

Meddlers In Time- The Cockatoo River Incident

Wayne Watson

Copyright 2010

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or otherwise able to take legal action against me, is purely coincidental.

All the names were pulled out of my memory and applied more or less at random. You ain't that character just because you share a first name and a trade.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

The Cockatoo River Incident

Prelude

Throughout the Empire of Man there are many great memorials to the fallen. On the planet of Yalumba there is one of the smallest, yet the events leading to its creation, history has shown to be the most pivotal in the course of the empire.

In the Ikuntji province, exactly 847 meters from the Cockatoo River Mission bell tower, there is a small knoll. The grape vines now have been cleared for 200 meters around. Circling the top is a simple tall hedge of Acacia. Within the hedge is a circular grass lawn. Around the border of this lawn are 47 simple crosses- half a meter high and iridium plated. At the center of the Lawn are 16 similar but smaller crosses, grouped together in four rows of four. The single gateway of wrought iron has no decoration but a single word.

'DUTY'

This is the story of the events leading to what is now known as 'The Cockatoo River Incident'.

The day the Empire realized that 'Live and let live' was no longer an option...

Cockatoo River Incident Memorial

Jenny and Wayne quietly walked out of the inner circle of the memorial- a place that few were ever permitted to stand upon the lovingly cared for lawns. They took up position in front of the Imperial flag and saluted as it was lowered to the strains of the Last Post. As the guard party marched off towards the mission, they stood for a while in silent contemplation.

"Never forget how much worse it would have been without you" said Wayne.

"I tell myself that every time I think about it. Not that it helps much..."

Transit Station

21 years previous (Empire time line)

"I've done some weird shit, but this beats it all." said Jenny- now inhabiting a four-year old child's version of her body.

"This is just like having the baby sister I always wanted." said Sonja laughingly, picking Jenny up and spinning her around.

"You need to find a man and make babies." said Jenny. "Now put me the hell down before I get in character and pee all over you."

Transit Station Ready Room

"Good luck- things are going to be a bit hairy until the Marines take control" said Wayne.

Jenny waited next to the portal area dressed in flimsy silk and makeup- this prostitute's garb looking disturbingly incongruous on her young body. "I plan to act like my apparent age and hide under the bed- I hope those marines aren't too trigger-happy."

"No worries there- those boys like to take slavers alive- all the better for tossing out the airlock."

"Gate in ten seconds" said Sonja. "Time to get in character."

Jenny stepped through to the (empty) captain's cabin of the 'Golden Caravan'.

Heavy Destroyer 'Wotan's Fury'

'Four Hour Warning- Normal space in four hours' sounded the intercom.

Captain Jamieson scanned his messages, then took a quick shower and put on a fresh uniform- along with the now traditional splash of Old Spice. Time for a quick tour about the ship before taking the helm for the battle. Outside his cabin, the duty officer was waiting.

"What's on the trouble sheet?" said Captain Jamieson.

"Two marines on the sick list- I gather they got carried away with close quarters training, Sir" said Ensign Johnson.

"Eichmann's'?"

“Aye Sir”

No doubt Lieutenant Eichmann has already dealt with them, thought Wayne.

“Engineering?”

“Nothing operational Sir”, said Johnson, handing over a tablet.

Wayne scrolled down a list of minor faults- all under action. Just the usual house-keeping repairs. He handed the tablet back- “OK- Commanders brief at minus three hours- dismissed.”

“Aye Sir”, said the ensign, saluting.

Forty minutes for a bit of breakfast before the final brief.

*

Heavy Destroyer 'Wotan's Fury'

CIC

'One hour warning- all hands secure for N-space running' announced the intercom.

"Call it" said Jamieson.

"Nav- all ships on-station".

"Tac- prox shows one megatonne plus, a capital ship, four frigates and multiple minor traces".

"Guns- all systems on-line and charged".

"Drive- grav on stand-by, tractors nominal".

"Damage- standing by".

"Security- standing by".

"Last comfort call" said the Captain- "Tac- call on status change".

"Tac aye- Trace firming- confirm 'Scimitar' class cruiser and eight contacts at minus 10,000 tonnes".

Their sub-space proximity array was one of the major factors in Free Company Wotan's Fury's success. The best anyone else possessed was a detector that would only work a few seconds before exiting sub-space- and that was more than most had. As they edged closer to the exit point, the information built up- tonnage, vector and numbers.

'All hands- minutes one to N-space.'

Then it was time and they crossed the threshold in to normal space. The collision alert klaxon sounded- they had exited exactly on course- dead astern of the escort cruiser and closing fast.

"Guns- I have a firing solution".

"Engage 90" said Jamieson, directing the gunnery officer to fire as soon as the hit probability reached 90 percent. Additional detail was streaming onto his Tac screen- battles were won by sensors more than guns and the 'Fury' had the very best.

"Aspect change- targets capacitors ramping"

"Guns hold " said Jamieson, taking a calculated gamble- he wanted to let the enemy capacitors charge up, as they would produce considerable secondary damage if hit. In any case he was still well out of their range and it took time to swing a cruiser about to use its main spinal mount.

Fifteen seconds later he said "Weapons free" and the quick-firing batteries flashed out their rods of UV laser energy.

"Tac- I have secondary's on the target- low-level EMP and out-gassing"

A good first strike and as with most fights in the real world- the one that got the first solid blow in won.

"Continue until destroyed with two turrets- all other turrets target those frigates" said Jamieson. "Cutters- you are clear to engage".

The six ships cutters went to full speed and rapidly closed on the now seriously damaged cruiser. With the cutters away, they began to decelerate heavily, not wanting to overshoot. Now only several hundred kilometers out, 'Fury's' secondary mounts added their fire to battle, targeting individual guns and sensor arrays. The two main turrets also shifted to suppressive fire, trading intensity for rate of fire. Each time the cruiser got a shot away, the gun firing was pinpointed and raked with fire. Two cutters sped directly in, traveling along the same axis and slightly below the 'Fury's' outgoing fire. At 15 kilometers range they both released a salvo of torpedoes and broke off at maximum power. Obscured from the cruisers few remaining sensors by the laser energy and debris, the six torpedoes closed the gap in 30 seconds, decelerating hard just before striking the hull, where their armored nose cones tore through the relatively thin hull plating like needles. Five of the six five-kilotonne warheads survived the impact and detonated six seconds after impact, tearing the cruiser to pieces.

"OK, settle down- we are still in the fight- all batteries- engage those frigates. When they are dead, target the small craft at will. Tac- what have we got coming?" said Jamieson.

"Hostiles inbound- battle group in effective range in six point five hours. Two cruisers, Scimitar class, five unidentified destroyers, seven frigates and twenty minor contacts".

"Call the cutters back. Sailing Master- once those frigates are slagged or gone put us in a blocking position to hold off that task force." Leaving his officers to continue the battle, Jamieson turned his attention to the data feed from his frigate 'Jolly Roger'.

Control Room

Frigate 'Jolly Roger'- Free Company Wotan's Fury

The ship's intercom sounded 'One hour warning- all hands secure for N-space running'

Commander Hendrik glanced at his readouts, in particular the subspace mass detectors which were now starting to register the presence of his prey- a huge 'Caravan' class bulk freighter. Also on his screen were other vessels- a cruiser and four frigates- but these were for 'Wotan's Fury' and the other frigate 'Blackbeard' to deal with.

This was always the worst time- the waiting just before exiting sub-space. But at least he had the advantage of a sub-space detector far in advance of anything else found in this time. The minutes

counted down seemingly getting faster as the time approached. Then there was no time left for a last check of all stations and the 'Jolly Roger' was in normal space- now the work really started.

Space battles are won and lost by intelligence. Whose ship had the best sensor arrays, signal processors and fire control- and more importantly- the advantage of surprise. The small flotilla had used the advantage of their sub-space instruments to come into normal space behind the freighter and her escorts- where their sensors were at their least effective. Before the cruiser had even gotten a firing solution, Captain Jamieson's gunners were pouring fire into the cruiser, while the 'Blackbeard' held off two of the escorting frigates with equally devastating fire.

Hendrik directed his gunners to support the other two vessels as he closed on the freighter and gave the order for his cutters to start their runs. At 50 kilometers out, he directed the secondary weapons operators to start burning out the freighters sensors and communications. As he did so, a violent flare of incandescent light caused the camera screen to momentarily flare out, telling him a torpedo had taken out the cruiser with a nuke- something they seldom used, being in the business of taking prizes. Glancing to the XO's screen, he saw tracery indicating that the 'Fury' had already redirected it's quick-firing lasers to the remaining escorts.

Now they were clear to grapple with the freighter and board.

As the Sailing Master took the frigate in, Commander Hendrik watched the teams from the cutters burning through the hull, forcing an entry for the heavy infantry in their active armor. They would be creating a diversion for the main thrust, consisting of Hendrik's light infantry who enter through a soft-seal.

As the frigate approached the hull, the Remora docking pod locked into position on their ventral aspect. The Sailing Master would close the last few meters at low speed, driving this hardened cylinder, which looked like the end of a hypodermic needle, through the hull plating. A crushable collar filled with expanding sealant would caulk the breach.

A faint shudder told them that the hull had made contact.

"Mag-grav locks engaged Sir", said the Remora operator. "We have soft-seal". He activated the hydraulic rams that would clear the penetrator and deployed the cutter arms. Where needed, cutting lasers would slice through plates, wreckage and bulkheads. While it is true that most thing on-board ship do not react well to gunfire or cutter beams, it is also true that wherever possible, such items are kept away from the outer hull wall.

"Scutters away" said the operator, as he released an array of small camera robots to scout the ship. These would race along the corridors mapping the way, dropping remote sensors and repeater stations- generally providing intelligence for the assault force.

With the way clear, Lieutenant Tom Phillips lead his marines into the 'Golden Caravan'. They wanted to kill a few slavers before heavy infantry got them first. They had barely started moving towards the ships bridge when the hull shivered.

The heavy infantry commander called over the comm- "Explosion in engineering.- looks like they had the tractors wired to blow- damned fools went up with the engines."

Hendrik glanced to the Tac officer, who anticipated his query- "Sir- Grav drive still running- tractor field died when that explosion went off."

Without hesitation Hendrik said-"Combat engineers topside- get us bonded to their hull, we will take the freighter under our power. As soon as we have control, slave their grav drive to our control- move it people, we have a hostile task force just hours away and I'm not letting this prize get away."

While the freighter was huge, the tractors in Hendrik's frigate were larger than those used by the freighter, being rated to do exactly this task- or to move the frigate faster than most naval shipping in this time.

Before the marines had finished beating their way to the C&C, the ship's engineers had attached bonding and anchor cables to the hull, securing their ship and were running cable to engineering in order to take control of the freighter's grav drives.

"Bridge secure Sir" said Lt. Phillips. "Two walking wounded being evac'd back now, seventeen prisoners secured. We are ready to receive the prize crew now".

"Good work Lieutenant- sondes show activity in cargo bay 18- video and detectors indicates a guard room and a huge life reading. You will send a section and investigate further."

"Aye Sir- Phillips out."

Tom's section arrived moments before the heavy infantry and a sensor team. The guard room was locked, so Tom ordered the section sergeant to have a mech open it up. The mechanized marine soon had the door destroyed with his power axe, to reveal three cowering guards.

"I can smell slaver scum even through this suit" said the marine corporal.

"OUT- NOW." shouted the sergeant. "On the fucking deck- you crapheads know the drill.- Out or he drags you and that exoskeleton is known to pull arms and legs off."

The three guards scurried out of the room and lay prone on the deck, while Tom's men shackled them and dragged them off to join the other prisoners. Tom waved the specialists over to start sweeping. Immediately the team leader confirmed the scutter's life reading.

"Sir, you got THOUSANDS behind that bulkhead.- I think we got a slave cargo here."

"Why do you say slaves' specialist?"

"Sir, if they was troops, our asses would have been kicked off this ship- and you can only pack troops or slaves in that tight."

"Good point" said Tom with a grin, "Why don't you take a look on that monitor in the guard room?"

The specialist gave to room a last sweep and moved in to look at the pickup. The horrified look on his face told Tom all he needed to know. "All of you- go in one by one and take a look at that monitor- move."

"Sir- we have to get them out of there now" said a shocked looking young marine who wasn't quite as worldly as he had previously thought.

"Negative" said Tom. "This is a a specialist job- turn them loose now and we will never get this ship ready to jump. They have lasted this long- they can hold on a little longer. Best you all can do

is get this ship swept, secured and out of here so we can do something for these folks. Now proceed with your sweeps- Sergeant Jorgenson- you are in command- I have to brief the skipper- get to it."

Tom wanted to be nearby when the detector teams swept the officers quarters. The REAL reason for this mission, known only to Jamieson and himself was there.

*

"Got a ping- low level, though- could be some attenuation through these soundproofed partitions"

"OK- in you go- I got your back"

"They ain't paying me enough for this shit"

"Just get your wide ass in there private."

"Under the bed corporal- reading looks like it's a kid."

"Hey it IS a kid- come on out little girl- we are here to help you- AH CRAP... She goddamn bit me."

"Well don't try grab her- lift the bed off...oh sweet Mary and Jesus...Sir- Sir- you gotta see this."

Tom strode into the room "What's all the fuss... Oh my..."

This part Tom didn't know. Before him was Jenny dressed up in transparent silk, makeup and perfume- not that he hadn't seen that before but not when she was in a four-year old's body. His face hardened. He tapped at his wrist comm. "Sir- are you receiving my helmcam? - You may want this as evidence. Yes Sir- in the Captain's quarters. Very well Sir, Phillips out." He turned to the two marines. "You two hold your position here. Guard this girl until an evac team relieves you, and then continue with your sweeps."

"Aye sir" said the two marines, snapping to attention.

Jenny sat on the edge of the bed. "Can I go home now?"

*

Wayne had gotten a message regarding Jenny's successful insertion and feeling a lot happier now, although he would not relax until they were in subspace on-route to the rendezvous point. Five still-glowing hulks drifted in near space and the smaller craft were mostly debris clouds. His flotilla had only sustained superficial sensor damage and no hull breaches.

