire planet. That made everyone in there 'my people'.

I turned and casually tossed my gun in the lake.

Royster and the girl both gaped, thinking I'd taken leave of my senses. Maybe I had. I started walking. As I approached, I called out, "I'm coming in. Alone and unarmed. Shoot me if you like, or we can talk."

I walked in there among them, leaving Royster fuming outside. Andi rolled his eyes when he saw me. I managed a weak smile in return. I was looking down the barrels of several weapons – and by the way, there were more of them and better armed than in my vision. I'd have died in the doorway for sure if I'd gone in guns blazing – but the weapons' users seemed confused and hesitant. Not surprising really.

"Okay," I said. "You took my people hostage. Tell me why."

Their leader kept his assault rifle trained on me. He looked tired and tense – not a surprise – but both determined and sad. "We want our freedom," he said simply.

"You're free," I replied. "Freer than before we got here, at any rate."

"Don't split hairs with me!" he snapped. "You know what I mean."

I locked eyes with him. "Yes, I do. You want to be the captain of your own fate," I said.

The muzzle of the rifle drooped and his eyes widened. "That's... exactly it."

"You want a say in government, equal treatment for locals and offworlders. You want to chart your own course into the future rather than be told what to do by a bunch of Star Vikings."

"Yes." He wasn't a very good kidnapper and now he was out of his depth completely. I liked him though. He was my kind of desperate.

"And you're willing to kill anyone you have to in order to get it."

"Yes." The rifle came back up a bit.

"Okay, well here's how that works," I told him. "You start shooting, my hostage-rescue and AWC teams come in here and kill everything in sight. Maybe that starts a conflict between the offworlders and locals and maybe it doesn't. But it increases tension. More incidents follow. That just proves to the Vikings that you locals are too dumb and savage to be anything but underlings, and it shows you that we're just a new set of oppressors. The last lot got overthrown so maybe you can battle your way to freedom. Some of you try. Loads of people get hurt and lots of things get broken. Nothing gained by anyone."

"And you can offer me an alternative I suppose?" His tone fell somewhere between sarcastic and intrigued.

"Oh yes," I said lightly. My decision was made. "The alternative is to surrender right now to me, an unarmed woman standing in the middle of your little band of heavily armed desperadoes."

Their leader made a dismissive noise quite similar to the one Royster used a lot, so I went on. "You said you were willing to kill anyone you had to in order to achieve your ends. I bet you're willing to die."

"Of course we are! We..."

"So what else are you willing to do?" I prodded. "Are you willing to throw down your guns to get what you want? I am. I just threw mine in the lake. Will you do the same?"

"What good would that do?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you. Local elections are due very soon. In a few weeks we'll hold the planetary presidential elections and ratify the executive and legislative officers. What if those officers included locals? What if someone got elected who'd speak for you? Who'd listen to you and give you a share in government, let you help captain the fate of everyone on Nicosia, not just one group or the other?"

"Like who? There's three candidates and they're all offworlders."

"Like me," I said.

That got through. He looked at me quizzically. "Why would you do that?"

"To stop this happening again," I said truthfully. "And because it's the way forward. Look, I know where you're coming from better than you do. You're desperate, you'll try anything. I've been there and done some awful things because there was no alternative. But here you have one."

"Surrender?"

“Trust me. You’re willing to fight and maybe die, but do you have the courage to hand over your guns? To trust me when I say that we can make a better future together? How about that?”

“If we surrender to you, you’ll disarm us and throw us in jail forever.”

“No, I’ll pardon you. There are three people on this planet that can pardon any crime, and two of them are in this room right now. I’ll pardon you and offer you a job in the new government.”

He shook his head. “I want to believe you... “

“Then give it a try. Worst-case, if I’m lying then you get to be martyrs to your cause and sometime soon another bunch of crazies – no offense – will try the same thing. You don’t lose anything but your freedom or your lives, and those were forfeit when you raised arms against the Star Vikings.”

“What guarantee can you give?” he asked.

“Nothing. Not a damn thing but the words I’ve already said. Just believe.”

“I...”

“Look,” I said harshly. “I’m offering you a chance to make a good future for your people by working with me here. I’m offering to give you what you want in order to avoid problems for my people and because in the end there can’t be any us and them if we’re going to be able to live in peace. I’m offering to freely give you what you’re trying to take by force. And we both know you can’t get it by force. You’ll just cause a lot of suffering to no good purpose.”

“I...”