"Guns- Sir- I have a solution on the final hostile. He will in range for another 12 minutes at current course and vector."

"You will fire 17 volleys with the X turret, aiming to narrowly miss- the 18th volley will be aimed to destroy him."

"Aye sir" said the Weapons officer, trying not to sound puzzled at this strange request.

"We have a task force headed our way we may have to fight" said Jamieson. "Let's not give them an

indication of how good our gunnery really is. - Carry on."

Jamieson's message screen flashed. He glanced at it, then took a few seconds to read it more thoroughly. Hendrik's techs had gotten the freighter's computer back on line and brought up the manifest. 'Golden Caravan' had over 5 thousand slaves on board and was carrying rations for twenty days. With the rendezvous point 21 days out at their estimated speed and the next friendly planet another ten days from there, they would have a serious shortfall. Even the emergency rations carried by 'Fury' wouldn't go far amongst those numbers. He knew from experience that slave rations were, at best, minimal and couldn't be stretched very far.

Wayne called the Sailing Master over and pointed at the message. Lt Commander Jessie Burling didn't need to use a tablet to do the numbers. She thought for a few seconds and said "Transfer as much mass as you can to the freighter- including all the cutters loaded with our reserve stores and we can do a speed run to Abilene, pick up stores and make the rendezvous point in 28 days, allowing two days to load."

"Set the course commander." said Jamieson.

He started keying codes into his panel- "QM- load all reserve foodstuffs for transfer to the prize."

"Engineering- Get a reclamation team and stores onto the prize- have them take our synthesizer kit."

"Transport- Stand by for cross-loading- all cutters to remain on that freighter for the jump."

He then called the XO over "Have the Chief of the Boat organize a contact team and prepare to receive casualties. Wayne knew that many of the slaves would be in poor condition. The Crows like to condition their captives by having a few die in transit- it let them know how low their lives were regarded.

These details attended to, he turned his attention to the approaching task force. Time to arrange a little surprise for them.

*

"Grav drive is synched sir, but those tractors are beyond repair. They used a shaped charge on the field generator casing- we are going to have to drag this bucket all the way back" reported the damage control chief.

"Very well Master Chief- we are under way now- attend to the auxiliaries- you have five thousand refugees on that ship and they will need all the facilities that you can rig and repair to survive- Hendrik out."

"OK you idlers- you heard the skipper- lets get the reclamation on this piece of junk working like it never has before- which shouldn't be too hard."

*

Tom Phillips stalked through the assembled ranks of the captives. Unsurprisingly, none would admit to being captain of this freighter with its cargo of misery.

Amongst the slave trustees who did the scut work on the ship, he saw what he was looking for and gave a slight nod of his head. Two marine guards pounced on the man indicated and dragged him aside. Slaves, no matter how favored, did not have well-manicured nails, a lack of calluses or the marks of rings on their fingers. Tom turned to the nearest prisoner "Who is he?"

When the prisoner remained silent, Tom said “Throw him out the nearest airlock” The marines had been hoping for this and their sergeant pointed to two troopers who dragged the stunned slaver away. Tom grabbed another captive and simply glared at him.

“Noble sire- he is our captain.”

“I can see that your captain does not want to want to be identified- my men found a young slave girl in his stateroom- a VERY young girl.”

Tom watched the assembled captives as they looked away from the doomed captain- it looked like they were not surprised to hear this. He let them consider what their fate would be for a minute longer, and then made an announcement that shocked them all. “My orders are to put you on a shuttle and return you to your fleet which is approaching now.”

This was the last thing they were expecting- Imperials were reputed to show no mercy towards slavers- indeed, this is what would have happened if the direct order of Captain Jamieson had not said otherwise.

“Except your captain” said Tom “He goes out the airlock- fit him with a suit and throw him out.”

The marines herded those spared to the hanger bay where they were loaded onto a shuttle and sent on their way, the younger marines shaking their heads at this decision. The senior ranks were not bothered. They had a fair idea what Captain Jamieson was up to.

*

“Sir- We are will be at tractor velocity in two minutes” said the sailing master.

“Engage tractors at start velocity” said Hendrik. He knew without checking that the enemy fleet was 90 minutes away and that the tractors would now give them plus vector with an estimated 15 minutes lead until they were safe in subspace. 'Fury' had already fallen back to prepare to give covering fire, although they were reluctant to give away their targeting abilities, so were holding fire. The flotilla's lighters and cutters had transferred all of the reserve stores to the freighter and the logistics people were trying to sort out exactly what stores were on-board- a huge task on a ship of this size. They had already discovered that the manifest was far from accurate or complete. It looked like a lot of loot gained when the slaves were taken had been undeclared.

The shuttle full of captives was now standing off the point cruiser. No doubt the Crows were trying to decide if the persons on-board had loaded with viruses and were scanning for radiological or explosive contents. Crow paranoia had worked for the Free Company yet again, as somebody made the decision to destroy the shuttle. A laser flashed briefly, then disappeared into a white flash as it hit Jamieson's package and sent the D-T mix hidden in the shuttle's water tanks into fusion.

“Aspect change Sir- we have three hostile drifting unpowered- the point cruiser and two frigates- the rest of the formation is starting to disperse.”

“Signal 'Wotan's Fury' and synch our confirmed jump time- also congratulate Captain Jamieson on his trap.”

“Aye Sir, message sent.”

“Advise engineering of our jump time and that they have my permission to continue working on the hull.”

The fitters, welders and techs would like that- 'outside' work in subspace rated maximum hazard pay.

“All away Sir and hostiles still 55 minutes out of range.”

“Their range” said Jamieson, resisting the strong temptation to send a few parting volleys. “All hands prepare for subspace running- Sailing Master- the helm is yours.”

Safely transitioned, he gave the order to stand down from general quarters. Commander Hendrik's troubles would now be beginning.

Prize ship 'Golden Caravan' Subspace.

While the rest of the Free Company would be easing into a relatively relaxed drag through subspace, the prize crew would be preparing for a far less pleasant journey to the rendezvous point. Hendrik and his officers knew from experience that they just couldn't let the slaves out- their release would have to be carefully managed- those who had been recently taken into slavery- most of them would be relatively easy, but those who had been slaves for generations would be far more difficult to manage. There is an ancient saying 'you can take the farm boy off the farm, but can't take the farm out of the farm boy'. This ran true with slaves too.

With all the ship's officers tied up directing repairs and organizing the prize, the task of liaising with the slaves fell to Lt Tom Phillips, aided by a warrant officer, contact specialist Guiardo Rameraiz- a highly skilled negotiator.

“Records- such as they are- show this hold to have about 2000 persons captured in a colony raid, Sir. This is why they are in such filthy conditions- this trip is part of their slave conditioning. They will be stressed, half-starved and kept cold and dirty to break down their spirits, the Crows like to let the older and weaker ones die and leave the bodies in there, as part of the process. Sir, we let them out and they will tear the ship apart looking for Crows and trustees- so here is the best way to proceed...”

Tom switched on the audio and video feed to the hold's announcement system. “This is Lieutenant Tom Phillips, Free Company 'Wotan's Fury'- acting under an Imperial warrant, we have seized this vessel from the Hegemony and claim her as a prize of battle. We are currently in subspace and are in the process of refitting this vessel in order to get you into some decent living conditions. Please bear with us as we complete this work and repair battle damage and we will get you all out of there as soon as practical. Please get your sick or injured ready to move out- we have a surgeon on board and pick representatives to assist us with helping you.

Times are going to still be tough and we will ALL be getting a little hungry before long, but YOU ARE NO LONGER SLAVES. Welcome back, citizens.”

“That was good Sir, now we give them ten minutes and go in with a squad and meet them face-to-face.”

If the view on the monitor looked bad, inside the slaves hold was several orders of magnitude

worse- the stench of excrement and death was appalling- especially to career spacers who are renowned for being meticulous in their hygiene. This was all deliberate- keeping new captives naked, degraded and in filth- all designed to break down their spirit.

These were recent captives and had not yet been broken. A group of three approached Tom and his men, while the crowd looked on; they walked tall, carrying themselves with dignity despite their nakedness and dirt. "I am colony leader Shannon Antares, ICS grade six- Lieutenant, you have our profound thanks for your rescue-what may we do to assist you?"

"Firstly, we will see to your immediate medical needs. I need you to keep order in here- you are, unfortunately, going to have to remain in here for a while longer although we can move the sick out now. Can you have any engineers, or those with maintenance experience assist us with getting some sanitation in here?" The colony leader, nodded to one of her assistants who went off to gather a work party.

By now, Tom had sized up the mood of the freed slaves. "I will open the compartment doors, but please have your people remain in here unless involved in a work detail. Our marines are searching the ship for any crew we may have missed and I don't want any of you getting mistaken for them- and getting tossed out the nearest airlock." Tom's comm buzzed, signaling work details wanting clearance to enter. "Lt Phillips to Ops- open the main hatchway to bay five and turn all services on."

"Colony leader- we need to remove your dead. They will be frozen for the meantime and we can hold a service for the dead when we depart subspace- if your people could assist with identification, that would be helpful"

"Of course, sir." She lowered her voice- "The former crew of this ship?"

"All dead- we don't take slavers prisoner" replied Tom.

"Good- I will pass that on to my people."

"You might pass on that we spaced the captain- in a fully operational suit."

"Thank you sir."

The constant drone of the ventilation fans changed pitch, as one of the operations team found the control and increased the airflow to vent the foul air and the lighting intensity started to increase. Ops and the fitters had already unlocked potable water cocks and turned on the showers and toilets, while logistics were tracking down a long list of supplies, such as soap, toiletries, cups, bowls and clothing. At least they would have water and sanitation now. When the area was cleaned up, they could start assembling the bunks stowed in a now unlocked adjacent storeroom.

A runner arrived and saluted Tom. "Sir, quartermasters compliments and can you please report to Ops and help them out with the manifest? Sir, they can't make heads or tails of half of it."

"Colony leader- I will leave Warrant Officer Guiardio Rameraiz here with you to liaise- I have to go help find some of these stores your people need. When we get them sorted, I want to do a full debrief with you." said Tom.

"Thank you and all your people again Lieutenant and I hope to pass on my compliments to your commanding officer in person soon."

“You will get to meet Captain Jamieson in about 28 days at our rendezvous- Colony leader- from what I have seen you have done an outstanding job of leading your people through the worst of times.” Tom saluted her and left, following the runner to the operations control room.

Guiardio's nose wrinkled and he walked over to the sanitation area- a collection of plastic pails and a waste hopper to empty them into. He took his belt knife and put the point of the blade on a nearby pipe, then put his ear to the tang. Sheathing the knife, he called the tech working in the guard room. “Johnny- turn the damn waste vents on.” The Crows, in their perversity, had shut down the waste vent fans, in order to cause more of a stench- as if not supplying water for cleaning their filthy hole in the deck excuses for toilets was not enough. Now to find a cleaning stores locker. There would be one near here, as the slaves' last task on board ship would be to clean this fetid hold.

*

“Baklava- 1200 kg- what that means is one day's more food.” said Tom. “Now, let's see what else we can find in this manifest. When the locusts raided that colony, they would have taken all their stores as well. We are still seven days subsistence rations short.”

*

“Sir, the drive generator is beyond repair, all the ancillaries are OK. Good news is we can replace it with a Caterpillar FTLD-4 and those are easy to pick up- even out at the frontier. Power grid is in good shape and life support is in fair shape too, but could use some work to get it running at capacity- looks like this is a fairly new ship and the Crows haven't screwed it up too badly yet.”

“QM is still trying to sort the stores Sir- techs are having some trouble interfacing a translator with their GUI. The OS is written in something called 'French', then translated into Crow scribbles...”

“Yes, spare me the technicalities” said Commander Hendrik “What is your progress locating foodstuffs?”

“Sorry Sir- Lt Phillips is the only one who can really read that manifest and so far he has identified additional three days rations, at subsistence levels.”

“Sir, given the condition of our refugees, we can expect a 2-5% mortality rate at those levels” said the ship's surgeon.

“If they seized that colony's stores then there is a high probability that their emergency rations are somewhere on board- find them” said Hendrik.

“Sir, I believe that we have the hardware to rig an algae prote processor. That stuff tastes like shit, but it will sustain life.” said the surgeon.

“Then get a team on it- in fact- start looking for one on-board. I recall the Crows use such things to feed their slaves. If that is all, back to your posts.”

“One small bit of good news Sir- we located a consignment of coffee. The head chef has tested it and pronounced it good.”

Hendrik gave a small smile. “Splendid- have some sent up to control ASAP. You will be needing it.”

As the section heads left, Hendrik stretched out in his chair. It had been a full-on 27 hours since taking this freighter and there was still a lot of work to be done. While the ship was in a fair state of repair now and steadily improving, the human cargo was proving troublesome. Not the first refugees released- they were now almost self-sufficient. All they really needed was their freedom and dignity returned. The other 3,000 were more problematic. About 2000 of them had been broken to slavery and were, to say the least, dysfunctional. They were behaving like battery hens released from their cages- huddling in the corners, refusing to believe they were free. They would have to be transported to one of the empires rehabilitation centers where they could be returned to functioning.

Even worse were the remaining thousand. They were born into slavery and knew no other existence. Nor could they comprehend one. They were on lock-down and would remain so until the crew's specialists could determine what to do with them. Right now, they were as dangerous to the crew and the other slaves as their masters.

Then there was one who was outside of these groups. The young girl found in the late captain's cabin.

She was definitely unbroken and unharmed, but none of the other captives knew of her. Careful questioning by the surgeon had determined that she was the sole survivor of a pirate raid on an outie transport. Other than that all they knew was that she was about 3-4 years old and named Jenny DeVries. The surgeon's team had taken a shine to her and had her quartered in sick bay. By all accounts she kept quiet, stayed out of the way and was happy to entertain herself on one of the ships information terminals. Hendrik saw no reason to change these arrangements.

She could stay there until they off-loaded the former colonists at the Yalumba system in ten weeks.

*

“A drink?” said Captain Hendrik.

“Brandy and soda, thank you” said Colony Leader Antares.

“My apologies for taking this long to have this meeting” said Hendrik, handing her a tall glass. “Before I start asking questions, I'm sure you have a few you would like answered.”

“I do, Sir- firstly, what are your intentions with my people? - we would like to know where we are going.”

“Firstly, we are getting far away for the system where we took this ship- 21 days out to an uninhabited system. At this point we rendezvous with our other two ships who have gone on ahead for supplies- real food, not krats. From there to the frontier for more provisions and on to the Yalumba system, where we plan to land your colonists. If you want to establish a colony there, this is a place with plenty of room- they have only been inhabited about 120 years.”

“Not what we really wanted when we set out, but considering the circumstances- I think my people will be glad to take the second chance- although we have no capital now.”

“You still have much of your colony stores- we have no salvage claim on the property of Imperial citizens and the empire is quite helpful with distressed colonists. Of course they don't tell you that when you set out- I'm sure you understand why.”

“Yes, quite.” she acknowledged. “Although I wish we were in a position to repay you- debts must be paid.”

Hendrik gave dismissive gesture with his raised glass “The empire will also compensate us for our efforts- consider the account settled in full.”

“Well then- this ICS G6 is learning a bit about the empire today.”

“Yes, now I would like to know more about how you came to be in this most unfortunate situation.”

“We started out four years ago, to set up an independent colony deep in what was meant to be the neutral zone. Following typical procedures, the destination planet had been seeded with Terran flora and fauna, the LZ had been leveled and utility structures build in advance by autonomous robotics. We set down with no great dramas and for three years carried on setting up a colony, in textbook manner. Our only contact with the outside being an annual visit from an Imperial scout ship.

About a month ago- I can't be sure of time, as we have had no way of measuring it- we were in the middle of harvest. During the mid-afternoon, we lost our satellite and comms. Shortly after that, four drop ships landed on the outskirts of the settlement and we were attacked by two companies of light infantry with armor and gunship support. We were systematically split up and were unable to mount a meaningful defense. They set up a stockade and processed us prior to loading everyone onto a lighter. While this was going on- and for several days after the colony was systematically stripped of anything of value.” She paused and took a deep drink.

“That sounded to be a more professional attack than is usual for raiders- they are usually hit & run- grab a few easy captives” said Hendrik, passing across the brandy and the soda siphon.

“Captain that was a well- armed, trained and disciplined specialist force if ever I saw one. They were not raiders- they were Crow elite infantry. I would say that they had carried out this same type of operation on more than a few occasions- they were total professionals.”

“No doubt naval intelligence is going to want to go over this with you and your colonists later- but I agree with your assessment. We have heard rumors of such a unit. Now to the point of your colony stores- did you have the standard emergency reserve rations?”

Shannon grimaced “We lived on them for two weeks before we were transferred onto this ship. Bad as krats are, they were better than the crud the Crows ration slaves. I can't be sure how much is left- the store was destroyed when a couple of my people holed up in there to make a stand.”

“Every little helps- we are a few days short of providing a subsistence ration, but our surgeon says we will cope if we keep the fit and able bodied a little short, to keep the children and sick list's rations up to minimum. For what its worth, all my crew have volunteered to go on the same ration, to keep those children and pregnant women fed.”

For the first time in the ordeal, Shannon broke down and burst into tears, repeating “Bless you- bless you all.”

Hendrik poured another large brandy- this time being rather sparing with the soda siphon. “At least we have plenty of drink- our supposedly teetotal friends had a sizable cache of contraband on board- I can always count on my marines to locate the booze first.”

His attempt at a joke stopped the tears and he passed her a clean handkerchief. “We found these

too” he said, sliding a humidor of cigars across the table.” They lit cigars and smoked for a few minutes. Hendrik continues with his questioning.

“What do you know of the other captives on board?”

“All I know is what your crew has mentioned- that there are others on board. Your people don't give much away.”

“It may be possible that some of these slaves were involved in the raid on your colony as laborers- I thought it best to segregate your people from them.”

“A sound move sir- they would tear them to pieces if they recognized any of them.” Her face darkened, as she recalled the stockade and the taunts of the Crows laborers. They had not realized that they were second or more generation slaves- born menials although they were higher up the pecking order than taken slaves.

“Quite so, best we let naval intelligence determine if there is a case against any of them.”

“That's better.” said Tom, as the hot, stuffy air in the ops room started to cool.

A fitter emerged from underneath the console. “That one was easy sir- the fire baffle was fitted the wrong way around. You had zero airflow- we are finding a lot of stuff like this- I hope the Crows build their warships this badly.”

“Specialist, I just wish this inventory problem was that easy to fix” said Tom, getting up and stretching. He had spent almost all of the last 48 hours at the console trying to locate food amongst the vast cargo bays. Almost all of the cargo was listed by destination, not contents. So far they had located a cube of baklava by luck and another of canned cheese by searching.

The young fitter paused then said “Sir- if it's not a dumb question- have you tried scanning the cargo with thermals?”

“No” said Tom “We just used life detectors but not thermals- why do you ask?”

“Well, sir- I had the thought that if there were any reffer cubes amongst the cargo, they would probably contain food- they will show up a couple of degrees warmer than ambient from the inbuilt heat pumps. Because of that, they are always top-stow, so should be easy to locate.”

Tom turned away from his screen, slapped his hand against his forehead then picked up a handset. “All search teams- have one person switch to thermal and scan the top-stowed containers- you are looking for cubes above ambient. Open those and report in.”

Several minutes later, one of the teams reported in. “Jackpot Sir, found one full of frozen lamb, going by the pictures on the boxes inside- tell cookie to heat up his stew pot.”

“Copy- did you get that QM?”

“I did, Lieutenant- that was some inspired thinking for a marine.”

“Can't take the credit, QM- that was one of Sandy's fitters”

“Who will now have all the troops lining up to buy him a beer- I'm sending a work party down and getting the cooks back in the galley now- QM out.”

Tom turned to the sheepish looking fitter. “Have your crew chief call me- that calls for a bonus.”
“Aye sir” he said, saluted and gathered up his tools. He had a full shifts work ahead but now had the prospect of a hot meal.

After what seemed like an endless procession through sick bay, the medical team was finally finished- for now. They had thankfully received the latest news- that frozen food had been located and there was more than enough for this leg of the journey. While there was little risk of real starvation, the boost to morale was at least as important to all aboard- more so to the newly freed refugees. Lieutenant Lillian Williams, the ships surgeon, finished looking over the Chef's menus and approved them. People kept on a diet of concentrated rations- and a minimum energy one at that- had to be reintroduced to real food. The last task of her watch completed, she handed over to the senior med tech, and then turned her attention to a small figure at a spare terminal. “Young lady, I think you have had enough reading for one day- look at the time- now it's off to bed for you.” Jenny smiled at the surgeon and hurried off into her cabin- an appropriated room in sick bay.

Lillian smiled- the sight of the diminutive figure bringing back memories of her own children, long grown up now. Her staff had taken it upon themselves to look after this one child- unlike the colonists and the other ex-slaves, this one had nobody. More gentle probing had revealed that her full name was Jennifer DeVries and she was space-born, most probably to one of the independent freighter/transporters that plied it's trade about the outer colonies. Attempts to find out more just got 'they are all gone now' from her. These freighters operating on the fringes were the usual prey of pirates and surviving crew were often sold to Crow slavers.

“Still here” said Tom. “If you are finishing soon, the wardroom bar is open, if you fancy a drink?”

“I just need to tuck our guest in- say- you found her, come in and say hello.”

They entered Jenny's room. The plain sick room had emptied of diagnostic equipment, and been decorated with a few personal items from the medical team- a colorful hand-made blanket and a stuffed toy bear- and a locker had been fitted. She was already curled up in her bed. One of the crew had programmed the ships tailor module to produce a miniature set of uniform for her and this was draped over the back of a chair.

“Hello” said Jenny. “I remember you.”

“Yes” said Tom. “I wanted to come and see you earlier, but we have been very busy fixing this ship.”

“I know. Everybody says that the cockroaches don't make ships worth a damn.”

Lillian snorted at this remark out of such a small mouth and Tom gave a chuckle. “Well, we make much better ships- good ships like your people's ones.”

“Now that I remember- I brought you some pictures for you wall, like I promised.” Lillian unfolded her tablet and tapped the screen. “These are pictures from my little girl's home on Yalumba- she is the assistant winemaker at the Cockatoo River Mission- she has a daughter about your age, Jennifer.”

The pict wall changed from mirror to window and now displayed an image of a pleasant, sunny river valley, with vineyards, fields and a winding oxbow river. Cattle and sheep grazed and flocks of large birds flew about. All of the better appointed ships had these pict walls that gave the illusion of space. Despite what many would say about being born to live in space, all well-adjusted people needed space and the more the better on board ship.

"I don't like planets" said Jenny, "But that looks like a nice one."

The scene faded to one of a courtyard in a large adobe compound, with children playing.

"Good night dear" said Lillian, setting the glow panels to auto-dim. The pict wall detected the change in ambient light and set it's scene to dusk, lowering the sounds. "I will be watching you on my comm and the duty medic is just down the corridor- see you in the morning."

"Goodnight" said the little girl, yawning, as the two officers left for the wardroom.

"What did you pick up?" said Lillian.

"I concur with your findings- accent and speech of the travelers. She is ship-born and that will- is- helping her to adjust."

"How is that?"

"They have a wider idea of 'family'- the crew is family- not a couple of individuals. We have taken her into our crew, thus our family."

"This is going to be a problem when we have to let her go."

"It doesn't need to be" said Tom. "You have inadvertently- or not- started the process."

"It would be inadvertently- please elaborate."

"Cockatoo River Mission is also an orphanage for girls- and a fine one- there are more than a few of our crew that call that place home."

"Myself included" said Lillian. "Let's start getting her ready for that- a much better idea than being lumped in with a lot of colonists, good people though they are. I'm sure my daughter will help and the Wolf has contacts all over that planet- I can't see him objecting."

"No, the boss will usually go along with a good idea- now whose round is it?"

Jenny closed her eyes feigning sleep and reflected on the last couple of days. Playing the part of being a distressed three year old had not been hard. What was difficult was pretending to need the normal amount of sleep of a child her apparent age. Even though the child's body required more than an adult, it had been enhanced and could easily get by on five or six hours sleep. However, this had been planned for and Jenny was able to run a auto-hypnosis sequence that put her to sleep.

While she had spent some time in the empire, to get familiar with speech, common technology and

life on a spaceship, there was a vast amount of knowledge she wished to acquire. The data terminal was a good place to start and the busy crew was glad that she could entertain herself quietly at the terminal, without paying much attention to what she was reading. Most crew was involved in furthering their education while passing time in subspace and there was a eclectic range of information in the ship's library. The next step was to acquire a tablet, which should not be difficult- the crew had been trying to find her all sorts of small gifts without any prompting.

While she would have liked to go exploring the ships, that would be out of character and in any case, no matter that Wayne's hardened privateers were a pushover for a small girl, nobody moved freely about a military vessel without good reason- certainly not civilians nor children. She would have to arrange that through an obliging officer- Tom or the surgeon.

On the longer term front, it was apparent that Wayne and Tom had done a lot of preparation for this insertion, getting the right people together at the right time and places. From what she had seen on the pict wall, her new home-to-be looked very pleasant and she would have to do more research tomorrow. She hoped the blue skies were the normal state- she had at the next fourteen years there before reaching her adulthood- and the active phase of her mission...

Abilene Provedore Deadwood Spaceport

Abilene was the last world in this part of space nominally controlled by the Empire. The last port of call before entering the supposedly 'neutral zone'- the buffer between the Empire and the Hegemony. This was one of the first independent colonies- privately funded and outside but not opposing the Empire. The founders of this world were considered eccentrics- they wished to create a world in the image of the ancient 'Wild West' of Earth's American frontier. They certainly managed to recreate the 'Wild' part.

Abilene, like its namesake, was a border world where colonies came to trade and take on supplies- along with those who operated on the fringes- pirates, privateers, smugglers, mercenaries, free companies, travelers, bounty hunters and brigands. It was farming and mining world- as most young colonies were. The cities were like the old cow-towns (which only two people in this age knew from experience.) The law was made by the folks with money and what was good for making money was the law.

Wayne liked Abilene.

Free Company 'Wotan's Fury's spent quite a bit of time in this zone. The hunting was good and the crew could blow off steam here, knowing that almost all problems could be fixed with money. As they provided a significant contribution to the local economy in purchases and loot, they could get away with most things short of rape and murder. A fair fight was never considered murder and rape never came into it with a profusion of willing amateurs and skilled professionals on hand.

On this trip there would be no shore leave, however. Just Wayne and his Quartermaster had traveled down in the ships gig and now they were watching as the last lighter departed with it's cargo

The heavily laden lighter wobbled on its field as the grav drive took the load. The ship lifted, floating upwards, then its pilot fired the reaction drive to gain steerage and the cargo ship started its 2000km climb to 'Wotan's Fury'.

“That's the last one Captain- and a pleasure doing business with you sir.” said Pete 'Vittles’ Peterson, owner of Abilene Provedore.

“We will be back for a resupply in three to four weeks- I have to escort a slow-mover in, so I can't give you an exact time. I appreciate you giving me priority on that order.” said Wayne, passing over a sizable credit chip. “That's for the prompt service.”

Pete looked at the chip and his eyes widened. Imperial credits were a sought-after currency this far out on the rim. “Don't you worry Cap'n- we will hold those stores for you. With a bit more warning on the resupply, I can get you a bit more variety dehydrated and ready for next time- in the quantities you need, that is.”

“That would be appreciated- they will be hungry when they get this lot. Once they have eaten that, they will start getting fussy again.”

“Aw Cap'n- now who could ever get sick of corn bread, beef and beans?”