“No, time’s up. Either you’ve got the courage and vision to take what I’m offering and make it work, or you haven’t. Violence and bloodshed is easy. Don’t you think I know that? It’s easy to charge in guns blazing. But trust? Years of hard work and honorable partnership, despite our history and our differences? That’s going to be difficult. You got what it takes? You’d better decide because any minute now I’m walking out of here.”

“You’re going nowhere!” he said unconvincingly.

“Wrong. One of three things is about to happen. Either I walk out with the hostages and you let us go or you shoot us and AWC comes in the door about a minute later to turn you into greasy puddles on the floor.”

“Or?”

“Or we all walk out. I get elected as president and we make things better for everyone on Nicosia. Together. Can you handle that?”

There was a long silence as the kidnappers exchanged looks. I saw a range of emotions on their faces; fear, apprehension, anger, confusion... and hope. At last their leader lowered his rifle and Andi took it away from him. They both looked embarrassed, and rightly so.

“Okay. We surrender,” the leader said.

“No you don’t. You’ve just allied yourself with me. There’s one hell of a difference. Oh, and by the way you’re pardoned.” Andi glared at me at that and I realized that things might be ticklish for a while. I know I’d be unhappy about working for someone who’d held me at gunpoint. But then if Bouncer Askey could handle it, these people would manage.

I extended my hand to my new ally as the other kidnappers lowered their weapons and looked around in disbelief. Some of them still expected AWC to come in through the walls, thinking this was a clever setup. But then they didn’t know me. We shook hands and introduced ourselves. It was bizarre but then what part of my life hasn’t been?

“Lisa Davies, Acting Colony Director and President-Elect.”

“Joharn Miech... I’m a factory foreman... well, I was. I’m not exactly sure what I am right now,”

I shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out in good time,” I said. And we did. After my first term was up I refused to stand for re-election. Joharn received my support and blessing for his campaign, and he’s done a fine job so far as planetary president. It’s nice to be right sometimes.

But back then things were tense and fraught. I keyed the portable comm unit and spoke a few codewords to verify my identity. “Director Davies here. Situation resolved, we’re coming out. All units stand down. No hostiles present. I repeat, no hostiles. Everyone here is with me. I’ll explain sometime.”

I cut off the comm before anyone could start yelling for answers. “Andi, go tell Royster to stand easy. We’re coming out.”

Andi scurried out the door and I paused, gazing thoughtfully at Joharn Miech. That was the moment, I think, when the future was decided. When we proved that whatever we may have been, the Star Vikings were driven only by necessity. When we could we were merciful. When we could, we traded for or bought what we needed. When we could, we extended a hand in friendship.

And as soon as we were able, we put down our weapons and returned to a peaceful existence. Monsters we may have been to some, but there, in that moment, was validation of what we stood for. We went out to the stars to fight the darkness with lasers and star-hot plasma. But when it wasn’t necessary any more, then we put down our guns.

The dazed former hostages and the bewildered kidnappers were all jumbled up behind me as I headed for the door. Joharn held it open for everyone and we emerged into dull sunlight. For me, that was the moment I knew I was right to believe. The future was safe.

Because when I went into that bunker I did it to bring my people out safely.

And I did.

All of them.

Every Threadbare Sail

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired" and reconstructed from transmissions received from RCES Apollo during the Battle of Nicosia.

Footnotes by the compiler, Comdr William I. Ryson, Jr.

Lisa is at this time an official advisor to the Planetary Government of Nicosia. She is 36 years old and has recently stood down after a 3-year term as Planetary President. It is early 1215.

I've heard it said many times; if you live long enough, you lose everything. Not for me; not quite. I didn't lose all of it. Some I gave away, some I wasted, and some I willingly handed on to those who came after me. But I've pretty much lost everything, so I know the saying is true. And I've lived long enough.

Quite long enough.

I'm sure my career with the Service makes good reading. The autobiography is still selling well enough to live very nicely on, if I chose. Then there's the pensions. Yes, I've got money. I've got respect, hero-worship even. A starship named after me. A town here on Nicosia named for my husband. I should be proud, they say.

I *am* proud. We went out there and we did good. Transport commander, starship captain, assault pilot, sometime Marine, acting colony director, planetary president. I've done a lot of things, seen a lot of places. Yeah, and I've lost a lot of friends.

What do I have to show for it? I have a nice little house, a five-year-old son and an old three-legged cat. I live comfortably enough here on Nicosia, here with all the other burnouts.