Wayne laughed at that “I will have a bit more time on my return- we can get together over some of your best steaks and I will bring a few bottles of whiskey and tell you the story you are busting to hear.”

“You got yourself a deal there, Cap'n- and if I read the cards right, your crew is going to have a wad of prize money to blow.”

“Not wrong- but you may have to wait a couple of months before that happens and I don't count my chips 'till I have them safely out of the saloon.”

“True, true- now before you mount up, is there anything else I can get for your return?”

“If you can find a Cat FTLD-4, that would be much appreciated- and I will pay list price for a one in working order.”

“It will be done Cap'n and on the QT- it goes without saying.”

“It does and adios Pete.”

“You too Cap'n J.”

“ISO type three docking collar.” said the lighter pilot.

“OK Jess- kill your drive, we have a tractor lock now- warping you in.”

The heavy lighter inched towards the docking collar, drawn in by the 'Fury's' vector-able gravity drive. The metal surfaces kissed, and then the camming dogs latched the ships together. The seal inflated, the instruments indicated a firm seal and once pressures were equalized, the two dock doors slid outwards and upwards. Cargo handlers ran forward and attached their hawsers to the containers. Once clear, the Loadmaster started the winch, hauling the containers out along the roller bed. As soon as they were clear of the lighter, the dock doors started to close, while the handlers started to stow and secure the last of their cargo.

“Clear to disengage- have a good drop and see you next furlough, Jess.” said the Loadmaster.

“Make that soon, lover,” said the lighter pilot, disengaging the dogs and firing a short burst of her

reaction engines. As soon as she was clear of their microgravity, 'Fury' commenced boosting at full power. In three hours they would be in subspace, where they would remain for about half a light-year. Then, having entered subspace from near Abilene, they would drop back to N-space and re-vector for their true destination.

"I'm not surprised" said Mr. Ramirez. "You treat them as refugees and victims- they are Crow slaves but they have been for generations and like the Crows, they see you as *Kaffirs*- have the marines treat them as raw recruits- they will understand this." 'Ensigns.' he thought to himself..

Tom appeared just in time to re-enforce WO Ramirez's lesson on slave management to Ensign Johnson. It wasn't that he was a slow learner- he would never have gained a position on THIS ship if he were- like most people he had assumed that all slaves wished to be free and would be actually grateful to those who had freed them. Wrong.

On this ship, 2000 ex-slaves were glad to be free and were now working running and repairing the ship. Another 2000 ex-slaves were learning to be free men again and were slowly learning to fend for themselves and help the crew.

The other 1000 resented their change in status. Their liberators were *kaffirs*, ungodly, evil and unclean.

And about to receive the full attention of Commander Hendrik, who had just heard about this morning's rebellion.

Ensign Johnson stood at rigid attention in front of the Captain's table.

"So, Mister- you had a mutiny?"

"Sir- they refused to follow my directions to police their quarters."

"And you took what action?"

"Sir, I withdrew to seek further instruction."

"I see. I believe Mr. Ramirez has since advised you on the correct procedure, in these instances?"

"Aye Sir."

"The lesson here Mister, is to seek the advice of you senior NCOs' BEFORE you get yourself into a position. Do you understand this?"

"Aye Sir."

"Then I suggest a disciplinary exercise to teach the collaborators who is in charge. Do you have any ideas as to who's advice to seek?"

"Yes Sir- my Warrant Officer, Sir."

"Dismissed Ensign."

“Subspace proximity alert sir- vessel in the 150 kilotonne class system inbound.”

“Sound General Quarters- all weapons to 'safe' and track.”

The ship burst out of subspace and within seconds had started vectoring to match course with the bulk freighter and escort. The speed with which it changed course told them that it was the 'Fury', even as the IFF codes were verified.

“Stand down from General Quarters” said Commander Hendrik. “Stand by to receive freight- all shuttle crews to your stations.”

“Sir- I have an incoming transmission in clear from 'Wotan's Fury'”

“On the main viewer, Yeoman.”

Captain Jamieson's face appeared on the screen. “Greetings 'Jolly Roger'- I have four hundred tonnes of food on board and want to transfer immediately. What is your status?”

“Sir- 'Jolly Roger' and prize are in much better shape than when last we met.- My shuttle crews will commence cross-loading on your clearance.”

“Carry on Commander. I will be coming across with the first return shuttle for a full debrief. Jamieson out.”

“Lieutenant Phillips- a Quarter Guard for the CO, if you please, bay TBA.” ordered Hendrik. “Officer of the watch- have the chief steward prepare the briefing room to receive the CO.”

At least they had first-rate coffee to offer the Captain.

*

Wayne returned the Marines salute and Tom dismissed the Guard, leaving them to the orderly sergeant. A steward followed them dragging a large hamper on a cart. “A few essentials for your mess” said Wayne. “From the signals I have had a chance to read, you found enough food to hold out OK?”

“Thanks to a fitter's mate with experience working bulk carriers, who taught me that there is often another way.”

Wayne laughed. “Have his section head present him at Captain's Mast- I'm staying on-board this leg. Charlie needs a shot at conning the 'Fury' without me looking over his shoulder.”

“Will do.” said Tom. “Speaking of 'Hearts & Minds'- most of the rescued captives are doing real well. One lot is refurbishing the ship, another are undergoing rehab, but the others...

Crow generational slaves- and here is the rub- there are far too many of them here. They never leave a family, unless the family is taken over or falls foul of the sultanate.”

“Tom, I'm going to leave that one for the empire's specialists to sort out. In the meantime, have you got them under control?”

Tom gave a wiry grin. “Mr. Johnson has learnt much regarding how to handle institutionalized slaves.”

“I found oxygen deprivation proves useful in difficult cases.”

“As did Mr. Johnson- he also proved that Marines with hard brooms and industrial detergent soon end 'dirty strikes'.”

“The lad shows promise.”

*

By the time they reached the bridge of the 'Jolly Roger', the next shuttle was already unloading- this one full of long awaited clothing and textiles for the ship's tailor module. Along with foodstuffs, Wayne had purchased many tonnes of other items- toiletries; blankets- even book readers and a few entertainment units. He considered that money spent keeping the passengers a bit happier was a good investment. They stood to make a great deal of money from this mission, a significant part of which would be the bounty on rescued citizens by the Empire.

Taking his place at the head of the table, Captain Jamieson said “Where are we at with our prize? - Engineering first”

“Sir, with the exception of the FTL Tractor, we are nominally operational. All critical systems are in good working order- ancillaries need lots of small repairs and adjustments. We have 55 civilians with engineering experience assisting with repairs.

“Personnel?”

“Approximately 2000 civilians in good spirits, giving us a labour pool of about 1000, who are assisting with engineering and housekeeping, 2000 civilians deadheading- not much use but not much trouble either- the first civilian pool are taking care of them. Then we have 1000 considered hostile aliens. Sir, we have anecdotal evidence that they have been used by the Crows to loot settlements when raiding- this is how they are stripping these settlements so fast.”

“In other words, this vessel has been actively involved with the slavers?”

“Affirmative Sir- We believe she holds ½ a light out from the raid and acts as a support ship.”

“Supporting evidence, Commander?”

“Specialist equipment found, barracks on board, navigation records and loot located amongst the cargo inspected. All documented and evidence preserved for Naval Intelligence.”

“Good work. That intel will pull down a hefty bonus.”

“One more point, Sir- we found docillation implantation equipment and implants in their surgery.”

“Damn- we may have been a bit hasty in releasing the crew. I would now rather that Naval Intelligence mind-fucked the lot of them. Still, it's done- QM- your appraisal of hull and cargo?”

“Sir, the ship is going to fetch 3.8 to 4 billion on the market, if you sell at New Chicago or one of the old worlds. No system out near the rim could afford her. The cargo- 90% of the manifest is encrypted- I have sent that data to 'Fury' for her computers to work on. Based on the other 10%-

which is probably lower-valued cargo and the 3 % physically inspected, I estimate the general cargo to be worth about 12 billion. Bulk cargo- another 800 million in industrial gases, chemicals and minerals. That is conservative, gentlemen, and I recommend selling off our cargo as we stop over. Too much in one market and we drive the prices down. But Sir, I was saving this for last- we located a high security hold near the center of the ship. This contained processed fissile material- forty-seven tonnes and some 19,000 litres of hydrogen isotopes- pure, not heavy water. That lot we are going to have to let the navy put a price on.”

“Yes, I will do a trade on the last.” replied Captain Jamieson. “But as for the rest- we have enough loot here to buy out our shareholders- which I propose to put to a meeting of all stakeholder officers at first opportunity. We have a way to go yet, although it should be all routine, so let's keep focused on the mission- and keep the troops minds on the job and not on drinking their prize money.

Let's get into subspace, then we can think about a night off- it's about time the mess had a slap-up formal dinner.- gentlemen- to your posts.”

What Wayne had not told them was that in several months they were going to do the same sort of raid again, before the Crows had the chance to react and beef up the escorts.

Which was what the Imperial Navy wanted- the Crows capital ships tied up with freighter escorts...

On approach to Yalumba, permission had been given for a few of the civilians to visit the freighter's owners lounge- here they could view the famous sight of the gas giant Opal and its numerous incandescent neon rings- a light display unequalled throughout the explored galaxy.

“I must say that I would never have expected a Free Company to be such pleasant hosts.” said Colony Leader Antares.

“It just goes to show that you can't believe what you see on the 3D” said Captain Jamieson, with a laugh. “You will be seeing us from time to time, as we pass through this sector every few years. I'm expecting a good return on my investment here.”

“I'm sure that you will get one- it will be a long term one, mind.”

“I want a lot of long-term investments- one day we will get out of this game.”

Jamieson had traveled ahead to arrange a home for the rescued colonists- Yalumba being what is known as a 'big planet'- one with a land mass larger than it's oceans, they were readily accepted by the planets leaders- especially given that Captain Jamieson's company were sponsoring them.

During the weeks in subspace, they had located much of their looted colony equipment and stores, plus the Free Company has added other loot and credit to replace that which had been lost- for a shareholding in this new colony. Normally, a colony would land to find buildings set up by robot drones- in this case local machinery had been hired to do the same job- setting up a landing field, stores and temporary accommodation for shelter until their own could be built. Their claim was over 1000 km from the nearest settlement- not a virgin world, but fairly close to it.

In a few short hours, they would be starting over again. Most failed colonies never got this chance.

The gig touched down on a square of grass near the river, about 200 meters from the mission building- a large rectangular structure made from locally quarried limestone blocks- not the usual silico-concrete domes, favored by Imperial colonies. It was the sort of structure once common in hot climates- massive stone walls to insulate from the summer sun and it gave the appearance of having been a part of the landscape for centuries- it was one of the earlier buildings on the planet, having been raised about 100 years earlier. On the other side of the river were similar structures- the famous winery which tunneled into a nearby escarpment to make the the cellars. Grapevines covered the river terraces and sheep and cattle wandered about the river flats, through which flowed an oxbow river of crystal-clear water from the mountains some thirty kilometers away. Willow and Poplar trees followed the river and older Oaks, Gums and Acacia were scattered about the fields, giving welcome shade to the stock. The surrounding hills were dry and yellow, while the irrigated land closer to the river was a lush green. The skies were a azure blue with just a few tiny wisps of cloud and temperature was a pleasant 26 degrees- although it was only 1000 hrs local and would get hotter later in the day.

A small group waited by the edge of the field. The surgeon of the 'Jolly Rodger's' oldest daughter, her husband and their two young children. Wayne and Lillian exited the lock, carrying a small sleeping figure. 'I gave her a mild sedative' Lillian said.

"Good" said Emily, her daughter. "Let's get this little one to bed, then we can have a drink and supper- you said you could stay a while?"

"We have a couple of extra days" said Wayne, as they walked up to the mission. "We decided to take on some cargo for New Chicago while we were here- we were going that way and had plenty of space, so your wine co-op got a good price on the freight."

"That's one cargo we don't have to worry about losing then." said her husband Jim. He looked up to the skies to where the huge form of the 'Golden Caravan' could be easily seen in it's low orbit. "That is one big ship- how much cargo are you taking on here?"

"148 kilotonnes- your whole vintage and assorted other cargo. We captured her almost full, but have off-loaded 2000 colonists and most of their equipment that we recovered- that left us a couple of bays to fill up- no point in running empty."

They were now at the main gate to the mission compound, a pair of 6x4 meter latticed steel gates hung open- they were closed at night, more to stop stock wandering in and fouling the courtyard. The sun was setting and the mission was winding down for the evening, with only the older girls still up- they were watching the 3D in the seniors classes lounge. As was the practice here, this was the adult staff's time to take a meal and relax, now that the heat of the day had eased off. The mission was of a classic design- open plan and airy, with high ceilings and lots of arches. Earthy terra-cotta tones dominated and colour was added with bright pots filled with decorative plants and miniature fruit trees.

The mission was really a small walled village, with a central pathway and two rows of three-storied structures, dormitories, classrooms. An atrium joined the two blocks. The ground floor apartments opened out onto private courtyards, the classrooms were on the first floor and the dormitories on the second floor. At the other end of the compound were a commissary and a swimming pool. All the buildings were roofed with replica terra-cotta tiles, made from near-indestructible silica-concrete.

"We will put her in one of the guest rooms tonight, next to your rooms, so she can see familiar faces when she wakes." said Emily. "This part is never easy, the leaving."

“This child seems very resilient” said Lillian. “We are sure she was taken from Travelers and they tend to foster and pass children about their extended families.”

“Which doesn't make it any easier for you, mum” said Emily. “You always were a big softy when you thought no-one was watching.” She pointed out a plain, but well-appointed room and they carried the sleeping Jenny in and tucked her into bed. Emily slaved the monitor to her wrist comm, so that they could listen for her waking- not likely after the sedative. “Tomorrow we will buddy her up with a couple of the older girls- no need to be concerned- we do this sort of thing all the time here.”

Leaving her husband to put the children to bed, Emily lead her visitors to her private garden- an 8x8 meter space, paved with flagstones of laser-cut native stone and home to a small water feature that sprayed the tropical plantings and helped cool the air. A table of teak wood was set with places for four and Emily started laying out plates from a small chiller unit. "This is our usual fare here- a light meal at the end of a hot day- if you want anything else, I will have the kitchen send it over.”

“No- this is splendid” said Wayne. “It's much the same on ship- meals get lighter as the watch gets later.”

“I should have thought- would you prefer to eat indoors Captain?”

“Outdoors is a great change- I spend almost all of my time inside a ship these days, but I do enjoy the sky over my head too. Thanks for asking, though- a lot of old spacers get the agoraphobia quite bad, but I'm not one of them.”

“This fare is splendid- our hydroponics section never produces enough fruit or vegetables for our liking- and Yalumba produce is second to none.” said Lillian.

“True,” said Wayne. “This food would fetch top credit on the outer mining worlds- in fact I will buy a few tonnes next time I do the Helzin run.”

Emily's husband Jim returned with two bottles. “I will let the Cabernet breath for a while, while we start with the Chardonnay.”

Wayne picked up the bottle. “One of the few not of old earth that finds it's way to the Imperial court. I suspect much of the shipment I'm loading will be headed there.”

“Certainly all of the premium labels” said Jim, who was the head winemaker. “I'm proud to say that our own label is now in that category. What you may not have heard, is that we have branched out into our own brandy.”

“Well, I will certainly have to give you my opinion on that.” said Wayne, looking forward to trying a brandy made from the empire's finest grapes.

After a leisurely supper and some excellent wine, they retired to a garden area just outside the mission walls. By now the place was much quieter, the older girls having been sent off to bed by the duty matron and the abundant bird life had roosted for the evening. All that was to be heard were the few night-hunting owls, a cricket-like native insect and the gentle sound of moving water coming from the nearby river.

The brandy was indeed up to the standard of the rest of their fare. The sky reddened into darkness,

with just the light of the three small moons and Wayne produced a cigar case. "A meal like that needs this final touch."

They prepared and lit the cigars then sat and smoked in quiet reflection for a while. Lillian finally broke the silence. "That little one will be up early, so I had best be off to bed soon- she is used to seeing my face first watch."

"Yes, we don't want to keep you from your work tomorrow."

"Nonsense." said Emily. "This is our down-time until the next harvest comes in and we have plenty of time for guests- especially ones who only come by every three or four years."

"We will be in this sector a bit more often now." Wayne informed them. "The armed escort market is growing as cargoes in these fringe areas increase in value- you are no longer the frontier, but sure aren't part of the inner circle worlds yet. I promised not to say too much, but I had talks with your Governor and there are a few new trading partnerships in the wind."

"I never thought of you as a freighter." said Jim.

"Oh, we carry freight all right." said Wayne. "It's just that much of it is loot."

Jenny had used her metabolic control to counteract the sedative and was now laying awake, feigning sleep with her head under the light blanket. For the next couple of days, she could continue much as normal, but would have to remember to act a little agoraphobic- and be afraid of open water- for a while, as she 'adapted' to life on a planet. For a few days they would watch her closely, but would stop doing so once she appeared to settle in. Not a difficult piece of acting- the hard part was these early bedtimes.

By the time Lillian awoke, the apartment was quiet. "The children have taken her off to the aviary to feed the Cockatoos" said Emily. "If they don't get fed early you can hear the screeching from here. Wayne left at first light- said he was off to check out the countryside."

"That will be him gone for the day then, even at the speed he travels at. About time he took some kind of a break." Emily pushed the coffee pot across the table and Lillian took a refill.

"What's with the aviary? Don't you have enough of those feathered noisemakers about the place already?"

"Tame Cockies are the hottest new export item- 5000 Imperials for a talking bird back in the circle."

"Damn. That's good money for a pest."

"It offsets some of the damage the birds do to our fruit, anyway."

"Don't you have such a thing as a shock field out here?"

"Not considered an essential import- this is a fairly new colony."

“I will talk to the skipper- a few cases from your cellars and we bring you a shock field generator- by the back door. The ICS nosy's don't need to know everything.”

“Jim- and I- would certainly appreciate that- now I must see where these children are.”

Emily activated a window and gave a 'locate' command. The supervisor computer pinged the appropriate locator pendants, triangulated their position and aimed the nearest camera. A group of children were feeding pieces of fruit through the wire of the breeding cages to the birds. “See- there is your young one feeding a Galah- she is doing well for ship-raised. They often have trouble adapting to planet life.”

“I have a feeling that that one would make herself at home anywhere.”

*

Jenny was gingerly passing pieces of fruit through the bars to the raucous birds, while the other children encouraged her. Wayne's last words came back to her; 'This undercover lark can be a bit of a drag, but try to make the best of it and have fun where you can. We all go on about having a childhood again, knowing what we know now- you are going to get that chance, so make the most of it.' She gave a laugh at the antics of the Cockatoos and the Lorikeets, then exclaimed to the other children “This is FUN.”

*

Wayne had covered about thirty kilometers by noon and was now at the top of a small hill overlooking the settlement. He had taken a survival vest from his gig, and now took a break and drank from a water bottle, scanning the surrounds with a small pair of pocket binoculars. Whoever picked the site did a great job- this was a prime piece of country- a great place to grow up. He hadn't realized how much he missed wide open space and the quiet of a near empty countryside. But he knew he wouldn't be living on a starship forever- another 21-22 years or so. Hardly any time at all and it's not that it was a bad life anyway. Wayne was always one to make the best of the circumstances he was in.

He checked his tablet for messages and added shock field generators to the list of equipment that he reckoned this settlement needed. His quick survey traveling through the station had found a few things lacking. The bounty money he was due for 'rescuing' Jenny would cover most of those and he could always use more good investments. With a few taps on his tablet, he ordered the 'Fury' to move overhead and scan the station with it's deep-penetrating radar. A good groundwater supply would help the station- the land looked right for it and he would hire a drilling contractor before they left if the ship confirmed the water was there. Small settlements always had more on their 'To Do' lists than they could afford and even with the credit coming in, you still had to find the equipment out here. He had the push to get it on-site.

He decided he had seen enough for now and using his tablet again, ordered his gig to travel on auto to his location. There was a fine looking swimming hole in that river, just downstream from the station and the day was getting hotter. He hoped they would have beer here, and then laughed out loud at his thought. This was an AUSTRALIAN planet!

After three days of R&R in the hot Yalumba sun, it was time to leave. The new subspace tractor had been fitted to the freighter and the chief engineer had pronounced it ready for the next long leg of their journey- a five week drag to New Chicago, on the edge of the sector know as 'The Inner

Circle' of the Empire- the worlds settled in the first three centuries of colonization. There they would off-load all their cargo and make arrangements to sell the prize ship, then once restocked, head back to Abilene for a month's leave for the crew. Then it would be back into hostile space to do what they did so well.

Jenny put on a fine display of tears at Lillian's leaving, as would be expected of her. Lillian had given Jenny her Free Company ring on a chain, to wear as a pendant until such time as it would fit a finger. "This means that you are ALWAYS a member of our crew now and we never forget our own- nobody else may ever wear this ring unearned and you will find when you get older that it opens many doors otherwise closed- not that this means much to you now. Take care and I will be back this way when I can." Lillian hugged her a last time and stepped into the hatchway and waved goodbye. The shuttle's strobes started and the small crowd moved back as the grav drive engaged. Unlike a civilian shuttle, this military model shot straight up as the pilot steadily increased the gain on the drive.

If anyone thought their battle-hardened surgeon's tears were out of place, they kept their thought to themselves. They could be the next one in her surgery being sewn up- the surgeon had a long memory and sutures could hurt more than they had too.

Cockatoo River Mission 15 years later.

Jenny had indeed enjoyed her time at the mission- and her second childhood. To all around, she settled into mission life easily. She found that there was very little acting requires, as this was a great time and place for a child to grow up in. Studious and a self-starter, she was soon left to study at her own pace, rapidly working through the small schools curriculum and moving on to more advanced subjects. She developed an interest in outdoor pursuits that would go a ways towards explaining her enhanced body- swimming, long distance running, hunting, athletics and gymnastics. With her adult mind in a child's body, it was natural to become a leader amongst the children, who she mentored and steered though the often hard path of being an orphan.

At eight years old, the gymnastics instructor- a retired Marine Blademaster- saw a great potential in her for unarmed and armed combat. All children were instructed in the arts of self-defense, but Jenny, after copying the actions of the older girls, was permitted to start training several years earlier than normal. On reaching her adulthood at eighteen, she was close to earning her Blademaster's rank- just needing the necessary combat experience to achieve this. It was in the areas of all matters martial that she really excelled, rapidly rising through the ranks of the local school cadets to district commander by age fourteen- the Empire and their allies recognized ability ahead of age or family. Under her leadership, the Mission cadet class- always popular- was taken to a new level. Unlike their predecessors back in the 19th century, these cadets did much more than drill and a smattering of military training. They were at the level of late 19th century regular army light infantry- of the more professional armies of old earth.

'Wotan's Fury' and crew regularly appeared in the skies, visiting Yalumba every year or two, often on the way back to the Imperial 'Inner circle' cluster, loaded with loot. The Free Company was to take another two of the great mega-ships and a score of lesser craft prize, although none with a cargo like that of the first. With dozens of navel vessels destroyed by Jamieson's raiders, the Crows were force to withdraw from this sector and use their precious battleships to escort convoys of freighters passing near this zone.

On Jenny's sixteenth birthday (based on apparent age and the date of her arrival), the Free Company appeared in their skies. They were about to move sectors to the outer world of Helzin- a fabulously rich world laden with valuable minerals, where they had accepted an Imperial commission to assist in the reunification of the planet. Their mission would be to keep other opportunists who might exploit the up-coming conflict out- along with a few other projects on the secret list.

After loading provisions and many farewells to their friends on Yalumba, Jenny and a select group from her cadet class were invited to take a short trip around the system. After taking a turn at the helm of a 150,000 tonne state-of-the-art heavy destroyer ('Fury' was in reality a cruiser, but Free Companies were not supposed to have such vessels.) Jenny's path was set.

She would be headed for the Imperial Navy, via the elite War Academy.

Nothing less would do.

On her return, she applied for a Colonial scholarship- supported by the Mission staff, the province aristocrat and her Cadet Cadre officer. This was provisionally approved by local recruiting, subject to satisfactory completion of a tour with local forces. Knowing what she was up against at the War Academy, the local militia had her posted into the elite Puckapunyal Bushrangers at the minimum age of seventeen years, for scout training.

After a few short months in the searing outback, she had gained the grudging respect of the crack light infantry troopers, who had run off their share of well-connected wannabes seeking the badge of an elite unit. By age eighteen she had passed the torturous pre-entry and was nearly finished her initial advanced training. At three months short of reaching nineteen years old, she had completed her Jungle and Arctic warfare training and was badged into the regiment at the rank of Trooper.

On her nineteenth birthday, her acceptance into the War Academy was confirmed, subject to satisfactorily completing a tour on active duty on old Earth and a period of six weeks leave, prior to transport arriving, was granted.

Two weeks after returning to Cockatoo River mission, the event she had been waiting for for these last 15 years happened.

The sun was on the way down as Jenny packed water and trail rations into a small pack, along with a chameleon ghillie. By a non-coincidence (one arranged by Wayne Jamieson) Emily, Jim and their youngest child had taken a jumpbug across planet to visit their old friend Shannon Antares at the 'Second Chance' settlement. This removed any shred of doubt in her mind that it would happen tonight. The stations computer almanac also showed the moons in the optimal position for a 0200 attack.

She had given the reason for her overnight hunt as a nest of Yabbies out past the gum grove to the west of the station. This native pest was a creature similar too, but tougher than, a Terran Armadillo. Its powerful mandibles could wreak havoc on crop roots- its food source, so they were hunted continuously to keep them from becoming established near the vines. They were a nocturnal burrowing creature and, while deaf, were very sensitive to the vibrations of approaching footsteps.

They called for a big-bore and long-range rifle able to penetrate their armored caprice. Jenny had just the weapon- a custom-modified 10mm Remington sporting rifle, rifled to shoot 25 gram slugs at subsonic velocities. This silenced weapon was topped by a variable powered day/night sight- an old-fashioned model without ranging laser or ballistics computer. Jenny didn't need them. Over the

years she had measured and memorized the distance between every significant landmark for many kilometers around the mission. Likewise the ballistics table for her rifles load was firmly committed to memory. In her pockets were sixty rounds of full metal-jacketed 'Yabbie Busters', along with 40 rounds of 'specials' hand-loaded by Wayne's master armourer. These miniature warheads would easily penetrate a shuttle's hull, a stone wall or most light armour. Half of them were subsonic and matched the ballistics of Jenny's silent load, while the other twenty were full-powered penetrators. Not that accurate out of this rifle, but there was no taking cover from these.

She wore a standard utility knife- a marine of the 19-20th century would recognize it as a K-bar, and her Batik knife, which she always wore on her left side. She was dressed as she always was, for the local bush. Just as she had equipped herself for a hundred other hunting trips.

On her way out, she told the duty warden of her plans for an overnight and reminded her that the cadets would have musketry drill at 0700, before the heat of the day and that she would be back to supervise that. The warden acknowledged the message and wished her good hunting. Jenny walked briskly off into the night, breaking into a trot once she had crossed the swing-bridge over the Cockatoo. She traveled fast over familiar ground and was soon in her first hide- these hunting hides had been positioned over the years on points suited to watch the most likely approaches to the mission. She took a drink from a water flask- a collapsible canteen that wouldn't slosh when moving and ate a bar of chocolate. That done, she took her service pistol from her pack and attached the holster and magazine pouch to her belt.

Now the hardest part.

Waiting.

Jenny waited at her LUP. All the time the words of Wayne echoed through her head. "Take the lighter first-THEN defend the Mission. We need more information on who is behind these raids- then you may defend the mission as you see fit."

The mission goal was never in doubt. The number of survivors was.

And exactly who those survivors would be.