We all try to claim we're still useful, that the administrative jobs and the advisory posts are our due for long service in the field. Truth is, we started to come apart at the seams and they pulled our tickets before we became a danger to all concerned. That's our reward for long service. Impressive, isn't it?

No, that's bitterness. I did what had to be done, all the way through the assaults and the recoveries, the starship captaincy and the colony missions. I did it because it had to be done, and we're winning. The lights are starting to come on again. But the cost....

My husband, Colonel Bill 'Bison' Ryson, was killed in action four years ago on an Advisory operation. Just routine, but he didn't come back. Bill was the last of the old comrades. Now there's just me, all alone to remember how it was.

I took my son to the park last week. In the park there's a set of bronze statues, with the inscription, 'In memory, The Crew of RCES *Apollo*.' It commemorates what for most of them was their last cruise. They're so lifelike I'd swear they can speak. They sometimes talk to me, anyway.

There's the skipper, Elsie, looking stern and wise. Beside her stand the Navigator and Chief Gunner, looking away into the middle distance. Beside them is Bill, all heroic Marine. And then there's me. The pose is all wrong - I should be cowering behind something, not gazing destiny firmly in the eye, but it's not a bad likeness. For some reason my statue isn't bronze like the others. How they keep it from rusting I don't know, but it's cast in steel.

You see what a reputation can do? According to popular legend, I'm Captain Lisa Ryson, Space-Hero First Class. To me, I'm still Lisa Davies, flight school graduate and all-round ordinary person. Often scared. More often now than then. But you don't see that, do you? You only see the hero you've made me. You can only see the statue. The steel.

We've had a colony here on Nicosia for a few years now, ever since we pacified the world. It was people like those statues who made it possible, who made us safe. I miss them. All of them.

We toast 'Our dear lost comrades, our absent friends' each evening. I know what that means. I've known the cost. I've paid it. I've led comrades to their deaths because I had the arrogance to believe that I was right. I've killed hundreds of my own people for some goal, some rescue or some recovery. That's what heroes are; killers. Being a hero is more than statues in the park. It's about choosing to lead your friends to certain death and paying a little of the price from your own soul each time. You wonder why I can't accept any more missions? Because I've nothing left to pay with. I have a home now, and a child.

I just wish I had a future, but then maybe I never did.

The colony was doing well, up until this week. We'd carved out a niche for ourselves, set up a good industrial base - hell; things were so good we could even manage to publish autobiographies of yesterday's heroes. Then the Vampire came.

It was big, and it was hostile. It'd been seen before, over the burned-out wasteland that had been one of our bootstrap operations. Seven thousand tons of hostility, and aimed at us.

It'd popped up here and there, as if searching for a target, a nice poorly-defended target. Eventually it found one. Us.

I have a theory about this Vampire, a scary one. Maybe all the Vampires got together and talked to each other. Maybe they realised how organised we were getting. Maybe they realised we were a threat, so they acted. They sent this ship to take us out. Maybe this is the beginning of a new Vampire War.

As soon as I found out about it, I got all the other burnouts together, and we discussed it. They agreed with my ideas, mostly. We told the authorities, and they asked for better defences. Too late, of course. The Vampire arrived yesterday.

The system squadron met it; two *Victrix* ships, a dozen fighters, a couple of Defence Boats, even an armed merchant along as rescue ship. It was a brave stand. So was Little Big Horn.

The Vampire shot its way through, barely even slowed. Our ships fought to the last, but they never stood a chance. Only the merchant escaped as the Vampire chased down the few crewmembers who'd escaped in small craft. It destroyed them all. Then it shaped course for us.

I got a call a few hours later. The other veterans had an idea. The old *Apollo* was still in-system, awaiting salvage crews. She'd been a colony transport for a while, after she got all busted up, but the damage was just too bad to make it worth a full repair job. Like me, *Apollo* is a worn-out old hulk, fit only for the scrapyards. Only the weight of public opinion, which kept *Apollo* in commission as a museum and monument, prevented the salvage order from being processed. They'd taken her Jump engines, but she was intact otherwise.

The veterans had found themselves a purpose. They managed to fire up her drives, get a few weapons running. The authorities were only too willing to help, given the situation.

Then the little delegation arrived. Keith Hullie, Grey Manaassi and Andi Kooder turned up on my doorstep. Andi was my exec on the colony runs. He'd been retired after he lost an arm and his right eye. Nelson fought at Trafalgar with one arm and one eye. I took that as an omen, and not a very pleasant one. Nelson died at Trafalgar.