Wayne had told her what was the fate of all those at the mission without their intervention. The adults would be implanted with docillation chips and sent to the mines- the girls would be sold as sex slaves- the reason for this raid was to take these extremely valuable and very marketable slaves. The raids had been very professional, small and infrequent- not enough to push the Empire to war, as there was no firm proof as to who was behind them- whatever they may suspect. He believed that naval intelligence could glean enough information from the landing craft and a few captives. All she had to do was fight a company to a standstill and buy the time for the local forces to mount a rescue.

What he had left unsaid was that some of the girls and staff of the Mission would have to become martyrs in order to spark the Empire into action...

Jenny had done all she could to ready the mission. By planning a range shoot for the early morning, the cadets would have their weapons handy and magazines loaded. Many of the older girls also had hunting and sporting rifles, shotguns and pistols in their rooms- as did all the adults, but their attackers would know that and no doubt go in hard. She had several ideas on how to give the

mission a little advance warning...

At 0130hrs, the first sign of an imminent attack. Her comm set went dead, as a kinetic weapon smashed through the communication satellite that served this region. Now they were cut off from their nearest help. On a colony of this size, the failure of the satellite would not be acted on for some time- and it could be hours before anyone figured out that there was a deliberate attack underway- somewhere on a huge continent. No doubt the ship would be jamming the local backup radio. Another reason to take the ship.

With her enhanced hearing and vision, Jenny spotted the near silent approach of the lighter, which came in low from the uninhabited eastern plains. She pulled the ghillie over her and watched the lighter land in the spot she had selected as the site that she would mount a raid from. Troops poured out from the rear hatch and moved off immediately, while the slave handlers milled about letting them get well ahead before following. They were acting as porters, carrying all the restraints and equipment, plus spare ammunition and supplies for the troops. As they moved off, she started crawling into a position to see into the lighter, through the open rear hatch. There were four guards and two flight crew to take out. The flight crew obviously pulled rank and ordered the security detail out of the ship, while they enjoyed a probably forbidden cigarette. The security detail moved around to the front of the ship to sneak a smoke themselves. It looked like the real professionals were in the raiding party, which made the task actually harder. If they had spread out like proper sentries, she could have easily taken them one by one.

She started the mental process that activated her enhanced reactions and strength. Jenny would now be thinking, reacting and moving about four times faster than a normal human. She shouldered the rifle and took careful aim. At just over a hundred meters away, the silenced rifle went totally unheard over the insect life and the heavy bullet slammed into the side of the pilot, destroying his lungs and heart. Less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of a second later the co-pilot was also dead on his feet, shot just below the ear, severing his brain-stem. Now Jenny started stalking the group of four guards, who were oblivious to the carnage in the cargo hold. Moving slowly to get the best from her chameleon suit, Jenny crept to within meters of the group and shot the man on the far side of the group through the face. They instinctively looked to their fallen member and in that time she had put down her rifle and charged in with a knife in each hand.

Her two blades stabbed into a pair of necks, cutting through to the spine, severing arteries and veins as she jerked them free. The sole survivor tried to bring his slung rifle up as she slammed a boot into his crotch, then brain-stabbed him with her Batik, using her enhanced strength to drive the heavy blade near to the hilt, before ripping it free. The curved pistol-grip handle on this ancient design was perfect for this stabbing attack, giving the extra purchase to free the blade. A quick check that all were dead, then she gathered up their ammunition and a pair of rifles, which she would cache along the way. Now to make sure the ship stayed grounded.

Entering the ship, she closed the ramp behind her and reloaded with armour piercing rounds. Taking care to fit earplugs, she emptied the rifle into the ships grav drive controller module. This lighter was going nowhere without a major refit- and all the computers plus the information they contained would be undamaged.

A quick search of the ship revealed a set of night vision binoculars- several generations of technology behind even the colonies older equipment- but they would suffice. She put them into her pack and left through the small side hatch. Heading parallel to the attackers, she reached a small knoll about 850 meters from the Mission. Crawling up the reverse slope, she took out the binoculars, taking care to check that they were set to 'passive'. As with all their equipment, Crow gear consisted of monkey-copies of old Imperial models and the controls, while unreadable, worked

the same.

The auxiliaries were lying up on the other side of the river, waiting for the command to advance, while the assaulter's were in position and ignoring the gates, about to breach the wall on the side of the staff accommodation. That made sense, she thought- take out the biggest threat in the opening seconds and seizing the girls would be a walk in the park. She hoped they would think that, anyway. Jenny knew those girls would fight for their lives and at least sell themselves dear.

She brought up the rifle and adjusted the scope. This was a long shot for the slow-moving slug, which had a trajectory like a rainbow over these distances, but she had practiced at exactly this range and the target was large. The designer of the Mission building had put in a feature from the distant past- a bell-tower- and a bell tower needed a bell. Jenny sighted on the bronze bell and fired. She saw the bell rock well before the loud 'DONG' reached her- and then the fight was on.

The raider's commander was no fool- as soon as the bell sounded he gave the order to fire the breaching charges and commence the assault. As the stone walls were breached, grenades were lobbed into the courtyards and the slavers immediately climbed through the breaches firing their short-barreled assault rifles, as they charged into the apartments.

Jenny silently cursed as she hurried to take up a new position- the staff apartments were on the blind side to her hide on the knoll and her secondary position was five hundred meters away. The attack would be won or lost before she could get in a position to help. From the sounds of the battle, she could hear that the attackers were not having it all their own way. Somebody inside was fighting back.

*

The old Blademaster, Jan Kessel had taken charge of the survivors and was directing a fallback towards the central winding staircase. The surviving adults- five of them- were all bloodied and battered from the explosive attack and running low on ammunition. Jan knew they were done for, but he wanted to buy the girls' time to organize a defense. If they could make the attack expensive enough, or keep them at bay long enough, there was a chance that the raiders would break off the attack before the local militia could mobilize. As the last of the group rounded the corner, he spied four troopers advancing through the smoke. "Hold the stair" he yelled and threw himself at the advancing troops, firing his last two rounds. One struck a Crow trooper in the face, felling him, the second being stopped by the trooper's body armour. As he closed to knife range, a burst of rifle fire hit him in the belly. With his last strength, he staggered against one of the troops, sliding his dagger under his armour and through the diaphragm, into a lung.

Assault Captain Ishmal sized up the situation on his tactical monitor and ordered the next two groups of four in, convinced that they had broken the back of the resistance. It had cost him four men, but he had known that the Imperials would not be taken without a fight. As he waved them in, a rifle shot sounded- not one of theirs- and one of the waiting assaulter's fell dead. The troops immediately located the position and two light machine guns hosed down the bell-tower. "Keep your eyes open." barked the Captain. "You should have seen that sniper- they are meant to be the amateurs- not you."

As soon as Jenny heard the report of a sporting rifle, she groaned. "Not the tower- you know better than that." Sure enough, the top of the bell-tower disappeared in a cloud of pulverized limestone.

Inside, the assaulter's made the most of the firing outside and rushed the stairs, firing as they ran upward. As they reached the first landing, two assault rifles opened up, one from each side of the

first floor landing, raking the assaulter's with 7mm military rounds- which had no problem defeating crowd body armour. As with all cadet units, their rifles were not the latest, but were a perfectly adequate older revision of the Imperial 7mm caseless general-purpose rifle. The second wave was held off.

Ishmal cursed again. This was taking too long and his losses had been high- but his backers did not accept defeat. He decided to redeploy and ordered his troops to the front of the mission, where he ordered a grenadier to breach the first floor wall, pointing at a likely spot. The grenadier fired two RPG rounds, tearing a meter-wide hole through the thick stone and the Captain ordered a scaling ladder into the breach, as his troops kept up a suppressing fire into the hole.

With the worst of luck, the RPG rounds had struck the nursery, as several of the younger girls were evacuating the babies to the top floor. From her vantage point, Jenny could see where the wall was breached and guessed the worst, fighting back the streaming tears of rage and sorrow in her eyes. She needed her eyes clear- now she was in a position to fire on the raiders.

Through her scope she saw one climb the ladder and raise something to the edge of the hole in the wall, before climbing down- it must be a camera. A short discussion between four figures- they would be the command group- and two details moved off. One went to the rear of the structure, while another set charges on the gate hinges. It looked like they were going to try a push from all directions, which would almost certainly overwhelm the defenders. Now she saw the auxiliaries start to move- they must have been summoned as scratch reinforcements. Jenny had a plan of attack.

Assault Captain Ishmal was a very competent leader and knew that the attack had to keep moving, before the defenders managed to barricade themselves in further. He ordered his grenadiers to fire their last hyperbaric missiles at the stairwell and into the breached room. He figured that damaged slaves were better than no slaves. Not wanting to wait until his reserves brought up the extra ammunition- now running low, he ordered the attack to recommence. The first section blew the gates off and their grenadier fired down the main hall at the stairwell, as another blast weapon tore apart the badly damaged nursery, blowing out partitioning walls and widening the breach. Now there was no return fire coming from inside the building and the troops raced up the ladder and gained a foothold in the mission. At the same time the second and third sections stormed the stairwell, killing the last defenders. Intent on watching the action on his monitor, Ishmal failed to see that his reinforcements had not arrived.

Jenny made the call to concentrate on cutting off the reinforcements. As the lead man reached the suspension bridge, she fired, dropping him in his tracks. The men following thought he had stumbled until others started to fall at a rate of one every three seconds. Finally realizing that they were under attack, they scattered for what cover they could find, while Jenny's heavy slugs tore through them. As soon as she saw the command group turn towards them, realizing that their reserves were under attack from a sniper, she swung her rifle around, loaded an armour-piercing round and carefully shot the man pointing and giving orders. The multipurpose round hit Assault Captain Ishmal under the armpit, the RDX charge detonating, sending the tungsten penetrator through both sides of his body armour and riddling his chest cavity with incandescent Zirconium chips.

By way of getting their attention, she then loaded one of her full-power rounds and gut-shot the man next to him, then scurried back down the reverse side of the slope, to find another position. Machine gun fire raked the brow of the spur and a poorly aimed RPG grenade burst 50 meters away- but Jenny had disappeared into the night.

The defenders had rigged a camera in the shattered remains of the bell tower and could see that somebody was out there and hurting the slavers- it had to be Jenny. The word spread like wildfire and strengthened their fading resolve to hold on. The attackers were now out of explosives, grenades and RPG's- their resupply scattered across the field on the far side of the river, dropped by fleeing or dying auxiliaries. They were now unable to push up the final flight of stairs, without facing a hail of copper and tungsten cones. After several minutes without a shot from below, the camera showed the troops in an orderly retreat, headed in the direction of their lighter. Every now and again one would fall and not get up.

Jenny was now stalking. She would make a kill, then retire and take up another position. As she got nearer to the crippled ship, she glanced to her rear, checking her six and saw a flag had been raised from the ruins of the bell tower. They had held their ground. Then she felt her comm unit pulse against her wrist- comms were being relayed locally and somebody was calling her directly. She interrupted her stalk and moved back 100 meters to talk. She selected 'play' and received a message: "Jenny- if that is you out there, move back towards the mission- we have incoming."

She doubled back towards the Mission, keeping cover between her and the troops cautiously retreating towards their ship. Somebody back at the mission had gotten a message out on the backup radio, kept on the top floor. Help was on the way.

*

Sixty kilometers out, Lieutenant Hanna received the order to commence her attack run on hostiles at the Cockatoo River Mission. Pulling her GS-16 into a climb, she set her scanners to sweep ahead to the target area. At forty kilometers, the scan was complete and she confirmed the aim point. Dipping hard towards the ground, and then pulling up sharp at full power, she executed a flawless toss-release of her eight 100kg cluster units, then banked hard to orbit the target zone, in case a guns pass was needed. The bombs soared upwards, and then started a near-vertical descent into the 'basket'. Their targeting computers found the designated target- a group of men on the ground- identified them by weapons and uniform and coordinated an optimum spread for their bomblet payloads. At 100 meters above the AGL, the bombs dispersed their sub-munitions and fire fell from the sky on the hapless Crows.

Lieutenant 'Wedgetail' Hanna flashed over the target, her anti-personnel masers finishing the work her bombs had started. She keyed 'Hail' and transmitted "Target neutralized." As she continued to orbit the area, covering the incoming infantry and rescue services, she saw a lone figure running towards the enemy ship. 'Looks like that is the one they warned me about.' she thought.

Running back towards her original position, Jenny prepared to fend off anyone trying to reach the ship. Now that the large rear ramp was secured, they would have to enter by the side hatch, presenting an easy target. Jenny was down to her last six rounds, so she checked a captured assault rifle and laid it on the ground next to her. She made a call to the mission on the channel used before and started relaying information to the Territorial infantry that were now dropping into the zone. Directing one section to land and secure the ship, she had the others drop in a line parallel to the previous advance of the Crows.

Annoyed at the lack of appearing targets, she moved in carefully to make contact with the infantry now at the ship, calling ahead to make sure they knew she was coming.

She was challenged, then passed through the perimeter and Jenny was lead to the section commander, a sergeant wearing insignia showing he was attached Imperial cadre. "You didn't leave us much- someone had done for this ships crew..." he said, then stopped as he saw the tell-tale

blood splatters over the front of Jenny's clothing. He knew the signs of a knife fight when he saw them. "You did that?"

Jenny nodded.

"You got a unit yet?" he said, assuming Jenny was about the age for starting her service.

"Puckapunyal Bushrangers- just badged and home on leave."

The sergeant gave a low whistle and said "Figures.", with a quick grin, then turned to his watching squad "Do any of you wombats have JOBS? - well bloody get on with them."

He was then interrupted with a contact report from the south picket. "Bravo two- Papa four- south sweep linking up reporting sector clear- out." A few minutes later, the patrol's section leader was at the CP, which had been set up at the rear of the ship. "The Major wants any locals back at the mission for debriefing and your body count, then secure this ship as a crime scene."

"We have six hostiles KIA here, courtesy of the ranger here."

"Those high caliber kills we been finding would be yours too?"

"They are- relay back to your OC that we had 54 raiders, sixty auxiliaries and six flight crew- I counted them coming off the lighter."

"Good work troop. The boss will be a lot happier if we can account for all of them. I will have a detail escort you back. Best you stick with us- the troops on the line are a bit trigger-happy tonight."

The larger moon, Pearl, was up now and with the moonlight the trip back was a lot easier, their escorts still taking care to let the pickets know of their advance. Word over the net was that there were only a few Crow survivors and they were all injured. Unlucky them. As the party neared the mission, they saw the organized chaos of the emergency services. It looked like every unit in the province had descended upon the Mission. A military police patrol craft orbited the area, warning off the flood of jumpbugs carrying civilians wanting to help or fight. A field hospital had landed behind the Mission and floodlights had been rigged everywhere. Police and intelligence were imaging and gathering evidence for a full investigation, soldiers were policing up the damage inside and, ominously, a mortuary truck was being loaded with small body bags. Off to one side, a line of body bags had been kept separated.

Jenny was escorted to the CP, which had been set up in the mostly undamaged commissary, where she waited for a harried Major to finish giving orders through a military comm set. She came to attention and saluted. "Trooper DeVries reporting Sir." The Major removed his helmet and wiped his dusty forehead. "Take a seat Trooper, it's been a bad night and I hear that you have been in the thick of it- now first- can you confirm those hostile numbers?"

"Yes Sir- I got a good count. I was out hunting and saw the ship drop not far from my hide."

"Good- then we have accounted for all of them. Their support ship slingshot out of orbit at the first sign of trouble and they will be in subspace before anyone can get near them."

"Sir- how bad was it here?"

"Bad enough- we have 61 confirmed dead and a couple that probably won't make it- almost

everyone surviving was injured- mostly minor stuff though.”

“Sir- with your permission, I need to...”

He interrupted “No Trooper- you need to stay out of there. Take it from an old soldier- the dead don't need you- remember them as they were. The living- they need the medics now. They will need you later. In a few minutes naval intel. will be landing and they are going to debrief you. They will want to get your turn of the events and its policy not to let you talk to the other players- at least until after they have wrung you out.”

He saw the grim set of her jaw and continued “What I can tell you is that the people here- every last one who could aim a rifle- put up one hell of a fight against a real tough opponent. For what it's worth this battle is going to go in the history books. Your actions almost certainly turned the battle, from all accounts and that's all I can say right now.” His wrist comm buzzed and he glanced at it. Calling an orderly over from the far side of the room, he directed her to take Jenny to the intelligence section that had just landed on the other side of the river.

Jenny would spend longer than the battle took being questioned by Intel and it was daylight before she left their ship. By the time she was dismissed, the survivors had been evacuated- the settlement of 'Second Chance' had offered to take them as a group, while the Mission was cleaned up and repaired. Already the cleanup was well under way, with no shortage of willing volunteers. She wandered about the mission, taking in the battle damage- walls pock-marked by bullets and grenade fragments, windows blown out and the lingering acrid fumes of explosives- along with the metallic tang of too much spilt blood. “There you are.” came a call, and she turned around to see her section commander. “Come on, the skipper has popped over to pick you up- wants to get you before the brass does.”

Glad to get away before her emotions took over, Jenny climbed on board the troop carrier. The pilot closed the rear hatch and took off on a semi-ballistic course for the capital of Victoria.

“I'm afraid you won't be getting much shut-eye for a while, Trooper” said Lieutenant Colonel Atkins, her Commanding Officer. “I will have the medics give you a pepper-pill when we land- the Governor and the Official Representative want a word. What had happened is that you have been a big part of capturing the first definitive proof of a government organized slaving ring. We all knew it was going on, but had no proof until you took that lighter. Intel is unpicking all sorts of info out of its computers already.”

“Sir, all I did was fail to keep the cockroaches out of that mission.”

“No troop- what you did was give them a fighting chance, when you rung that bell, when you took out their commander, when you chased off the auxiliaries. We found 61 bodies with 10mm slugs in them. That's a fair effort- although I would expect nothing less from one of my troops.”

She gave a tired little grin “That's near one for every one of ours- not enough- I want a rematch.”

“You shall get one. I believe your application for Academy training will now be fast tracked- you can consider your active combat requirement ticked off.”

“Sir- I really want to know what happened inside the mission.”

So he told her.

“Not going to pull any punches, so here it is, based on the interviews of the survivors.

When you rung that bell, you gave the Mission about two seconds warning. Just enough time for a couple of the staff to grab sidearms before the Crows stormed in. The attack still killed most of them, but nine survived and rallied by the old Blademaster, they fought a retreat to the stairs. There three of them- sorry- I don't have names apart from Jan- chose to play Horatius at the bridge, while the others got the wounded upstairs. More importantly, they brought the time for the girls upstairs to make a stand, while evacuating the young ones up to the next level.

The old man- and he was a good friend of mine- went out fighting to the last. He was near cut in half and managed to get one with his blade before he died.” The Colonel paused for a bit before continuing.

“Upstairs, the girls had taken a position either side of the landing and were holding the Crows off. The Crow commander then had his troops force an entry by blasting the wall with RPG's. Unfortunately, they hit the nursery, which the younger girls were in the process of evacuating. I'm sorry- you lost sixteen infants and young children when they put a hyperbaric into the room, as well as four of the defenders”

He paused again and watched her closely, waiting until she had rubbed the tears from her eyes before continuing.

“Another standoff then took place, as the survivors held the next stair. At this point, the Crows were out of grenades and were holding their position, while the reserves brought more ammo up. This is the point where you took out their command group and started harrying the reserves. Unable to continue the push and with no effective command, the Crow troops decided to get out of Dodge- they were over time and knew that local forces would soon be on the way. You turned the battle.”

“Sir, I should have left that damned ship and gone straight home...”

The Colonel cut in “And gotten cut up by the ships laser when they realized there was a sniper out there. Those boys knew their business. You did what you were trained to do- not leave an enemy behind you if you can. Look- this will be with you all your life, so get this through your head right bloody now. One- you gave them the warning that prevented a successful first strike. Two- You took out the command group at a critical time. Three- you cut off their reinforcements and resup. Four- you stopped them getting away to do it again.”

Jenny gave a weary hit of a smile. “Thanks Sir- by the way- what happened to their support ship?”

The Colonel frowned. “They took off at the first sign of our local forces activating. An Imperial courier ship got off a couple of long shots that looked like hits, but they managed to jump clear. Off the record, the ship was not Crow design- it was a damned traitor. Another mystery solved.”

He continued: “The staff and the girls in particular put up one hell of a fight- I'm not one for such things, as you know, but there will be a bucket-full of gongs handed out for this affair. They tell me that you were the local cadet commander and played a lead roll in training those girls. They did you great credit the way they conducted themselves- right down to the youngest...” his voice faltered and Jenny wondered what could affect the old warrior so. Composing himself with some difficulty, he continued.

“In the remains of the nursery, we found one baby alive- badly hurt, but saved by a girl of about eight years old who shielded her with her body... There were scenes like that everywhere- kids not

even in their teens dead holding empty carbines- another who had thrown herself on a hand grenade- a stabbed Crow trooper with dead girl's teeth locked onto his arm... Jenny, I've seen some real hard fighting and this was some of the most intense- right up there with assaulting a ship and that is as full-on as it gets- but this- with kids..."

Jenny took a long drink from a water bottle. "At the mission we have a lot to do with the 'Second Chance' settlement- exchange programs with their school; sporting contests and so on- we- all the staff and older girls have heard the first-hand stories of those colonists being taken as slaves and what they suffered. Myself, I was very young and don't remember hardly anything before being rescued, but those people have a philosophy of 'Never Forget'. I grew up with that and trained those girls hard for just what happened. I should have done better though- one of them got killed trying to snipe off the bell tower- that never should have happened."

Colonel John Atkins regarded Jenny for a moment. 'She is going to make a fine officer and leader', he thought. 'She is looking at every detail to see what could have been done better- if only she doesn't drive herself too hard.'

"Now I have a bit of good news there- the young lady in the bell tower survived. She remembered her training well enough to get her head down smartly, but in her rush she fell down the ladder and broke her leg. She will be up and about in a week. Before you ask, all I know is that she was about 13 years old."

The doors to the flight deck slid open and the pilot announced "landing in ten minutes."

The Colonel gestured to the medic who had been sitting quietly at the rear of the troop compartment, who brought up a bag and handed it to Jenny. "Get cleaned up- there is a clean uniform in the bag- got to at least get the worst of the blood and dirt off before going before the board." he followed the medic through to the flight deck, leaving her to clean up.

*

"What do you think Doc?" asked the Colonel.

The 'medic'- a military psychiatrist- had been quietly observing Jenny, while he read the brief on the mission incident. "Sir, she seems to have come through as well as can be expected- for somebody who has just lost a quarter of her family. Keep somebody close to her; keep telling her she had done things right, just as you have been doing. SOP, really. Her background shows she is a survivor, her attitude and demeanor is what I would want to see in a potential officer- I'm giving her a provisional up-check for her admission to the academy, but want to see her for a formal interview before she ships out."

"That's about how I see it too, Major- now let's get this board out of the way."

*

In the 35th century, the saying 'Justice delayed is justice denied' has been taken to heart. With laws minimized and rationalized and no such profession as lawyer, the delays of the 21st century are unheard of. With crime a rare event, there are no longer courts as they used to be known. Justice (as opposed to law) is served by a senior member of the civil service, a senior commissioned officer or an aristocrat- often a panel of all of these. In this case, as there had been deaths, convention demanded a board of inquiry into the events.

Governor Bruce, as the planetary head of the ICS, had pulled rank to head the board. Also sitting was Lord Hamilton, ranking aristocrat and Lieutenant-General (retired) Smythe. They had been in constant communication with the Mission relief task force ever since the emergency was declared, and had spent the night going through the evidence collected at the scene.

The Sergeant-at arms shouted “All rise.” and the packed chambers stood as one, as the board took their seats. The conference room was packed with the ranking ICS, Aristos and military. Most looked like they had been up all night- many were wearing uniforms of their territorial units, as well as those of firefighters, ambulancers and rescue workers. Almost all had sidearms and a few had their carbines and rifles slung.

“Citizens, be seated” said the Governor. “This board of inquiry into the incident at the Cockatoo River Mission will now proceed. I have a volume of evidence of a most graphic and disturbing nature. It is my order that this will not be broadcast in pictorial form. Those members of the public wishing to view this material shall have it made available through the usual channels. Good citizens- the foul deeds committed do not need images to shape our conclusions here.

Our findings are as follows- All occupants, staff and associates of the Cockatoo River Mission are formally exonerated from any and all blame in this incident and are found to have acted lawfully in the killing of the assailants or associates involved in this raid. The board determines the motive for the raid was to seize Imperial citizens for the purposes of selling into slavery for financial gain. All further investigations into the causation of the aforementioned incident are hereby passed to Naval Intelligence” pronounced the Governor, resuming his seat. After giving the audience a few minutes to talk amongst themselves he continued.

“I now call for volunteers to form committees for the awarding of honors, civilian and military and for the repair and restoration of the Cockatoo river mission.” The governor took a few minutes to select volunteers from the sea of raised hands then announced that a recess of one hour would take place, during which time refreshments would be served.

The groups split off into separate chambers and stewards carried in trays laden with food- all donated by the local service groups, as was traditional from time immemorial.

Jenny's thoughts were far from food, but the province aristo, Sir Michael Fordson, took her arm and steered her to the counter, placing a plate in her hand. “You look about all in, lass- so eat up- food is sleep. You did a hell of a job out there- I must apologize that I had not done more to ready the mission- I should have foreseen...”

Jenny cut him off. “Sir, we are all feeling that- remember that YOU were the one who sponsored our cadet unit. Without those M114's YOU brought the girls, I doubt they would have held the mission.”

Sir Michael gave a snort “I thought I would be offering up a few words of consolation, but you have turned the tables on me.- yes, you will make a fine officer and I hope that you will return to Yalumba when your service is done.”

“You can count on it Sir Mike.” she replied.

“But to the Missions immediate need- that I can help with- in fact, we have been inundated with offers of assistance from all over the planet. We WILL rebuild and restore the Mission and we are already getting offers from old girls to come back and staff the place. You have my word as a member of the Imperial family that the events at the mission will never be forgotten. Now before

the ICS get hold of you- will you travel with me to visit the field hospital after this?"

"Sir, of course I will."

The Sergeant-at arms sounded a gong, signaling the gathering to come to order. The committees had reached their conclusions- the empire did NOT work like old earth.

The spokesmen took the stand. "The committee for awards and decorations has concluded that on precedent, the defense of The Cockatoo River Mission was by a regularly constituted military unit and a serving member of a regular military unit whilst on leave from active service, thus are eligible to receive full military honors.

The following honors are conferred;

Cadet Sub-Lieutenant Williams- cadet force commander- is awarded the Victoria Medal of Honor. Cadet Sergeant Bickle and Trooper DeVries are awarded the Distinguished Service Medal in Gold.

Cadet Corporals Anderson, Williams and Bryce are awarded the Distinguished Service Medal in Silver.

All other members of the Cockatoo River Mission Cadet Forces are awarded the Distinguished Service Medal in Bronze.

The following civilians are awarded the St. George Cross (posthumously):

Blademaster Kessel, Dr Joan Deitrech, Wendy Smith.

It is our recommendation and appeal to the Herald of Lists that battle honors be awarded to all who were involved in the Cockatoo river Incident and that a commemorative medal be struck and a suitable memorial be raised on the site. God save the Emperor."

The gathering rose, applauding. As the applause died down the Sergeant-at arms struck his ceremonial staff on the floor and shouted "Party will now observe a minutes silence for the fallen."

The military stood to attention, while the civilians placed hand over heart in the sign of reverence.

After a long minute, the Governor directed the relief committee to deliver its report.