Andi unfolded his bundle and stepped back. All three of them came to attention and saluted. "Captain Ryson. Will you resume command of RCES *Apollo*?" I looked at the bundle - a ship's captain's hat and sidearm, plus a uniform jacket. I haven't worn a uniform in a long time.

I stared at them for a long while, and then I said, "No."

Andi blinked.

"No. Take the *Apollo* out." I went on quickly, "Take her out and fight her well, Captain Kooder."

Andi looked at me, clearly with mixed feelings. He wanted me to take command, but he also wanted the glory himself. Well, I know what glory costs. "I mean it." I said firmly, "I've got a child to take care of now, Andi. You always deserved a

command." I couldn't help but think I was being a little cowardly, to shirk a little more blood on my hands. The Gods know there's enough already.

I watched the *Apollo* break orbit slowly, the old drives erratic. Every screen on the planet was following Andi and his little band of veterans as they went out to do battle for all of us. The other attacks had done some damage, and maybe - just maybe - *Apollo* could make a difference. We watched from a friend's house. Mary had a deep basement, although what good that'd do if *Apollo* failed I didn't know.

"Set every threadbare sail." I whispered to myself.

Mary turned to me, "What was that?"

"It's an heroic poem, from Old Terra. About a warship the government wanted to break up, Old Ironsides they called her - I can't remember the full name. The people still believed in her. I always remembered the last stanza:

'Far better that her shattered hulk,
Should lie beneath the wave.
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave.
Nail to the mast her tattered flag,
Set every threadbare sail.
And give her to the God of Storms,
The lightning, and the gale."

"That's not very good poetry," said Mary, unimpressed.

"I like it. Besides I agree with the sentiment. *Apollo* wasn't meant to be broken up for salvage."

A sudden, chilling thought struck me. *Neither was I*. I left little William with Mary and walked quickly home. The hat and the jacket were still on the kitchen table. I put them on and went out. I left the sidearm on the table. I've no need for guns any more.

There wasn't any panic, not yet. I reached the spaceport quickly enough. It wasn't hard to get a shuttle. They'd have handed control of the planet over to me if I'd asked. A reputation can be useful sometimes.

I just couldn't face seeing the *Apollo* make her last flight without me. I'd spent too much of my life on that fine old ship, too much of me was part of her. I gunned the shuttle in a one-way burn out to catch up. We'd fight, chase the Vampire off and go home. I promised myself that I'd really retire this time. No more blood.

The veterans cheered as I came aboard. We were few enough, but we could handle the ship's systems for this one fight. The Vampire was still an hour off when I strode onto the bridge.

"Status?" I demanded.

"Meson gun functional, seven laser turrets operational under MFD control. Some ECM available." Andi Kooder saluted me as he took the exec's seat at the Comms/ECM desk.

"Grey, what's our power situation?" I asked.

"Plenty, but erratic, Captain." Grey Manaassi replied, "Glad to have you aboard."

I sighed, looked around at the beat-up old control room where I had spent so many hours. I knew I was leading one more band of heroes to certain death. More absent friends for the dinner table, one more shattered starship. I knew.

But it was good to be here this one last time.

We made intercept with the Vampire while it was still half an hour out from Nicosia. It had used up all its missiles on the other vessels, leaving only its spinal mount and about sixty laser turrets to engage us. Only.

We'd swung right around in a wide arc, so that we were chasing the Vampire inwards. That way I figured we could keep using the meson gun for longer. As we closed, Gray picked up the merchant auxiliary, still following the Vampire. I contacted them.

"Merchant *Itinerant*, we plan to engage the Vampire. Can you pick up survivors if we're badly damaged?" That was a foregone conclusion, but I left it at that.

"Of course, *Apollo*, that's what we came along to do. Good luck." their captain replied. He was very young, but he had a haunted look about him. I knew why; he'd survived that first intense battle by running away while everyone else fought to the end. No matter that he couldn't make any difference, he still felt the survivor's awful guilt.

"Thanks, *Itinerant*. And yourselves." I cut the link.

The Vampire slowed a little to let us catch up, clearly wanting to take us out before it started on the planet. We could have broken off then, sheered away from the danger. Saved ourselves. Instead I gave the order to take us into that hell of laser fire. "All hands," I said into the intercom, "This is the Captain. Prepare to engage the Vampire."

As the meson gun cut loose, followed seconds later by all our remaining turrets, all I could think was, how many more vacant chairs at dinner tonight? Then I realised that it didn't matter. People had died to build the colony, and if it meant our lives, we would defend it. The future is worth it.