"Good citizens- it is the wish of the committee that all parties look well to the distressed. The community of 'Second Chance' has, by precedent, drawn the honor of sheltering the folk of the Cockatoo River Mission, until such time as their home is restored and repaired. When the wounded are fit to travel, the 3rd field hospital shall deploy to Second Chance for such time as is needed to rehabilitate the injured. It pleases the committee to report that the estimated cost is already more than covered by public subscription, without redress to Imperial relief funds. The committee wishes to offer it's thanks to the generosity of all citizens good and true."

"As do we all." replied General Smythe, the Official Representative.

Jenny had hoped to miss out on the public spotlight with so many feats of bravery, but this was not to be. The General turned to her and then the Sergeant-at arms was at her side, escorting her forward.

"Worthy citizens all- here is our hope. A young citizen passed through the hardest school on our planet and now off to the Imperial War Academy- the ultimate test of the warrior. She will do well.

It is my hope this young lady and those like her will take the war to our enemy. Too long we have

followed a policy of 'live and let live'. We must go forth and tear out the hearts of those who prey on our children.

Trooper DeVries- you are a weapon and now you go to be further honed into a weapon to tear deep into the foe- go to your destiny with our blessings.”

The assembly rose as one and cheered, clapped and continued doing so while the old man came down and led Jenny off into the governor's private chambers.

“Sorry to put you on the spot like that Trooper, but right now our people need a hero and with the rest in hospital, you drew the short straw. I don't know if you have figured it out yet, but that is what you will spend the rest of your time on this planet being. If you want a rest, look to the trip to old earth- you will get none here.” His voice softened “And for what it is worth from an old soldier, keeping flat-out busy is the best thing for you right now. Welcome to the world of command. It will only get harder, but it is the only job really worth doing.”

The next weeks were exactly as the old General had predicted. Before mid-morning local time, the story had flashed across the planet, along with an image taken as Jenny entered the broken Mission gates. 'Avenger' was the word most used as a title to the picture of Jenny carrying her hunting rifle. The story spread across the Empire of Man as fast as the courier ships and drones could travel and outrage was growing slowly but steadily, from system to system. A sleeping giant was awakening.

On Yalumba, Jenny had little time for the saber-rattling that was going on planet-wide. She was spending her waking hours doing all she could to rebuild the shattered community- recruiting volunteers to staff the Mission, directing repairs and spending as much time as she could with the wounded girls. With the advanced medicine of the 35th century- even on a backwater planet- all who survived the first day were on the road to recovery and the field hospital and staff would soon return to their usual posts. It would be some months before new eyes, eardrums and limbs were grown for implantation, but the real work would be with the mental scars and a drone had been dispatched to New Chicago to request a specialist redactor team. 35th century psychiatry actually worked.

With the resources of a prosperous world and a legion of willing volunteers, the mission was well on the way to being put back to new. Even the trees damaged by the bombing had been plucked out and replaced, using heavy-lift sky cranes. Jenny had over-ruled erasing all the damage- she wanted the bullet-pocked walls on the stairway to remain as a badge of honor for the defenders, so the stains were removed and the surface of the stone re-sealed. The hardest part was choosing a suitable memorial- the survivors had delegated this task to her. It seemed that every artist, architect or landscaper on the planet had submitted a proposal. After much late-night study, she chose a simple plan- one done by a 'Second Chance' artist- the now famous Acacia hedge and a lawn with Iridium crosses.

This seemed the right one for the rural setting of the mission. The artist had captured her interest by making the site the knoll where she fired the shot that rang the bell. The location would cost a few hectares of grapes, but there was no shortage of good land on the terraces and the cost of re-establishing the plantings would not be an issue now. There had been enough credit and labour pledged within first day to build the mission five times over.

As her six weeks of 'leave' were ending and her transport to the academy was soon due to arrive, a familiar ship dropped into the system. In tow was the freighter that had carried the raiders into Imperial space. Yalumba's picket ship received a brief transmission, along with an IFF signal.

“We have somebody you may be interested in talking to.”

'Hells Mouth'

Navigation Hazard Point (Singularity)

Three weeks previously

As soon as the freighter dropped out of subspace, the mass alarms started sounding.

“Cap'n- we are in a huge gravity well- but the singularity shows two light-hours away- OH CRAP. It's a tractor field.”

The Captain of the armed freighter and occasional pirate 'Belle Starr' was working frantically at his sensor board. This spot should have been clear- they had rendezvoused here on many occasions. Slaving a camera towards the direction of the tractor, his blood ran cold as he saw the bulk of 'Wotan's Fury' bearing down on his ship. He knew that this was no chance meeting- somebody had sold him out. “Dump the computer core” he shouted. Better to limp back on skip-drive than to have Jamieson find THAT evidence.

Before they could activate the dump sequence, the hull breach alarms briefly sounded and the second officer slumped over his station. A smell of burnt flesh and scorched plastic filled the room- although there was no sign of a laser-flash or a kinetic impact. The automatics had swiftly sealed the hull and as the Captain was wondering what the hell had just hit them, the comm screen lit up.

“X-ray laser- don't even twitch or I cook you where you sit.” said Commander Hendrik. “Stand by to be boarded.”

The Captain looked at his screens not believing what had just happened- the hostile was thousands of kilometers away and had just fired a shot with unheard-of precision. That and x-ray lasers were only in books and vids. There must be another ship closer- he started an instrument sweep, as he opened a voice channel to 'Fury'.

“What kind of piracy is this? We are an Imperial registered freighter in free space- you have no right too...”

Commander Hendrik cut him off. “Cut the crap traitor- you have been working with the Crow slavers, who sold you out. Just give me an excuse to burn you.”

Now the freighter crew was really starting to sweat. It would be a simple matter of reading the flight recorder and tracing their movements. From there a forensic team would be sure to find some trace of their Crow backers. After watching the second officer get burned down, nobody was making any moves towards their station controls, until Captain Jacques realized that there was no way they could actually see onto the bridge, even if a well-aimed shot could be fired at a workstation, using a plan of the ship. He closed the audio channel, realizing there was no negotiating with Jamieson's hard-nosed XO. “Quick now- they are bluffing. Start a soft data dump on the memory core and I will initiate auto-destruct for one hour. We can't leave any evidence for the damned navy.”

“I wouldn't do that.” came from the bridge hatchway. All the crew spun about in disbelief- there couldn't be anyone else on the ship.

Wayne Jamieson leaned casually against the bulkhead, swinging a short length of duralloy strut in

his hand.

“How the hell did you get on board?”

“You should be asking WHEN did I get on board.” Wayne replied, implying that he had stowed away. “Now will you co-operate and get a nice clean death by laser- or is it to be the hard way?”

“Take him alive- the fool has given us the perfect hostage. You damned fool Jamieson- what do a bunch of stupid dirtyfoot colonists matter?”

The crew all rose, drawing knives and short swords and started to cautiously advance. Wayne made no move to draw his blade, simply saying “Alright, the hard way it is.” Then an image flashed through his mind. An old memory- two happy, smiling children and their mother. The last time he saw them alive before they were killed by the likes of these pirates. Scum who had no regard for the consequences of their actions.

The old rage flared in an instant and Wayne turned from a scientific, calculating fighter into a raging and deadly elemental force. His intentions of disabling and capturing the crew were momentarily forgotten- he had one thought- hurt them. Time appeared to slow for him, as his synapses sped up five-fold. The others in the room moved like they were stuck in treacle.

A 600mm length of 30mm OD duralloy pipe doesn't appear to be much of a weapon, but in Wayne's hands it was as deadly as any sword. With his augmented strength and speed, the pipe became a grey blur, flashing across the control room and burying itself deep in a crewman's chest. Drawing a short 'Hawksbeak' knife, he pounced on the closest crewman, seizing his knife arm while tearing his chest open by plunging in the short, heavy blade and dragging it down, slicing through ribs. He used the body as a shield to fend off his other assailants, until he had torn the chest open with a half-dozen raking gouges.

The hapless crewman dead, Wayne flung his body at another crewman, knocking him down. He then pounced on another, repeating this performance. On the third crewman, his knife stuck in a kevlar breastplate. Enraged, he threw his victim across the control room, leaving him in an unconscious heap after slamming into a wall.

Ignoring the battle between Jamieson and his crew, Jacques had gone wide and was charging in fast, his short sword aimed at Wayne's exposed right flank. As his blade was about to make contact, a terrible crushing pain flashed up his arm, as a hand like a vice grabbed it and squeezed with inhuman strength. Then he was hauled around and used as a flail, knocking down two of the remaining three crewmen, the force of this dislocating the captain's arm at the shoulder and breaking the radius and ulna. Wayne seized the last crewman and tore out his throat with his teeth. A killing punch to the temple ended the crewman's agony and as suddenly as it had come on, the white-hot rage left him. He then set about securing the living with plasticuffs and treating their more serious injuries- they were not about to get off easy by dying.

Jacques painfully propped himself up against a console. "You bastard! What the hell are you?"

"A very bad son-of-a-bitch. I thought everyone knew that."

"How..."

"This place has always been a rendezvous point for pirates. I happened by and found the Crows you were going to meet up with. I put them in a shuttle, moved them off with the tractor and they got

downright talkative as they got close to that singularity. They really believe it is Hell's Mouth, by the way. I gave them the opportunity to find out. Now I'm sick of talking to you and I hear my marines."

Wayne stepped over and covered Jacques mouth with a strip of duct tape.

The marine boarding party entered the control room to find their Captain watching over several semi-conscious crewmen as he quietly smoked a cigar. "You need a medic Sir?" asked the senior marine, concerned at his blood-soaked appearance.

"No Corporal, I'm good- but those three need medevac and there are two in engineering with busted heads that might be alive still."

"OK Sir, I'll take care of it- you need anything?"

"Just a shower, looking at your face."

Wayne stood up and kicked one of the bodies. "Get a work party up here and police this mess up- double bonus for clearing my mess- carry on Corporal."

The marines jumped to attention and cleared a path for Wayne to leave the bridge.

"You heard the skipper-volunteers- you, you and you- get this bridge squared away" barked the Corporal. He had seen the Wolf in action before, but this was the first time the newer members had seen the aftermath of their commanding officer in action.

*

Captain Jacques woke unable to move- nor could he feel anything- nothing.

"Finally awake," snarled senior ship's surgeon, Lt Lillian Williams. "I wanted to say goodnight before I closed the pod. You are going to have a nice rest on the way back to Yalumba. We have you all wired and tubed, so there is no need to get up. It's not to long a trip for us, even dragging your clapped out shitcan, but you may be getting a little lonesome by and by. Never mind- when we let you out there are some folks really keen to have a long chat with you.

Give my regards to Colonel Linda Hamilton- an old friend of mine who works for Navy Intelligence. We went to medical school together- after we left the Cockatoo River Mission. She will be the one unpicking your brain bit by bit- goodnight asshole." One of the surviving crew members, fearing spacing, had become downright loquacious and had revealed the reason they were fleeing. She slammed the lid shut and a med tech wheeled the pod away to secure storage. She could get no information on the fate of her family and had a long week in subspace before she would find out.

The only reason their captives were still alive was that she knew that she could do nothing that would result in more misery than a forensic mind-picking...

Cockatoo River Incident Memorial

Wayne and Jenny strolled slowly towards the Mission, making the most of a few minutes of privacy.

"It is true that time helps" said Jenny. "But I don't think the pain will ever go away. I thought it would be just another mission and I would leave it all behind- like we have all done before."

"That was no ordinary Time Corp mission. The Corp has not had a lot of success with such deep insertions. Actually, you are the first successful one."

"The other all failed? How many have there been?"

"About twenty. No other operator has survived with their mind intact- they all went native and thought their past lives were a delusion. It's been 600 years since the last attempt- good agents are too valuable to risk. You had a unique profile that indicated you had a good chance. In any case, I backed up your mind-state to pre-transfer. That technology wasn't around last time they tried."

"No shit. So how does the mission stand now?"

"We just have the end-game to play. That is about ten years away. Until then, we are free to our own devices."

"Learning how to be better soldiers for the Empire."

"Exactly so, although we are actually learning all this good stuff for ourselves."

"Something I never lose sight of- now let's get back in character. The girls of the mission have intentions on stuffing us like a Christmas Goose- then Doc Williams will be pouring the local brandy into us. I don't think I told you- she resigned from 'Fury' just after you left for the academy and has been running the Mission clinic."

"Sounds a lot better than yet another civic banquet. I had heard that Doc was there- the girls kept in touch, even if it was just a message twice a year. It's going to be good to catch up for a few days."

The Mission was mostly unchanged from when Jenny had left over five years ago. The differences were subtle, yet clear to a military mind. Discrete sensor arrays watched the countryside and the bell tower was now topped by an antipersonnel maser, fashioned to look like a weather vane. Trees and shrubs had been cleared or trimmed to give clear lines of sight near the buildings and the gates were now more than decorative.

This was not a case of locking the stable door after the horse had bolted. This was a weather change throughout the outer worlds of the Empire. A realization that not only the new and under-resourced colonies were vulnerable to predators. News travels slowly through an interstellar civilization, but five years after the incident, the whole Empire of Man was now more vigilant, better prepared and stood ready.

Now they knew that they could not let the vast distances of space be their shield against evil. They were slowly accepting the fact that they would soon have to go forth from their comfortable existence and root out the evil that was the Great Hegemony of Worlds. This cult of death-worshipers should have remained on old earth, but for weak men standing by and allowing evil to take place- it was now amongst the stars and growing stronger.

The wheels of the Empire turned slowly, but ground finely. When the home worlds were secure, they would be able to set forth on the Great Crusade.

In the hour before dawn, Wayne stood alone at the memorial gate, staring silently at the markers for the dead. While he knew that the actions he had planned had saved many from a wretched existence, he was painfully aware that he could easily have prevented all of the deaths here.

Like all commanders he now, more than ever, felt the weight of carrying out his orders knowing that he had to sacrifice others to meet a larger goal. And like all commanders from the dawn of time, he knew that he alone had to bear that burden...

Other books by this author:

Meddlers In Time

Meddlers In Time- Out of the frying pan, into the fire