Believe. Always believe.

So we engaged the Vampire, closing to less than a hundred kilometres at one point. It poured fire into us. We hurt it, hurt it badly, but it wasn't enough.

At last we staggered out of the fight. Our stand was glorious, it was heroic and it was futile. We did a lot of damage, but we never stood a chance.

I called for a damage report as the Vampire came about to finish us. *Apollo* was nothing more than a wreck, in what the nautical historians would have called 'a sinking condition'. We had two turrets still firing in local control and that was it. Half the crew were dead or dying, including Grey and Andi. More vacant chairs.

I could only watch, helpless, as the Vampire slowed and came back into weapons range. We had no power for maneuver, little for weapons. I could see stars through the holes in the bridge. Yet still the engineers were working feverishly to restore just a little more power, to give me just one more shot. The Vampire closed in for the kill.

Then something hurtled into my field of vision, firing its two lasers at the Vampire. The *Itinerant*. She couldn't do any damage, yet she placed herself in the Vampire's path to try to protect us. Those men and women of her crew were real heroes, not like me. They sent that gallant little ship at the Vampire, hopelessly, desperately. They nailed the colours to the mast and challenged the lightning to strike them if it would. A salvo raked their frail vessel, but still they came on.

The Vampire stopped firing for a second, as if in awe or respect. The gap narrowed. *Itinerant's* last gun lanced out, bright and defiant against the cold stars, and the Vampire fired a salvo in reply. *Itinerant* blew up silently, taking with her that crew of heroes.

And Nicosia Colony's last hope of survival.

That's how it is. There's nothing between that Vampire and Nicosia except a few defence missiles. They won't make any difference. I'm out here alone and unarmed.

Well, not completely unarmed.

I've given the order to abandon ship, but I won't be leaving. The few surviving crewmembers can get clear in the shuttle. *Itinerant* bought us enough time to get a little power to the maneuver drive, so I still have one weapon.

RCES *Apollo*.

I've managed to get this open line to a communications satellite, so you should be receiving this down there on Nicosia. You must know, some of you, that I have a young son among you, as well as a lot of friends and a few of my husband's relations. When my son grows up, I want someone to tell him why I did this.

I'm doing it because somebody has to do it and there's only me left. This way my son *will* grow up.

All those people, all those heroes. They died to make a better place for people like my son. This Vampire has come to make their sacrifice worthless. For all the absent friends, for what they gave everything to achieve, I'm not going to let that happen. My life, for your future? It's a fair trade.

Apollo and me... we aren't going gentle into that good night. We weren't meant to be retired gracefully. *Apollo* deserves better, after all the years of service. So I'm going to give her the ending she deserves, and I'm going with her.

I'll give us both to the God of Storms.

Ryson out.

Epilogue

Taken from: "Yesterday's Hero: The Memoirs of Captain Lisa Davies, Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, Retired." Footnotes by the compiler, Comdr William I. Ryson, Jr,

I saw it, but I didn't understand at the time. I was just a little boy. But I've watched the footage over and over again, heard my mother's last message of hope and despair. A thousand times I've relived the moment when RCES Apollo smashed into that Vampire. I've seen the colossal explosion, watched the fragments whirling away into space. Once I understood what it really meant, it broke my heart.

But I believe that it was worth it. For the future.

As soon as I was old enough, I joined the Service. There is still so much more work to be done, so many more worlds to explore. We have a future to build and enemies of our own to defeat if that future is to be secure. I'm proud to be part of that, a starship commander in the service of the Freedom League.

We have reached out across the Wilds to old enemies and new friends. I have fought alongside the ships of the Fourth Imperium and the Terran Commonwealth, shared food with both Aslan and Vargr. I have seen the horror that is the Black Imperium and the terror of the Dominate. I have seen the darkness rolled back in my own lifetime, and I have played my part in lighting the way for others.

And today, as I stand here at the front ports of the ship I command, I look out at the stars and I remember. I remember the price the Star Vikings paid for our future. I see the monuments to the fallen and I hear the questions asked about their deeds. But what I see as I look out of the viewport isn't tragedy or a tainted legend. No, what I see is what they never stopped believing in; what they fought and bled and died to buy back for us, their children.

I see hope, endless possibilities, if we only believe.

I see what yesterday's heroes believed in, what they died for. I see what they built from the wreckage of a fallen civilization.

But most of all I see the stars.

I see our home.

And I believe.

Comdr William Ryson, Jnr. 1247